



Zefira Butaeva

The Scent of My Homeland's Wind

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Short Beeps

Memory

or “Where the Ganges Rushes to the Ocean...”

Dedicated to Galina Ilyinichna Saiko

I was in my final year of school when two young mathematicians, fresh out of their institute, appeared at our school: Elena Ivanovna, a tall, grey-eyed, beautiful blonde, and Fyodor Georgievich, a cheerful, quick, laughing brunet.

I don't know whether they had studied in the same group, but it seemed only natural that the two young teachers stuck together at school. Very soon we began to notice that it wasn't only their age that connected them so clearly. Fedya — as we simply called him among ourselves from the very first day — hovered around Elena Ivanovna so persistently. She was so strict and serious, beyond her years, that even behind her back everyone called her by her first name and patronymic.

Almost every break someone would run into the classroom and announce:

— Fedya's standing with Elena Ivanovna again! And he's saying something, saying something to her.

— And her?

— She's silent, just smiling.

A minute later, fresh news:

— Elena Ivanovna and Fedya are walking down the corridor!

— And?

— He's telling her something.

— And her?

— Silent, not even smiling.

I very much wanted to be like Elena Ivanovna. I liked everything about her: her beauty, her stateliness, her reserved manner. Elena Ivanovna seemed quite unapproachable to me, and I even felt sorry for Fedya, who had had the misfortune to fall in love (as we were all convinced) with Elena Ivanovna.

A month after classes began, the senior students were sent, along with Elena Ivanovna, to do farm work in a former German settlement, simply called “Kolonka” (“the Colony”), from which all the Germans had been deported at the very start of the war. It was there that we became close with Elena Ivanovna.

We lived in one of the empty houses. At night, having bolted every lock, we lay down in a heap on straw mattresses, listening to the scurrying of feral cats and the terrifying howling of abandoned dogs. Elena Ivanovna, apparently trying to entertain us somehow, told us all sorts of stories from her student days. It was especially interesting to hear about her fiancé, who was at the front. Elena Ivanovna hadn’t received a letter in three months already and worried terribly whether he’d been wounded.

Once Elena Ivanovna sang us a song, a long, soul-stirring one, with a melody as languid as the words. All the girls loved the song; it was easy to memorise, and from then on we sang it in chorus every evening.

Where the Ganges rushes to the ocean, where the blue sky is so bright,

Where the tiger creeps among the lianas and the wild elephant roams
the jungle,

Where longing weighs upon a giant people, there at times a single
melody sounds —

It is a Hindu singing, hiding his rage.

Great is the land of Punjab, cruel is its rajah.

There, at times, his command brings blood and death.

For empty whims, for the sake of his wife,

The maharajah oppresses his whole people.

The courtiers' flattery has grown coarse, and longing torments the ruler.

"Hey, bring me a slave here, let even a slave amuse me!"

The young slave appeared, and the rajah said: "You are all loyal, I've heard it many times.

So carry out my command now" —

(Great is the land of Punjab, cruel is its rajah)

"The one you love more than anyone in the world — kill her!

I have told you, I have commanded it!

My word is law. Or you yourself shall be put to death!"

Punjab waits three nights and three days, the ruler waits, leaning on his throne.

Then a pale slave approaches him, and throws down someone's head.

(The next two lines were completely forgotten, and whenever I later sang this song, I hummed their melody without words.)

"Great is the land of Punjab, cruel are you, rajah!

The one I loved more than any, for you, rajah, I have killed.

You told me so, you commanded me so!

Faith is blind. Accept now the slave's gift!"

After we returned to school I began visiting Elena Ivanovna. We would sit for a long time solving problems that Elena Ivanovna would specially dig up for me from old textbooks. She still loved to talk about her fiancé, and I confided my girlish secrets to her. Elena Ivanovna took a keen interest in

helping me choose my future profession. It seemed to me that Elena Ivanovna wanted me to follow in her footsteps. But, to my surprise, she once said:

— You should go into philology!

I was astonished, and even decided I didn't know what philology was. I found a dictionary and confirmed it was nothing like mathematics. In the end I heeded her advice and enrolled in the philological faculty.

A few years later, coming home for the holidays, I would meet with Elena Ivanovna. She had become even stricter, more reserved: her fiancé had gone missing. Then I lost sight of Elena Ivanovna. I heard that she had married, had a daughter, and moved away somewhere.

And in my memory, for several decades, there lodged the song Elena Ivanovna used to sing. I hummed it to so many people! Never once did I meet anyone who had heard it before.

Over the years, it began, for some reason, to irritate me that I could not remember two lines of the song. And when, this year, I began searching for Elena Ivanovna, one might have thought (and I myself sometimes thought so!) that it was precisely because of those two lines that I needed to meet the person who, without doubt, remembered them. But how to search? Where?

I began with the phone book. What if Elena Ivanovna, upon marrying, hadn't changed her surname! None of the "telephone" Boikos (Elena Ivanovna's maiden name) knew her. The house where she had lived with her mother had been demolished. My classmates had scattered across the world; I no longer saw any of them. I had to resign myself to the thought that I had parted with Elena Ivanovna forever, and so would never learn those wretched two lines of the song.

One day I got to talking with a niece I was visiting; we were reminiscing about our favourite teachers, and she spoke warmly of her mathematics teacher, under whose influence she herself had become a maths teacher.

— What was his name? - I asked.

— Fyodor Georgievich Kuruzidi.

— That's our Fedya!

My niece was even offended:

— We loved him very much and never called him Fedya.

— Well, I knew him when he was very young. Do you know where he works?

— He's retired. He lives somewhere on Telman Street.

I again started leafing through the phone book. There was no Kuruzidi listed, but there was a phone number for a Kuruzaidi. Deciding my niece had mixed up the surname, I called the Kuruzaidi number. To the woman who answered, I explained that I was looking for the mathematician Kuruzaidi, Fyodor Georgievich.

— Fyodor Georgievich isn't Kuruzaidi, he's Kuruzidi. His number changed recently, I don't know the new one.

— How do you know him, if you're not relatives with the same name? - I asked, surprised.

— Well, there are few of us Greeks in the city, and we all know one another. I'll help you. Write down the Petrovs' number, they're his friends, they'll surely know his new number.

I immediately called the Petrovs and again explained what I needed.

— Oh, I don't remember his new number, - said a woman in an apologetic elderly voice. - But I can give you his daughter-in-law's number!

The daughter-in-law, of course, knew the new number. And finally Fyodor Georgievich was on the phone.

— Fyodor Georgievich, I'm looking for Elena Ivanovna Boiko, my teacher. Do you remember her?

— Of course. We worked at the same school for several years.

— Do you know where she is now?

— She's retired, like me. She lives somewhere near me, but I don't know her address or phone number.

— What's her surname now?

— I don't remember her surname, - answered Fyodor Georgievich, and after a pause, for some reason spoke irritably. - Why do you need her surname? Go into the courtyard of the grocery store on Telman Street, ask the old women sitting on the bench, everyone knows the teachers there.

— Which store's courtyard should I go into? - I asked. - There are several on Telman Street, it seems to me.

— The one closest to me, - said Fyodor Georgievich, and hung up. Fyodor Georgievich was clearly in a bad mood.

It felt awkward to call back and ask which store was closest to him, so the next day I went to the courtyard nearest my niece's house.

It was morning, the old women weren't on the bench yet, only one woman was shaking out rugs. I went up to her and asked whether she knew which flat a tall, slim woman lived in — a pensioner, formerly a mathematics teacher.

— I don't know, I've only lived in this building a short while, but let's ask Marya Petrovna now: she knows everyone.

— Marya Petrovna! - the woman shouted across the whole courtyard. - Look out! There's a lady here looking for a retired maths teacher.

A dried-up little old woman came out onto one of the second-floor balconies. She looked me over suspiciously and said:

— In the next entrance, flat 15, lives a literature teacher. There's no maths teacher in our building, - and, looking me up and down once more, the old woman went back inside.

I went into the courtyard of the next store. On the bench, two women were sitting, chatting animatedly — not old women, but middle-aged. I went up to them and, by rote now — for the umpteenth time! — told them about my search.

— Why, that must be Kozelsky's wife, - said one of them. - She really did teach mathematics. I know it for certain: she was my daughter's homeroom teacher. Well, remember, - she turned to her neighbour, - they lived on the third floor?

— Ah, the one who, when he was drunk, threw bottles off the balcony? Of course, I remember, I just didn't know he was Kozelsky. He's been dead about ten years now. But where his wife went, I don't know.

— She left him. Took her daughter and left. She was worn out with him. He even used to beat her. I ran into her once at the market and told her about her husband's death. "That," she said, "no longer concerns me. And anyway I'm moving to another city."

To imagine that anyone could have struck Elena Ivanovna was beyond my strength. Could this really be the same man Elena Ivanovna had told us about back at the Kolonka? And if it wasn't, how could she, so proud, have lived with an alcoholic? The surname alone said it all! Kozelsky!

Something in me lost the desire to keep searching. Out of habit I leafed through the phone book. There was no Kozelsky listed. Well, thank God for that!

But something wouldn't let me rest, and a couple of days later I called Fyodor Georgievich, and had only begun telling him the results of my search when he interrupted me:

— Nonsense. Elena Ivanovna's in the city. A week ago my wife ran into her at the shop. And you've been going round every store. You need to listen carefully! I told you, the courtyard of the one nearer my house. She lives in the courtyard of the shop on the corner of Telman and Pozharsky streets. Only I don't know the flat number. And she's no Kozelskaya at all, she's Davydova. I struggled for two days, but I remembered!

I was so overjoyed that I didn't bother pointing out: I didn't know where he lived, and only two days ago he hadn't remembered Elena Ivanovna's surname either. As we were saying goodbye, Fyodor Georgievich asked:

— And what's your surname?

— Oh, you won't remember me. I studied a long time ago, and besides, not in your class.

— I remember everyone and everything, - Fyodor Georgievich said firmly. I gave my surname.

— I remember you! - Fyodor Georgievich exclaimed, sounding pleased for some reason. - A thin, dark-eyed girl with little braids.

I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing: that could describe almost any Ossetian girl.

— No need to laugh, - Fyodor Georgievich said, offended. - I remember you reciting poetry at every school evening and performing in the school plays.

Now that did sound like me. He really did remember!

The phone book again! There she was: Davydova E. I., Telman Street, No... and next to it, a phone number. I dial the number, a long ring, and a woman's voice (unmistakably, I hear Elena Ivanovna's voice!) says:

— I'm listening.

Without giving my name, I began humming: "Where the Ganges rushes to the ocean..."

I sang the whole song through and only then realised I hadn't stumbled once. So where were those lines, seemingly forgotten forever? I fell silent, pondering this, while the woman was saying:

— I don't know this song, I've never heard it, it means nothing to me. Now if it were "Roads"... But who is this, actually?

Something had gone wrong again, and I'd got the wrong number! But that voice was familiar to me!

— I'm sorry, I need Elena Ivanovna.

— That's me.

— Elena Ivanovna! How can you not have heard this song. You sang it to us at the Kolonka.

— I was never at the Kolonka, - Elena Ivanovna said calmly.

— What do you mean you weren't? Come now, Elena Ivanovna, remember: we lived at the Kolonka, then they sent us to break corn, we spent the night in a long shed, it started snowing and caught us in the field...

— I remember a cornfield, but that was near the village of Brut. So who is this calling?

— Elena Ivanovna, it's me, it's...

She heard my first name and wouldn't let me finish with my surname.

— My God! Where have you sprung from? Where are you? How many years since we've seen each other! A whole eternity! Tell me about yourself. Though, no, not over the phone. Write down my address. I'm waiting for you.

Half an hour later I was ringing Elena Ivanovna's doorbell. The door was opened by a not-very-tall woman (and here I'd been so insistently picturing a tall blonde!), trim, with light, stern eyes.

— Come in, come in, my dear. How glad I am to see you!

— Elena Ivanovna, why are you suddenly being so formal with me?

— Well, it feels awkward otherwise...

I understood her awkwardness when, in the large mirror hanging in the hallway, I saw two identical, short-cropped grey heads. Try telling which was the pupil, which the teacher! The years had erased that small difference in age which had once been between us.

— And this is my granddaughter, meet her.

A girl rose from the sofa to greet me. I glanced at her, and something clenched in my chest: she looked astonishingly like Elena Ivanovna — that Elena Ivanovna from long ago, whom I had remembered for so many years! She resembled her far more than Elena Ivanovna herself, standing beside her.

Then we drank tea and reminisced, and reminisced...

— Do you remember how once they brought the food out to the field late, and I didn't manage to cook dinner in time for when you all came back from work, so everyone ate half-boiled meat. And nothing happened, it was fine. But how I fretted over it at the time!

— Do you remember how we walked back several kilometres through the snow in torn shoes? And how we all caught lice?

— Oh, I don't want to remember that. I'm thinking of something else. I remember your mother, a quiet, modest woman. You brought her over to me at the graduation evening, and she thanked me for something. I believe she spoke Russian with a strong accent. And I also remember what a splendidly stylish white dress you wore, quite unexpectedly, at that evening.

— I kept it a secret that it was made from a piece of parachute silk, from the parachute of a pilot who had bailed out of a downed German plane. I was living then in Giseli with my aunt, whose house had, just before the German offensive, been the headquarters of some regiment. When the parachute was brought to headquarters along with the documents, the soldiers cut me off a piece “for handkerchiefs,” as they said. But it was enough for a whole dress!

There was no end to our “do you remembers?” Finally I made up my mind to ask:

— Elena Ivanovna, what became of your fiancé?

— He didn’t come back. He was taken prisoner, then sent to a penal battalion. He died in Czechoslovakia right at the very end of the war. I grieved for a long time. But life is life. I married a military man. I travelled the whole country with him. We lived in whatever quarters we were given. Only after my husband retired did I return to my home city and finally get this little corner of my own. Sadly, I buried my husband a few years ago. We lived together in harmony. I have a son in the city, he lives on his own but visits me often. My daughter settled in Crimea. Now my granddaughter has come to enroll in an institute. It’ll be cozier for me right away, it’s lonely living alone.

Elena Ivanovna’s granddaughter sat across from us, listening attentively, her grey eyes moving from one of us to the other. I wonder what she was thinking, looking at us? It seemed to me there was curiosity in her gaze, and indulgence, and pity. One thing was certain: the girl could not imagine that she might one day come to resemble either of us.

That night I fell asleep with a feeling of deep satisfaction. Elena Ivanovna and I had met, I had found her! And I remembered, I myself remembered those forgotten lines:

And the rajah looks at her, trembling: her features are familiar and dear to him,

In her he has recognised his wife's face!

Zefira Butaeva, 1995

Reviving the Past in Memory

A CYCLE OF STORIES

No one sees the world as you see it, because no one's eyes are like yours, no one's perception is like yours, no one's feeling can be like the one you experience.

Gaito Gazdanov

I can compare this feeling to nothing else — the relief of having spoken it aloud.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The Brothers' Tragedy

I woke in the night to a noise. The light was on. And the first thing I saw was my father's trembling fingers. He was sitting beside my couch on a chair, pulling on his socks.

Several men in military uniform were walking about the room, stamping their boots. Then they all left, taking my father with them.

Mama sobbed, wailing:

— Oh, woe is me! Our hearth has been destroyed!

Grandfather stood silent, leaning on his ever-present cane.

And neither of them noticed that, for the first time in 20 years of living under one roof, he had heard his daughter-in-law's voice: by Ossetian custom, Mama did not speak in her father-in-law's presence.

My sister and I cried along with Mama, but we didn't fully understand what had happened, didn't know that we would never see our father again.

Father vanished. And with him vanished all our family's "riches": the gramophone with its enormous horn, which Father wound up on holidays; the album in its green plush cover, full of beautiful Easter postcards (which I boastfully showed off to my friends); and the "holy of holies" — the typewriter. It was the most valuable thing in our house. Only in Father's presence could one touch it. As his favourite, I was sometimes allowed to peck out a few words with one finger myself.

All of this had been brought from our mythical Uncle Evgeniy, from distant Berlin, where Father had travelled in 1924 for a linotype machine.

I didn't know what a linotype machine was, and I didn't remember our uncle either (he had visited home in 1927, when I was only a year old), but he seemed to me fabulously rich. After all, it was only thanks to his gifts — two suits and a brown felt hat — that Papa was the most elegant and handsome man around. I didn't notice back then that the suits hung baggily on Father: Evgeniy was far larger than his brother.

In our family there was a kind of "cult" of Uncle. He was consulted about everything, if not directly, then in the form of musing: "And what would Evgeniy say about this?"

Letters from Uncle were read aloud several times over, then placed in the green album that always lay on the chest of drawers. Sometimes on a Sunday everyone in the house would go quiet, walking on tiptoe: that meant Father was writing a letter to Berlin. Once I learned to write, I was allowed to add a few words to Father's letter myself, and I was terribly proud of it.

And then it all came to an end. It was 28 October 1937.

The next day Mama, having gathered together some small bundle, set off to look for Father. I went everywhere with her: Mama didn't speak Russian quite fluently, and when nervous, couldn't get a single word out at all.

At first we went to the prison and stood in an enormously long line. Through a small window they grunted at us: “There’s no one like that here!” (How precisely such a scene is shown in Abuladze’s film “Repentance”!)

In the days that followed we methodically made the rounds of every place where prisoners were held. And there were many such places in the city. Wherever there were bars on the windows, there were prisoners.

Finally, at the military registration office, they accepted a parcel from us. Two weeks later, another.

...At one point a rumour swept through the city that prisoners would be taken away by train that night. When it grew dark, we went to the station. Long lines of people stretched down Kirov Street... hiding, silent, afraid to speak to one another. We drew near the station. We stood a long time, hiding in the courtyards and entryways of the nearby buildings. Dawn broke, and everyone dispersed, having learned nothing.

When, in mid-December, we brought the next parcel of freshly washed linen, we were told: “Departed!” It sounded plausible: it must mean that, indeed, there had been a transport that night and Father had been exiled. And Mama tormented herself to the end of her days that she hadn’t managed to get warm underclothes to him in time. Poor Mama had no idea that by then Father needed nothing at all anymore!

So began our life without Father. Left in Mama’s care — a woman without education or a trade — were an 80-year-old grandfather, my brother, still a schoolboy, and me, a fourth-grade pupil (my elder sister was already married). Mama tried to get a job at the printing house, where she had once worked for a year in the bindery, and where Father had served for many years before his arrest — they wouldn’t take her. She got work as a dishwasher in a canteen, and later as an unskilled labourer at a cannery.

I missed Father terribly — kind, gentle, cheerful. How many tears I shed over his balalaika, on which he used to play Ossetian melodies, singing along.

How much interesting he knew! He was the first to tell me about the “extraordinary man, the leader, Lenin’s friend,” Stalin. It was under the influence of his stories that I began to love Stalin with a fanatic’s devotion. How I envied my peer Mamlakat Nakhangova, who had embraced Stalin! I wept with happiness when, on 1 May 1948, marching in the Moscow State University column of demonstrators past the Mausoleum, I was granted the honour of beholding Him! And I was not alone. There were war veterans marching in our column, and many of them had tears in their eyes.

My passion for reading was also instilled by Father. He loved children very much and enjoyed translating children’s books from Russian into Ossetian. I remember one — Kipling’s “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.” (A few years ago I came across this book in Ossetian, but alas, the translator’s name wasn’t given.)

And starting in 1938, I wrote and wrote letters.

First “to beloved Stalin,” then to Beria. I wrote about what a good father I had, what a loyal Leninist, and what a monstrous mistake his arrest was. All went unanswered.

Only once, in 1940, was I summoned to the NKVD, where an army officer, holding an envelope in his hands (evidently my letter), insistently pressed me to explain how I knew that letters to Beria should be addressed to Dzerzhinsky Square. Then he said: “Your father is an enemy of the people. He has been exiled for ten years without the right of correspondence.” Naïve as we were, we began to wait for the end of those ten years!

In 1947, already in Moscow, on that very Dzerzhinsky Square, in response to an inquiry about my father’s fate, I was told that he had died in a camp in 1942. My sister, meanwhile, several years later, was issued a death certificate stating that Father had died of lobar pneumonia on 23 December 1943.

What was I to believe? Nothing! All of it was a lie! Now we know that “ten years without the right of correspondence” meant execution by firing squad. But even in 1955, the Supreme Court of the North Ossetian ASSR, in issuing a certificate, evasively wrote that my father’s case, “of one convicted by the former NKVD troika of the North Ossetian ASSR, has been discontinued...” Convicted of what? Unknown!

Many years have passed since 1937. My father was born in 1892; he could hardly still be alive. It may seem to some that the past shouldn’t be stirred up. We already know so much about that time, so much has been written, we’ve already read “The Gulag Archipelago.” But the older I grew, the stronger became my desire to finally learn the truth about my father, about his fate.

And then came glasnost!

In 1989 the KGB of the North Ossetian ASSR informed me (cautiously at first, and only verbally!) that, by decision of the former NKVD troika of 7 December 1937, my father had been shot. He was charged with having “been a member of a counter-revolutionary, bourgeois-nationalist, espionage, insurgent organisation; having conducted counter-revolutionary propaganda and espionage and intelligence work in favour of fascist Germany.” There it was! No more, no less! A classic set of every conceivable label!

When, at the First Congress of People’s Deputies, during their confirmation hearings, the Chairman of the KGB and one of the deputy prosecutors general answered deputies’ questions by saying that former victims of repression and their closest relatives could review their criminal case files, I began writing again...

And now I leaf through this yellowed folder: the arrest warrant, the inventory of confiscated belongings, the questionnaire (one detail speaks to Father’s state of mind: listing his children, Papa got my age wrong, writing 13 instead of 11), the interrogation records, the indictment, the troika’s decision,

and a certificate confirming that the sentence was carried out on 10 December 1937, at 20:00...

Could it really be more than 50 years since then? Why, then, did my chest tighten so, why did my legs give way beneath me, when I walked out of the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office? Or perhaps those are sincere who say they discourage the reviewing of criminal files only out of compassion, to spare relatives from shock?

Filed together with my father's case were the cases of eight other "criminals," supposedly members of some "People's Party," who were likewise shot on 10 December.

The indictment was drawn up by V. A. Boyarsky, an executioner known throughout the country, who, "due to the statute of limitations on the crimes committed," can no longer even be tried.

Against the backdrop of the atrocities attributed to him, my father's case, together with those of his eight "co-defendants," is a drop in the ocean. Indeed, even on the list of those the troika sentenced in a single day, my father was in the second hundred. And if he had a "criminal offence" at all, it was his connection to his brother, who had lived in Germany since 1912 — the others, in all likelihood, didn't even have that.

Filed as material evidence in the case are Evgeniy's letters to my father. Having read them, the charge brought against my father — that he reported information about the printing houses in Ordzhonikidze and their addresses to his brother — seems absurd. From the letters it's clear that Evgeniy was perfectly well informed about the printing trade the world over, not only in Ossetia.

I asked to have the letters returned to me. This could not be done until the Boyarsky case was concluded, so I was given photocopies of them instead.

I read the letters over and over again. And before me rises the image of my uncle — an intelligent, businesslike, educated man. From his very first letters to his last, written in 1968, one can feel his love for Ossetia. And I recall everything that was known in the family about my uncle.

Still very young, he had left the village of Dzivgis, where he was born, and took a job as a typesetter at a printing house in Vladikavkaz. In 1908 he moved to St. Petersburg, where he worked and studied at the same time. But in 1912, for taking part in unrest, he was arrested, and upon his release was barred from residing in the central provinces of Russia. Evgeniy then left for Germany.

During the World War, the revolution, and the Civil War, contact with Evgeniy was severed. Correspondence resumed in the early 1920s. By that time Evgeniy was already firmly settled in Berlin. He worked at first as a typesetter in a small private printing house. He fell in love with, and soon married, the owner's daughter, Frida. When, after his father-in-law's death, Evgeniy became the owner of the printing house himself, he began publishing Ossetian literature, first and foremost the work of Kosta Khetagurov, whom he had admired since his school days in Dzivgis, ever since "Iron Fandyr" first fell into his hands and became his guiding star. Even today one cannot read without emotion the words with which he accompanied his 1922 edition of "Iron Fandyr": "...I say to Kosta: 'Hallowed be thy name! All of Ossetia is grateful to you!' To his book — 'a safe journey home to Ossetia.'" (Evgeniy also gave his only son, born in 1924, the name of his beloved poet, calling him Kosta, not Kostya.)

All matters concerning the distribution of his publications in Ossetia, Evgeniy entrusted to his brother — "my proxy," as he called Father in his business letters. I remember "Iron Fandyr," Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell," a collection of Ossetian stories and anecdotes, postcards with Kosta's photograph, which we still had even after Father's arrest. What became of them, I don't know. Mama tore some of it up in anger, since she considered

Uncle to blame for Father's arrest: after all, during the search, everything bearing German inscriptions had been confiscated.

Sensible, purposeful, and himself highly organised, Evgeniy could not abide slovenliness, disorganisation, or wastefulness. His thriftiness and calculation were sometimes taken by relatives for stinginess, though in the hungry 1920s he helped the family a great deal.

Of course, the fact that Evgeniy had lived independently from an early age, with no one to rely on but himself, left its mark on both his character and his behaviour. His younger brothers, even as adults, lived to some extent under his wing. Hence, apparently, the instructive tone of his letters to my father. Evgeniy was clearly irritated by his brother's lack of confidence in himself, in his own abilities. And from letter to letter he lectures my father on how to comport himself, how to better organise his work, trying to impress upon him that the people Evgeniy dealt with understood no more about the printing trade than Father did.

What worried Evgeniy most of all was the fate of the youngest brother, Elbrus. He wanted to make a "practical worker" out of him and considered Germany, where labour was "elevated to an organised cult" and where "industrial and commercial education, in particular, is very broadly established," the country best suited for this. "With diligence, one can accomplish more here in a single year than we could in many, many years, and do it well," Evgeniy wrote to the department of public education in Vladikavkaz, seeking an exit visa for Elbrus.

Permission was granted, and in 1922 Elbrus arrived in Berlin, where, contrary to Evgeniy's plans, he enrolled in an arts and crafts school, and later in the graphic arts department of a higher art school.

Having successfully completed his studies, Elbrus returned to the USSR at the end of 1927 and began working in Moscow.

The repressions of the 1930s did not pass Elbrus by either. Only by chance did he remain alive. Elbrus fell into that terrible machine at a “fortunate” moment — shortly before Yezhov’s removal and Beria’s arrival, who was then “correcting the excesses” of his predecessor.

Elbrus spent only six months at the Lubyanka. But instead of the young, energetic, handsome thirty-two-year-old man, an old man came home — with a puffy, mealy-pale face, overgrown with a long beard, with swollen legs, missing teeth, and dull, suffering eyes. His whole body was covered in scars and bruises.

For many years Elbrus said nothing about the details of his imprisonment. Only shortly before his death (he died in 1981), sensing it drawing near, did he write a bitter confession about those terrible months.

For many years we knew nothing about Evgeniy.

After 1945, Elbrus made attempts to find out something about his brother. This was difficult, since the district where Evgeniy lived was in West Berlin. Finally, in 1967, through the Red Cross, we managed to learn his address. Elbrus wrote to his brother. Soon Evgeniy’s reply arrived. A long letter, the lines uneven, clearly written by a trembling hand. But the reasoning was logical, sound. He still remembered his native language: Ossetian words were fitted in where appropriate. He wrote that his wife Frida had died of cancer, that Kosta had turned out to be a bad son: he had run up debts, ruined Evgeniy, and abandoned him. “And now I live like a beggar,” Evgeniy wrote. He asked Elbrus to help him — to send some hard currency. “Here, those with no savings are considered paupers.” What could Elbrus send him? He did make some attempts to convert roubles into marks, but nothing came of it. It seems to me that Evgeniy, remembering how much he had done to secure his brother an education in Germany, felt hurt, suspecting Elbrus of unwillingness to help him. Evgeniy simply overestimated his brother’s means. Two final letters from Evgeniy to Elbrus have also survived, full of sorrow and

bitterness. And even in the last letter, old and ill as he was, he worried about the fate of the Ossetian books he still had in his keeping!

...In 1991 I finally received detailed answers to all my questions from the KGB of Ossetia. I was also given a “Death Certificate,” on which, for the first time, the exact date of my father’s death was stated — 10 December 1937 — and the true cause of death: execution by shooting, not the false “lobar pneumonia.” The place of burial is unknown.

An inquiry carried out by the Chief Military Prosecutor’s Office into the criminal case against a group of individuals (my father among them) showed that there had never been a bourgeois-nationalist insurgent organisation in North Ossetia, that there was no “People’s Party” of any kind, and that the case had been fabricated by the Boyarskys and their superiors, many of whom themselves later followed their victims to the same fate.

And Boyarsky is alive! A criminal case was opened against him several years ago, but “his state of health precludes the possibility of carrying out investigative actions with his participation.” So it goes!

...It has become hard for me to carry this pain within me, and I write about it all in the hope that someone will remember the brothers with a kind word, whose fate turned out so tragically...

Zefira Butaeva.

A Slice of Churek

When I was about 5 or 6, my father and I had a game. In good weather, by the time Father came home from work, I was always outside. As soon as Father appeared from around the corner, I would run to meet him, hang around his neck, and he would carry me home in his arms.

Once, while waiting for Father, I was playing hopscotch. A cart moved slowly down the street. The driver walked alongside the horse. From the cart

came the smell of fresh churek bread, being carried to the bakery not far from our house. In the mornings we would collect our ration of this already stale, rock-hard churek with our ration cards.

When the cart drew level with me, its back door suddenly swung open. Jolted loose, one of the trays slid, and a slice of churek fell out onto the ground. I picked up the hot piece and ran up to the driver: “Mister, mister, the door came open!” He stopped the horse, silently walked around the cart, and closed the door. I stood there holding the unbearably hot, large slice of fragrant churek, waiting for him to take it back. The driver looked at me, waved his hand, and, just as silently, went back to the horse.

The cart drove off. And I stood in the middle of the street, bewildered, understanding nothing.

A tall man came up and took the churek from my hands: “Little girl, give it to me, it’s too hot for you to hold!”

Coming home from work, Father hurried his pace when he saw, from a distance, a stranger standing beside me. But by the time Father reached us and I had told him everything, the man had vanished without a trace.

— Oh, you silly girl, - said Father, - that driver was giving it to you for keeps!

I looked at my empty, reddened hands, still feeling the weight of the hot churek, and only then did I finally understand what I had lost.

That day too, Father carried me home in his arms — but bitterly crying.

Zefira Butaeva.

A Wealth of Corn

This was during one of the hungry years of the 1930s. The staff of the printing house where my parents worked were offered the chance to work the fields of a suburban experimental farm in their free time, with the promise of

payment in harvest come autumn. Many were sceptical. But my parents went out to the field every day off, all year round, sometimes taking the older children along. And then, on a warm autumn day, a horse cart pulled up to our gate, piled high with white and yellow corn cobs. And beside it — Father and Mother, beaming, proud: all of it ours, earned by our own labour!

The whole courtyard came running to see the marvel. Someone helped unload the corn, someone offered advice on where best to store it. And I was sent to fetch Grandfather, who, as usual, was sitting with his ever-present friends on the step of a boarded-up shop.

— Come home quickly, babpu! — I shouted to Grandfather. — Look what they've brought!

When, out of breath, Grandfather came into the courtyard and saw the corn, his legs, it seemed, gave way beneath him. He sat down on a bench, watching the joyful bustle around the cart, tears streaming down his cheeks.

— I did see the cart go by, - Grandfather said, - and I even thought: who is this fortunate soul, chosen by God, into whose house such riches will come?

A happy time began. Never again did we eat those disgusting flatbreads made from distillery mash. And how many delicious things could be made from corn! Every day Mama baked churek, cooked porridge, made “dzarna.” Grandfather and I fried “tsakuta,” and I joyfully treated all the children in the courtyard.

That winter is remembered as the most well-fed of my childhood.

Zefira Butaeva.

Going for Potatoes

Once Father mentioned that some of his co-workers went out to the harvested potato fields to dig up the potatoes left behind.

Father decided to go too. Mama tried to talk him out of it: “You have no luck with things like this, don’t go.” Father insisted, and on his day off, early in the morning, taking along his 12-year-old son, he set off to try his luck. We had no rucksack, sacks wouldn’t do, so Father persuaded Mama to give him the white linen bag she used for boiling laundry.

It had already grown dark when Father and my brother returned, tired, gloomy, and... empty-handed. My brother fell asleep at once, while Father played the balalaika for a long while, then bitterly told us how they had crawled across the field all day, searching for tubers. Several times a watchman rode past on horseback. At first Father was frightened, but the watchman smiled encouragingly, and Father took this as a sign of permission, thinking he must simply be a kind man. At last the little bag was full, and my brother’s sack too. Pleased, Father and my brother came out onto the road, heading home. And then the watchman rode up again — but this time without a smile.

— Leave the potatoes and go, - he said. - And you should be thanking me for letting you go at all.

Father felt humiliated, deceived, but what could he do?

And Mama simply could not calm down:

— You wouldn’t listen to me! And look what you’ve done to that poor little bag!

Zefira Butaeva.

Grandfather

I love looking at the old photograph of my grandfather. I remember him only in his old age, when he was past 80 and already the elder of the Vladimirskaya settlement.

Almost every day he was invited to some celebration or other. It wasn't a proper wedding, wasn't a proper wake, unless my grandfather sat at the head of the table. He was invited, too, when family disputes needed settling, to reconcile the feuding sides. As I understand it now, this wasn't only a matter of his age. He was wise.

But in the 1925 photograph, Grandfather is still vigorous, full of strength. What nobility, what dignity in his face, in the turn of his head! A prince! Only his hands — the calloused hands of a labourer — betray his origins. And looking closer, you notice the frayed sleeves of the cherkeska he wore, as far back as I can remember, always the same one, along with the sheath of a dagger that had long since held a wooden blade instead of a steel one.

Grandfather undoubtedly possessed a natural intelligence, which allowed him, for his children's sake, to give up his settled place in the mountains of the Kurtatinsky gorge, where there was only a three-grade school, and move to the city. There wasn't much to lose, in truth — only a saklya, clinging to the cliffside. Father told me that in winter the rock face would be covered in frost, and all the children would lie down around the hearth — the only place one could get warm. But in the city there wasn't even such a saklya, and for several years the family had to squeeze into other people's corners. Still, it gave the sons (both daughters soon married) the chance to get on their feet.

The eldest, Evgeniy, had long lived independently — first in Vladikavkaz, then in St. Petersburg, and in 1912 he left for Germany and settled in Berlin.

My father, Kirill, was the second son. Right after arriving in Vladikavkaz he took a job as a delivery boy at a dry-goods shop, rising to shop assistant by the time of the revolution. After the revolution, influenced by Evgeniy, Father went to work at a printing house. He started as a typesetter, and by the time of his arrest in 1937 was a proofreader there.

The third son, Nikolai, learned a trade and worked as a cobbler his whole life.

The fourth, Zanchora, did not live long. During the Civil War, at the age of 17, he was killed by a stray bullet while simply walking down the street.

And finally, the youngest — Elbrus. He remained constantly under Evgeniy's watchful eye, for Evgeniy dreamed of giving his gifted younger brother a good education and a profession.

Grandfather gave his sons complete freedom, never imposing his will upon them, which was a rarity in such a patriarchal family. And indeed, what could he give them besides freedom, though he laboured his whole life long? Mama used to tell how, every winter day, Grandfather would ride his old nag into the forest, and on the way back would sell firewood at the market. The money he earned was barely enough for flour and grain. My grandmother died before Grandfather turned 70. He even resolved to marry a second time, and asked his elder sons' permission to do so. My father had no objection, but when they wrote to Evgeniy about it, the answer came back: "There's nothing to amuse people over, you're not the age for it!" Grandfather, they say, was offended, but to do anything against Evgeniy's will was considered such a sacrilege that it was unthinkable.

Both Grandfather, and my father, and Elbrus — with whom I was close until his very death, and whom I loved very much (I knew Nikolai little: he lived apart from the rest) — were more open, cheerful, and passionate than Evgeniy.

Grandfather and I had a special relationship: after all, without me it was hard for him to communicate with Mama, whose voice, by Ossetian custom, he was not supposed to hear.

Grandfather could not pronounce my name properly; what came out was something like "Zishi." This made everyone laugh, him included.

After my father's arrest, Grandfather changed a great deal: he grew stooped, became silent. He didn't want to leave us even for a short while, though he saw how hard it was for Mama to support the family.

Sometimes his daughter would take him to her village, almost by force. At most he could bear it there for two days. On the third, without telling anyone anything, he'd sling his cane over his shoulder, walk 8 kilometres on foot — and there he was, my babpu, knocking at the door!

— Zishi, I ran away! Let them search for me now! Look what I brought you.

He would untie the handkerchief knotted to the end of his cane and pull out treats: sweets, an apple, a pear — and watch happily as I devoured it all. Then he would embrace me and fall silent for a long while.

What was he thinking about?

About the life he had lived, about the death drawing near?

About his sons, scattered across the world?

There had been no word from Evgeniy for several years already.

Two years since Kirill, the gentlest, kindest of the sons, had been arrested. For what?

And now Elbrus, living in Moscow, had fallen silent too. Perhaps something terrible had happened to him as well?

Only Nikolai was nearby, but he might as well not have existed. He was ashamed of his father and avoided him, kept no contact with any relatives.

Beside Grandfather, I too would grow quiet. We would sit for a long time, embracing, and in Grandfather I sensed a small piece of my father, whom I missed so terribly!

...I was home alone when the neighbourhood boys burst in, shouting:

— Your grandfather's been run over!

I ran round the corner, where the old men usually sat on the steps. Now a group of people stood by the steps, discussing what had happened.

A truck had been driving down the narrow road. Suddenly two children ran out onto the roadway, holding hands. Trying to avoid hitting them, the driver swerved onto the pavement and struck a woman. Apparently losing his head, the driver wrenched the wheel sharply — straight toward the three old men sitting there. Two of them were younger and managed to jump aside, but Grandfather, leaning on his cane, was trying to get up when the truck pinned him against the wall.

By the time I ran up, the ambulance had already taken away both the woman and Grandfather. Red patches of blood stained the asphalt, and by the wall lay the broken pieces of Grandfather's staff.

I picked up both halves of that so-familiar cane of his and, pressing them to my chest, choking on tears, made my way to Mama at work.

We went together to the hospital. Mama stayed at the door of the ward, while I went up to Grandfather and took his hand. He was conscious.

— Babpu, it's me.

— Who did you come with?

— With Mama.

— Where is she? Let her come here, - Grandfather said with difficulty, and tried to open his eyes.

I relayed his request to Mama. She took a step, then stopped:

— How can I go to him? We've never spoken, how could I...

Returning to Grandfather, I lied:

— They won't let Mama into the ward.

— Why won't they let her in? She is my breadwinner, she... my support, she... - Grandfather murmured, already losing consciousness.

These were his last words. Grandfather died that night.

And Mama tormented herself to the end of her days for not fulfilling a dying man's wish — for not going up to Grandfather, out of fear of breaking with tradition. In that moment Mama forgot that she had already once stepped over that same custom: on the night her husband was arrested, in her father-in-law's presence, she had wept and wailed aloud:

— Oh, our hearth has been destroyed!

Zefira Butaeva.

The Kidnapping

For several years before the war, Mama would send me during the school holidays “for milk” to her younger sister in the village where Mama herself had lived before marrying. There were many relatives and acquaintances in the village. I loved going visiting with my aunt, and there was never a time when, learning whose daughter I was, someone didn't ask: “Does your mother still have that same long braid?” It turned out my mother had been known for her long braid, and for her diligence besides.

...Once an ox-cart pulled up to the house. The man sitting in it rapped on the gate with his whip and shouted in a creaking voice:

— Hey, folks!

My aunt came out and invited him inside.

I didn't like him: scrawny, unshaven, gloomy. And when the guest climbed down from the cart, I saw that he also limped badly. He went into the house, sat for a while, drank a shot of araka, spoke about something with my aunt.

— Do you know who that was? - my aunt asked, once he had left, and told me an astonishing story. (Mama herself only worked up the courage to tell it to me shortly before her death.)

My aunt was still a girl when, one night, someone knocked at their door and a woman's voice asked them to open it. When they opened the door, several men burst into the room, seized their elderly father and bound him, threw their mother aside, grabbed their eldest sister, and galloped off.

By the time everyone came to their senses and called the neighbours, dawn had broken. Among the close relatives there were no young men who might have immediately given chase. The neighbours were ready to go searching, but where? Kidnapping a girl was no rarity in those years. It was usually done after a failed matchmaking, if the relatives or the girl herself had refused a suitor. But here no one had proposed, and suddenly — an abduction!

A week later the girl was found in a distant village, and only then did it become clear who had taken her: a young man who lived on the same street as her. He was so certain no one would have him that he hadn't even bothered to send matchmakers. He had, in fact, set his sights on marrying my mother, as the most hardworking of the sisters. He himself had not taken part in the night's "operation," but had invited men from another village, fearing his own fellow villagers would refuse. Through a neighbour he learned who slept where. Usually the two eldest sisters slept together, while the youngest slept with their mother.

And it so happened that on that very night Mama had persuaded her younger sister to switch places.

The kidnappers didn't know my mother by sight, and besides it was dark; they had only been told that of the sleepers in the corner bed, they were to carry off the one with the long hair. And so they seized my mother's eldest sister: her hair was longer than that of the younger one lying beside her.

By the time the mistake was discovered, it was already too late...

The elderly parents had no choice but to accept it. Even if they had taken their daughter back, no one would have married her after she'd been abducted.

And so my aunt lived on with a man she did not love. He turned out, besides, to be stingy, greedy, and cruel. There was a large household, much work to be done, and my aunt, sickly and frail, was of the three sisters the least accustomed to hard labour. They had no children, and my aunt withered away from that joyless, difficult life. And when she took to her bed and could no longer manage the household, her husband brought another woman into the house, a healthy, strong one.

I was stunned — not so much by my aunt's story itself, as by imagining that this fate had been intended for my own mother.

When my aunt joked, "This man could have been your father," I was filled with horror. What — instead of my handsome, gentle, delicate father, this repulsive, wizened old man?

What happiness that it never happened!

Zefira Butaeva.

White Shirts

I always wanted to learn how to shoot. And so when, one day, sponsors came to our school — cadets from an infantry academy on the outskirts of the city — and suggested we sign up for various clubs, I chose the shooting club without a moment's hesitation.

"Shooters" were gathered from every class for the first session. It turned out the club had only boys in it. I had already gone up to the cadet to excuse myself — I certainly wasn't going to be the only girl there with a bunch of boys — when He walked into the room: Kostya, the cause of my secret torment and suffering.

He was, to my mind, the most striking, the most handsome boy in the whole school. He was in the eighth grade, was liked by many of the girls in his class, and, of course, by me, a sixth-grader — with no hope of breaking through their ranks. Only from a distance, during breaks, did I steal glances at him. And now, suddenly, this happiness: we were in a club with only one girl — me — and maybe, just maybe, he would notice me!

The club met on Sundays. All week I lived for that day, plotting how I would “accidentally” end up standing next to him, and how we’d take apart and reassemble the small-calibre rifle together. But it never once worked out: he was late to every session and always paired off with one of the other boys.

A few Sundays later, on a frosty, sunny day, we went out into the schoolyard, spread mats on the snow, our instructor set up the targets, handed out three cartridges each, and we began to shoot.

I waited my turn and dreamed: I would hit the bullseye all three times. Kostya would look at me, smile, maybe even come over.

And then I shot. The instructor went up to the target and announced: “Nine, seven, eight!” The best result of anyone!

The cadet praised me, the boys crowded round, staring in surprise. And Kostya... off to the side, was carefully brushing snow off his trousers... I couldn’t hold it in, I burst into tears — everyone assumed it was from joy — and ran home.

Then, as usual, competitions began between the schools of the district, of the city. And although I was one of only two from our school, alongside Kostya, taking part, he still didn’t notice me.

One day the deputy head summoned me and took me to the military instruction room. Kostya was already there. We stood side by side, they put rifles in our hands, and some correspondent from Moscow photographed us.

In February 1940, our photograph appeared in the newspaper “Pionerskaya Pravda” with the caption “Students of School No. ... (our surnames) preparing for the republican shooting championships.” Soon the local paper printed the photograph too. And letters began pouring into the school. From everywhere imaginable! From Kazakhstan and Belarus, from Ivanovo and Tyumen, from an orphanage in Ukraine. Boys and girls wrote, wanting to be pen pals with us. Many sent their own drawings, embroidery. For me, each letter was an excuse to go up to Kostya, to approach him openly at break: after all, the whole school knew what connected us.

That summer, one of the boys who had written to us, a nine-year-old, came with his mother to stay with us as guests. This made me quite bold indeed: I invited Kostya over.

He always came freshly pressed, in his unvarying white shirt, sleeves neatly rolled just above the elbow (that was the fashion in those years). The only child in his family, adored by his parents and his unmarried aunt, he was always well groomed, well dressed.

Kostya would play chess with the boy while I sat nearby, afraid to move, feeling my face burn, not knowing where to put my hands, braiding the fringe of the tablecloth into little plaits.

Kostya lived on the next street over, and his parents were from the same village as my mother. Both of these facts poisoned my life. Coming back from the vegetable garden with our hoes, spades, and baskets, we had to walk past their house, and Mama would often stop to chat with our fellow villagers. I, meanwhile, was always terrified he might see me looking so unpresentable.

And then, one day, something happened after which I avoided meeting Kostya for the rest of the summer, though at the sight of every white shirt my heart still leapt — Him!

...In the morning I went out for kerosene. There was none at the kiosk yet. The queue stretched an entire block. Numbers were written in indelible

pencil on people's palms, and in chalk on their kerosene containers. The kerosene wasn't delivered until evening. People, exhausted from standing so long in the heat, and furious, got into fights with those trying to cut in line. Somehow I extracted myself from that scrum with my canister full of kerosene. On the way out someone shoved me, and kerosene splashed over my legs.

And it was in this state — dishevelled, with a queue number on my hand, my hem splattered with kerosene — that I ran into Kostya. Smart, smiling, arm in arm with his aunt, on his way to the theatre. I wished the ground would open and swallow me whole!

A new school year began, and the summer's ordeal faded a little. There were two crazes that year at our school: a widespread urge for "kinship" — the game of naming each other sworn brothers and sisters — and the drama club. The "director-producers" were the students themselves. I took part in every production.

I too acquired a sworn brother, and I was proud of it. Though it soon became clear that I was merely a pretext: he actually liked my friend, whom he had cast in the lead role in the play, though she — fair-haired, plump — seemed to me entirely unsuited to playing a mountain girl.

That same winter I frequently appeared on city radio in programmes for children (sometimes alongside real actors), recited poetry in numerous competitions and olympiads. I loved all of it very much.

With Kostya, over that year, a strange kind of relationship developed between us. He would come up to me himself; we exchanged books, discussed them. Sometimes he'd come by my house for books, which I would beg from a neighbour and hand over to him, not always managing even to finish reading them myself first. But he treated me with a certain condescension. I remember how disapprovingly he reacted when I acquired a "brother" without consulting him first. And though I still liked him just as much as before, I resigned myself to the role of someone being looked after.

One summer day Kostya came not in the afternoon, as usual, but in the evening, and asked me to go for a walk — something he had never done before. He had such an unusual air about him that I froze: today, right now, he was going to tell me something important, the very thing I had waited for so long. And indeed he began to speak. About how I was a girl worth something, how he thought well of me, how he knew I wasn't indifferent to him either (I listened, and everything inside me rejoiced — at last!), but... that his close friend liked me and wanted to be with me, and he, Kostya, as the elder, as my friend, was advising me to meet with him.

I stood there in bewildered silence. And he kept talking, talking: “He's a good boy, reads a lot, you'll find him interesting. I gave my word that I'd persuade you, and if you don't agree, it means you don't respect me.”

He named his friend. I knew Boris. He used to go to our school, but his parents died, and Boris left for a technical college. We would greet each other whenever he came to visit his uncle, who lived in the house next to mine.

I agreed. I agreed to be with Boris, if only to prove that for Kostya's sake I was ready for anything. But how hurt I was!

The next day, at 11 o'clock, Boris and I met at the far end of the avenue. He too was wearing a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, but it all felt wrong somehow: the shirt wasn't quite as snow-white, the sleeves not rolled quite the same way.

Silently we walked past people sitting on both sides of the boulevard, all of them looking only at us. We finally reached “the Track” and went into the park. There we began to feel a little more at ease.

It was very hot, I wanted a drink, but I didn't dare go up to the water kiosk.

Then we took a boat out on the pond in the middle of the park. And only then did Boris work up the courage to hand me a little paper bag of candy

pillows, nearly melted and stuck together, which he'd been carrying around in his hand all day. I didn't know what to do with them, and "forgot" the soggy little bag in the boat.

With Boris it was, in fact, interesting, and we walked around until five o'clock. Finally I remembered with a start that I'd be in trouble for being gone so long, and hurried home.

Again we walked down the avenue. But something strange had happened during the day: no one was sitting on the boulevard anymore; people stood in groups under the loudspeakers, discussing something excitedly.

And I, glad that no one was paying us any attention, was feverishly trying to think up an excuse for my absence at home the whole day.

Approaching my house, without a word between us, we made a show of each walking separately — me heading home, he to his uncle's.

And only when I entered the courtyard, saw the neighbours all agitated, an aunt from the village in tears, did I learn: war!

Fear gripped me! My first thought — my brother! Where was Sasha? At one o'clock he was supposed to read Lermontov's poetry on the radio. He still wasn't here! I ran out into the street. Boris was standing in a group of men, talking to his uncle. Seeing me, he came up to me now without any pretence. Learning I was going to look for Sasha, he wasn't surprised, though he knew my brother was much older than me, and came along with me.

We found Sasha on the bridge over the Terek. I threw myself at him, pressed close. He stroked my head, calmed me, told me that all broadcasts, except for war reports, had been cancelled. When I finally let go of my brother, Boris was no longer beside me.

I never saw Boris again... A few days later he volunteered for the front and was killed soon after.

And at the end of the year, several older students from our school were accepted into the Yeisk Flight School. Kostya was among them.

He wrote me three letters from Yeisk. Good letters, tender, quite grown-up. He wrote that he would come back — and everything between us would be different — and asked me not to be offended, and to forgive him, without explaining what for.

But I wasn't offended at all. If only he stayed alive! If only he came back!

But he didn't come back. He didn't come back, just as Boris didn't, as Ibragim, Volodya, our physics teacher didn't, as my own brother and three of my cousins didn't, as thousands, millions of someone else's brothers, sons, beloved didn't.

Kostya's plane exploded on take-off at the airfield.

His mother was driven half-mad with grief. I met her several years after the war. She took me home with her. She embraced me, wept, showed me photographs of Kostya, newspaper clippings with the two of us together, and kept asking: "You loved him, didn't you? Loved him, loved him, I know it. It was impossible not to love him!"

And then, suddenly, she grew bitter and began telling me how one of Kostya's friends had come to offer his condolences — also a former student of our school, one who had watched Kostya's plane explode before his own eyes. "Why did he come? What do I need him for? He's alive, and my son is dead, no one saved him!" And there was so much malice in her face that it frightened me.

She invited me to come again, but I couldn't bring myself to. I wasn't sure that, sooner or later, she wouldn't say to me too: "What do I need you for? My son is gone, and you're alive, married to someone else."

Zefira Butaeva.

No One Is Forgotten!?

I dreamed of Moscow, like Chekhov's three sisters. It seemed to me too that in Moscow there would be a different life, an interesting, happy one.

My excellent school certificate made it possible to enrol at any institute without exams. But it wasn't really so important to me which one I entered, as long as it was in Moscow.

Mama objected to my leaving, knowing she wouldn't be able to help support me. I complained to my brother, who was at the front. And so, in mid-August 1944, Mama received a letter in which my brother asked her to let me go. "The war is ending," he wrote, "soon I'll come home, start working, and things will be easier for us."

Reluctantly, with a heavy heart, Mama agreed.

I sent my documents to Moscow and waited for the acceptance notice.

Now it was already the end of August, the beginning of September, and still no notice came. Every day I ran out to meet the postman, sometimes went to the post office myself. In vain!

Finally, in mid-September — a letter, written in an unfamiliar hand. Not paying attention to the return address, joyful, I opened the envelope, and... "You have probably already received the official notification that Sasha drowned on 25 August." I didn't grasp at once that they were writing about my brother — my own, beloved brother, who, after Father's disappearance, had become the greatest authority in my life, the one I was proud of. The difference in age — my brother was six years older than me — never got in the way of our closeness. We had gone to the same school, read the same books, both worked part-time at the radio committee, taking part in literary broadcasts for children, both were passionate about the theatre: we were both in drama clubs (I at school, he at some club or other). When my brother was learning a role, I would rehearse opposite him as his scene partner. He played the False Dmitry,

I played Marina; he a young gypsy, I Zemfira. We were also drawn together by our shared isolation from everyone after Father's arrest. My brother, perhaps, suffered it more tragically than I did. What it must have cost him, that one school meeting at which he was expelled from the Komsomol for refusing to renounce his father, an "enemy of the people." And they sent him to the front as a medic, even though he had graduated from an institute.

...I finished reading the letter, a long one, with some inappropriate, unnecessary details about the feelings of a woman I didn't know.

No! It can't be! Only a few days ago he had written that he would be home soon! And how could one go on living, if my brother was no more! I wanted to scream: "It isn't true!"

I looked at the clock in horror: Mama would be back from work any minute. I grabbed the letter and ran to the neighbours'. Choking back tears, I hid there, listening to what Mama, having returned, was doing: lighting the primus stove, making dinner, knocking on the neighbours' door to ask if they knew where I was...

Having sat at the neighbours' until it grew dark, I firmly resolved not to tell Mama about the letter. What if, after all, it wasn't true!

Mama scolded me for coming home so late, but seeing my face, grew alarmed. I said my stomach hurt. I lay down without eating.

God! What a night that was! Mama and I lay in the same bed. I was shivering, shaking. Mama didn't close her eyes once, worrying over me, changing my hot water bottles. Unable to bear it, I would start crying, as if from the pain.

Morning came at last, and Mama left for work. And I went to the neighbours' again — close, kind people, who did so much good for us. I couldn't bear another night like that one, and we decided to tell Mama everything.

Again I listened as Mama came in and busied herself, as she went to the shed for firewood, preparing to light the stove.

Surrounded by the neighbours, weeping, I went into the room and rushed to Mama. She understood at once... Her hands fell open... The logs scattered onto her feet.

— Oh, oh, oh! My son! My little sun!

She tore at her hair, scratched her cheeks, beat her head against the wall... And there was no strength to hold her back.

The next day a letter came from his commanding officer as well: “Grief has befallen our unit. We buried Sasha on 26 August at the Russian cemetery in the city of Yevpatoria. We are sending six roubles and two photographs of his sister, which were in his pocket...” That was all. There was no more room for doubt.

Relatives and acquaintances came to offer condolences. Mama accompanied her weeping with ritual laments, telling of her grief, of her son’s letters, promising to fulfil his final request: to send me to study in Moscow.

My sister and I stood beside Mama when suddenly I felt one of our relatives slip something into my pocket and whisper: “This is for your journey!” And then someone else... and someone else again. The money that is usually collected for a wake, they gave to me instead, for my trip!

They began preparing me for the journey. A cobbler we knew stitched me a pair of boots out of two of Grandfather’s old pairs. They made a skirt from my brother’s only pair of trousers. My sister’s coat was turned and remade for me. Mama gave me her knitted shawl, my aunt a sweater.

It was in this state that I turned up at the philological faculty of Moscow University.

...Life turned out such that it was only 26 years later that I was able to travel to Yevpatoria. I sought out the woman who had written to us about

Sasha. She took me to the Russian cemetery, closed now. At the far end, where the soldiers were buried, a few barely visible mounds. On some of them, wooden markers with little red stars. All the inscriptions had worn away. Under which of these mounds my brother lay — that was impossible to know...

I laid flowers on every single mound...

And then, 15 years after that, we received a call from the military registration office: they were looking for Sasha, to present him with the Order of the Red Star, with which my brother had been decorated in December 1943.

Zefira Butaeva.

My Repentance

In 1944 I came to Moscow to study.

Withdrawn, tense all over, unsure of myself, poorly dressed even for those times, I turned up in a group where almost everyone was a Moscow native. I sat silently through classes, pining for home, for my dead brother. And after classes — the famous Stromynka dormitory, with its dark, foul-smelling corridors, its rats, rooms holding 6 to 12 people, communal kitchens where, just to fit a pot on the stove, you had to wait in line. Later Stromynka became a home to me, and now I remember much good about it too. But at the time, I was ready to walk home on foot. On top of everything, on the metro, someone had stolen my purse right out of my satchel, with my money, my passport, and nearly a month's worth of ration cards.

I was in despair. What could I do? I couldn't very well share my grief with those self-assured, well-fed-seeming girls, whose only talk was of the skating rink, a Richter concert, a Yakhontov recital. What did my ration cards mean to them?

I confided in only one girl. She too was a Muscovite, though her surname and first name (Natella) were Georgian. I was drawn to this beautiful

girl, with her huge eyes, her fan-like lashes, her elegant manner. I noticed that she, too, looked at me warmly.

Natella sympathised with me rather reservedly. But that evening she came to my dormitory with what we'd now call "humanitarian aid": two loaves of bread, one white, one black, and a ration card good until the end of the month.

After much persuading, Natella agreed to have a cup of tea, declining a second piece of bread. I didn't insist, thinking a hearty supper awaited her at home. How could I have guessed she was just as hungry as I was!

Soon Natella invited me to visit. Her aunt met us and immediately sat us down to eat. And though the meal was some watery soup and millet porridge, it was laid out with a formality unfamiliar to me: proper place settings, a change of plates. And in the middle of the table, on a plate covered with a napkin, pieces of bread cut for the number of people present. (I noticed how, turning her back to me, the aunt cut a little extra from each piece, assembling a portion for me.)

That was how I found my way into a family that has, for 50 years now, been like my own. Though the first time, it felt rather strange: in the house, one adult and five children, of whom only one called her "Mama" — everyone else called her Lyalya.

I began visiting them often, and after the winter exam session I practically moved in, only occasionally stopping by the dormitory. And it was there that I learned of a tragedy before which my own grief paled.

Elena Solomonovna (Lyalya), my friend's aunt, had been expelled from the Party; all her relatives had been repressed.

Natella was the daughter of her elder sister, a former Baku underground activist, arrested a month after her husband — a member of the Georgian government — had been arrested.

Ira and Shurik were the children of Elena Solomonovna's younger sister, then serving out an exile in Akmolinsk as the wife of an "enemy of the people," a professor at Kazan University. After their parents' arrest, Ira and Shurik had lived with their grandmother in Baku. During the war the grandmother died, and the children were left alone, literally living as street orphans. With great difficulty, Elena Solomonovna managed, through a former student of hers, the polar explorer Papanin, to obtain plane tickets, and brought the children to live with her.

Vova was the son of Elena Solomonovna's second husband, a prominent economist arrested in 1937.

And finally, Elena Solomonovna's own son from her first marriage, Yura, whose father had likewise been arrested.

In that same flat lived the wife and daughter of Elena Solomonovna's brother, who had been repressed in Odessa.

My own father, too, had been arrested in 1937. But I was firmly convinced that he was guilty of nothing, that his arrest was some accident, some mistake. But here... surely there couldn't be this many coincidences... There had to be some real basis for it... I came to love this whole family deeply, yet this wholesale wave of arrests made me uneasy.

Once Elena Solomonovna told me about Lenin's "testament." I didn't believe her. I would inwardly recoil whenever anyone spoke disrespectfully of Stalin. After all, I worshipped him. It felt utterly terrifying to me when, passing by Beria's mansion on the corner of Spiridonovka and the Garden Ring, Natella would say, almost out loud: "Ugh, the swine, walling himself off behind that high fence, posting guards everywhere!" And she would tell improbable stories about Beria's drunken orgies, remembered from the time when they had lived as neighbours in Georgia.

Elena Solomonovna, a lecturer in political economy, expelled from the Party, and moreover an advocate for "upholding Leninist norms," could never

hold a position for long. It was astonishing that she was even left at liberty at all! And there was a large family to feed. And, now and then, a modest parcel to put together for her sister in Akmolinsk.

Where this not-very-tall, young woman (she was around forty, though to me, at 18, she seemed elderly) found such strength, such energy — it defied understanding.

I remember the enormous, battered briefcase Elena Solomonovna never parted with. Every evening we waited impatiently for her return. Not a day went by that the briefcase was empty. By whatever means, fair or foul, Elena Solomonovna somehow managed to redeem ration cards at some special shop or other. Sometimes she managed to get bread a day in advance. Every morning began with worrying over whom she now owed money to, and from whom she might borrow again, in order to redeem the ration cards.

We too were drawn into these schemes: we would sell the white bread our cards entitled us to, in order to buy more black bread. Sometimes the trade union committee issued us coupons for calico cloth, which we likewise traded for bread.

Despite all this, the house was always full of people. Friends, acquaintances, friends of friends and acquaintances of acquaintances... And everyone was seated at the table, everyone fed something, given tea. And it was I now — I turned out to have the sharpest eye for it! — who cut the bread according to the number of mouths to feed.

And how many people would gather for birthdays! What vinaigrette salad we'd make! And how much of it! Preparations for the celebrations began long in advance. Everyone put aside gifts, scrimping on something or other.

In 1947 the ration cards were abolished, and life grew easier.

Zhenya, the mother of Ira and Shurik, returned from exile. She was so beautiful, so charming, that it was impossible to picture her in a prison setting.

She had no right to stay in Moscow. She had to rent a room 150 kilometres away, but Zhenya couldn't bear to stay put there. She had grown so desperately homesick for the children she hadn't seen in years, for the warmth and comfort of home, that, at the risk of being exiled again, she spent nearly all her time in Moscow. We worked out a secret knock, and if a stranger came, Zhenya would hide in the wardrobe. We especially dreaded night-time calls and knocks, but it always worked out.

Then, in 1949, Zhenya was exiled again, this time to Siberia. She spent several years there, until at last she was able to return to Moscow for good.

In the mid-1950s Elena Solomonovna was reinstated in the Party, given a flat, and began working in her own field again. All her wards found professions, and made their way in life, some better, some worse. Now, at last, she might have lived out a little peace and quiet.

But... in 1965 Elena Solomonovna was killed in a car accident.

She had come to visit me two weeks before her death. She was full of ideas, of plans, spoke enthusiastically about her work, and was entirely absorbed in her worries over who should be sent where for a rest.

With Elena Solomonovna's death, the ties between the members of what had once been a single family loosened. Of everyone who had been arrested, only Zhenya had come back. Where the graves of the others lay — no one knows. Natella's mother vanished without a trace. As for her father, it is known that he was shot after being brutally beaten in the presence of, and with the participation of, Beria himself. Zhenya's husband and two of his brothers were shot. Elena Solomonovna's husband and brother were shot. Their names are now cited in many articles devoted to the victims of the "cult of personality."

Every time I visit Moscow, I try to see Zhenya too. And I never cease to marvel at how it's possible to preserve such warmth of soul, such

responsiveness, without growing bitter, without losing one's faith in people. And she remains beautiful even now, though she's past eighty!

I am forever grateful to the fate that brought me together with this extraordinary family. I often wonder: what kind of person would I be now, had these remarkable people never been part of my life?

And I feel the belated need to repent for those long-ago thoughts of mine, when I doubted the innocence of my Natella's loved ones.

Zefira Butaeva.

Guilty Without Guilt

In the late 1940s, my aunt's husband, a teacher by profession, was sent as headmaster to a school in a village where Ingush people had lived until 1944, and where Ossetians had been settled (by force, likewise!).

The headmaster's family was housed in one of the many empty houses nearest the school. The house was dilapidated, with an earthen floor. There were remnants of furniture in it too: a kitchen cupboard, a low little table, two stools. Notable was the large, overgrown fruit orchard by the house: cherries, plums, apricots, apple trees.

My uncle regarded his appointment as a temporary matter, and so had no wish to settle in properly. They bought only a cow, kept some chickens, planted vegetables. They lived like this for several years.

One morning my aunt went out early to milk the cow. Looking toward the orchard, through the morning haze, she made out the silhouette of a man embracing a tree. After standing there a while, the man moved to a neighbouring tree and pressed himself against it too.

My aunt was frightened, decided he must be mad. She ran into the house and woke her husband. Together they went out to the man in the orchard. He pulled away from the tree and looked at them as they approached.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. Noticing my aunt's and her husband's alarm, he reassured them:

— Don't be afraid, I haven't lost my mind. This is my house, I planted every one of these trees myself, and I've dreamed of them for years and years!

They invited the man into the house, and my aunt served breakfast on the low little table. He stroked the table:

— I made this myself.

It didn't go without a glass of araka, of course. Once he'd had a drink, the tension eased, and the guest told them the details — almost unknown at the time — of the terrible journey and the life in exile. They had been transported like cattle, in freight cars, with almost no food or water. Most of the elderly never made it to their destination, and those who did could not withstand the harsh climate, the tearing away from their native homes. Children died of cold and malnutrition.

Much has been written about this now, but at the time my aunt was shaken, and retold it all to me in horror.

When the guest made to leave, my uncle offered to let him stay on in his old house, but he exclaimed:

— No, no! It isn't you who are to blame for what was done to my people! We've been given a plot of land, a loan, I'll build a new house. I only came to look at my trees!

The Ingush man never appeared at the old house again.

It had already felt uncomfortable, living in the ashes of someone else's former life, but after meeting the house's true owner it became almost unbearable, and my aunt's family soon left that village.

Zefira Butaeva.

Letters About the Past

Good day, Alexei!

You reproached me for having forgotten everything. Not true. I can arrange an “evening of memories.” As they say, “I’ve got plenty of those.”

How we met, I don’t remember exactly. It seems Nata and I were walking down the Stromynka corridor, and a curly-haired, slightly balding young man invited us to be photographed. The two of you worked as a pair, like Ilf and Petrov: he did the inviting, you did the photographing.

After that — a blank.

But I remember a few days in the smallest detail.

We went out of town together. The day before, you had been there with your group of future art historians and wanted to introduce me to the beauty of the Moscow region too. We rode for a long time in a crowded electric train, pressed against each other. Then we looked at some ruins. It was very beautiful: the ground strewn with golden-green leaves, the red, half-ruined walls of church-monasteries lit by the setting sun.

You were in high spirits, telling me everything, explaining everything. I had very vague notions about architecture, so I was a grateful listener.

We came back already in the evening. For some reason there was no one but us. We walked to the station holding hands, rustling through the leaves, singing loudly (trying to sing in two voices): “Eh, dorogi, pyl’ da tuman...” [“Oh, roads, dust and fog...”] We could never manage the end of the refrain, “and bullets whistle” — it was too high — and we laughed.

It was warm — I unbuttoned my coat. You noticed my dress. It really was a beautiful dress: black, fitted, the bodice embroidered with beads. It suited me very well. You admired the dress so much that, growing embarrassed, I confessed: it wasn’t mine. I used to borrow it for formal

occasions from one of my girlfriends. Her father had brought it to her from Germany. You were taken aback, blushed, and started to console me, wiping away my tears.

We arrived in Moscow late, but you invited me to the cocktail hall at the start of Gorky Street.

It was the first restaurant of my life — I remember every detail. We drank the “Friendly” cocktail, ate pastries.

At midnight, intoxicated not so much by the cocktail as by the day spent together, we made our way back to Stromynka. We didn’t want to go into the stuffy dormitory rooms. We sat on some logs in the courtyard, and you spoke for the first time about your feelings for me. Then we stood for a long while by the window in that cherished nook at the turn of the corridor — the permanent spot of all the lovers in our dormitory.

I also remember well one more day — my birthday. We celebrated it, as always, at Nata’s. Everyone knew my dream was a French loaf, sliced lengthwise and spread with butter. I even saw myself in dreams holding it with both hands and eating, eating.

When the guests gathered, Nata and her brother presented me with two French loaves spread with butter.

We sat down at the table when you arrived with a package. We unwrapped it — there was a baguette, sliced lengthwise and spread with butter in exactly the same way. Amid general laughter I only managed to eat one loaf. When we got up from the table, you called me aside and gave me a second gift — a medallion on a copper chain. I remember every word you said: “I know you’ll have plenty of jewelry someday. But never throw away this medallion. It will always remind you of me.”

You were wrong, Alyosha — I never became the owner of jewelry. My children gave me my first ring when I was fifty. But the medallion I have kept.

For a while my daughter wore it, and now it lies in a small box, and I really do always think of you when I see it.

I also remember well a later episode.

Lena and I (you remember her, of course) were getting ready to go to our “home” cinema, the Orion, when you dropped by our room for some reason. Lena, as always, was clowning around, teasing you. I flirted boldly too, knowing you were seeing some girl. We asked you to write us something tender for when we got back. Making the bed, I found your note under the pillow with a single sentence: “Do not tempt me needlessly!”

I felt ashamed — my flirting really had been “needless”: right around then I was engaged to a dashing captain, a student at the artillery academy (hence your impression that I married a military man).

Fortunately, I soon discovered that my fiancé had only two virtues: he had fought in the Caucasus (his gun stood on the roof of a corn-processing plant not far from my hometown), and he didn’t reek of the Stromynka corridors — from him there always came the scent of good toilet soap.

And so the wedding never happened, which I never regretted, although things did not turn out entirely well for me afterward.

But that is another page of my life, one that has nothing to do with you.

Well, that’s probably enough for today.

All the best to you!

Greetings to your family, if they know about me.

P.S. Perhaps I’ve written something unnecessary, something you’d rather not remember — if so, forgive me.

Alexei!

Yesterday I sent you an account of a few (not all I remember about us!) fragments of the long-gone past, and today your letter arrived with photographs.

It would be funny if I said, “You haven’t changed at all!” So many years have passed! I’ll put it differently: “You’re recognizable!” You’re holding a glass! Celebrating something? Judging by the abundance on the table, the hunger they keep frightening us with hasn’t arrived yet.

What a sweet, youthful face your wife has! I’m very glad you’re doing well.

And special thanks for the photograph of Kaisanbek. I can’t take my eyes off him. What a tragedy that he died so young.

I’m glad you write so warmly about him. He’s been gone so long, and yet both you and I still feel his influence. (Isn’t your interest in the Caucasus partly thanks to him?)

You know, I only recently learned why, for all his erudition and intelligence, Kaisanbek always tried to stay in the shadows.

Once, on a train, I got to talking with a fellow passenger who shared Kaisanbek’s surname. It turned out Kaisanbek’s parents had been dekulakized, exiled to Siberia, and had died there. He fled from there, wandered, worked here and there. Of course, when he enrolled to study, he concealed all of this. His constant wariness suddenly made sense. He never told me any of it, even though he treated me like family — we were from the same homeland. Did he share it with you? After all, you lived in the same room for several years, you were friends.

How could I forget how we (you, Kaisanbek, Nata and I) fought our way into a meeting with Simonov? What ecstasy filled that enormous auditorium! And he, at the height of his fame, tall, handsome, “one of us,” read his poems about the war, about love, answered every note, some of them tactless, read

more, until he grew hoarse and begged to be let go. We barely made it to the metro that time.

And soon after, we went to another meeting. Ehrenburg's novel "The Storm" was discussed. The same huge auditorium, filled with philology students, but the distance — not only of age — between the audience and the author was very much felt. Many didn't like the novel, and said so bluntly.

Ehrenburg listened condescendingly, from the height of his years, knowledge, experience.

For me these encounters were a touch of something lofty, something real. As was the Great Hall of the Conservatory with concerts by Richter, Gilels. That stays with you for life!

I also remember forever the shock of hearing Yakhontov read. I don't recall what he read besides "Count Nulin." But how he read!

After such evenings I always thought: "What happiness, that I'm in Moscow!"

Only in the dormitory there were different kinds of concerts. Do you know why Lyadova and Panteleyeva performed at our place so often? Maybe they were patrons of our club, the way the Maly Theater patronized the university?

Though actually, we waited for Saturday and Sunday not because of the concerts but because of the dances. After which everyone scattered in pairs and wandered the huge square of the Stromynka corridors until midnight.

Oh, those dances to the radiogram! How many people crammed in! Half the boys didn't dance at all. Some hadn't had time to learn before being sent to war, some were embarrassed by their wounds. On our floor lived a boy who, I think, never once missed a dance. He was on two crutches, always sat in the same corner. There was so much longing in his eyes that I wanted to go over, stand with him, talk, take his hand.

Well, you can't have forgotten how you provoked Kaisanbek, who also almost never danced, and then me after him, into dancing the lezginka.

They announced a prize dance. When the lezginka started playing, several couples jumped out and, waving their arms, hopping in the same way — both boys and girls — began “lezginka-ing.”

The boys from the Caucasus didn't join the dance, just smiled condescendingly, standing off to the side.

And suddenly Kaisanbek came up to me — at your prompting, as it turned out later — and said: “Shall we dance?!” It was so unlike the reserved Kaisanbek that I couldn't refuse, even though I had never danced in front of such a crowd.

I don't know how I managed it, but Kaisanbek danced like a dignified man who knew his own worth. He didn't try to rise on his toes, but his dancing was surprisingly light despite his large build.

Apparently there was something to our dance after all (the girls in the room said they felt a Caucasian spirit) — because in the end only Kaisanbek and I, and the leader of the dance club with her regular partner, remained in the circle. Of course, they danced professionally and got the prize. But we were happy even without the prize — as if we'd been home for a moment. I remember how joyfully Kaisanbek's eyes shone, usually so sad.

Well, after such letters, would you dare say I don't remember something? And what do you remember? Write to me.

P.S. I was given Raisa Maksimovna's book “I Hope...” to read.

There are a few pages there about Stromynka, but of course without any of the “silliness” — dances, dormitory corridor nooks, and so on. Understandable — not that level!

Alyosha, hello!

You've been quiet for a while now. Not feeling well? Running around, earning your daily bread? Most likely — the work of our postal service.

Something has stirred up my memories. One thing catches on another. Different scenarios play through my mind: if only I had done this instead of that, then... Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, nothing can be changed now.

Tell me, Alyosha, do you know the feeling of guilt before those close to you?

I have a constant sense, growing stronger with the years, that I'm not attentive enough to my family, to good people in general, with whom I've been so lucky all my life.

My conscience troubles me that I brushed mother off when she told the same stories for the tenth time. What would it have cost me to listen to her once more? (Everything repeats. Now my own children often say: "Mama, you've already told us that!" And how I wish that later they won't regret it the way I do now!)

I feel guilt before my father too. Twice I, in a sense, renounced him: in my autobiography, when applying to university and then for a job, I wrote that my father simply died in 1937 (though it was clear enough: in those years few people died a natural death). Maybe my persistent attempts these last three years to find out the details of my father's fate are a kind of atonement, an easing of conscience?

And it is quite unforgivable that I only managed to visit the grave of my beloved brother, who died in the war, many years later, when the grave could no longer even be found.

There are many smaller transgressions too that I regret.

And before you, Alyosha, I must confess something. (Nata will never forgive me if she ever finds out I gave away our secret, kept for so many years.)

You know what Nata means to me. Our friendship over forty years is one of the blessings life has given me (beautifully put, isn't it?). I liked the cocktail hall you took me to so much, and I loved Nata so much, and everything was so alike for us — it was simply unbearable that she was left without that same pleasure. But what could be done? We pooled our stipends together. Where were we to find 160 rubles (that's what you paid)? And then suddenly "misfortune helped" once again — I lost my ration cards. When you found out, you immediately gave me your second card (you had some kind of preferential one).

It was the only chance to get money.

We sold that card at the Tishinsky market for 200 rubles!

That same evening Nata and I set off for the cocktail hall. The doorman eyed us suspiciously, then asked: "Who are you with?" Nata, putting on an air of casual independence, waved her hand toward the hall: "They're expecting us!"

We sat at the same table, ordered the same pastries, the same "Friendly" cocktail. I was burning with shame. And then two men sat down at our table. At first they paid us no attention, talked about science, sketched out some formulas, but once they'd had a drink (something stronger than our cocktail, apparently), they started talking to us and even tried to pay for us. But the waitress, an older woman, cut them off: "The girls came on their own, they'll pay on their own." We flew out of the bar as if scalded, feeling the doorman's disapproving stare on our backs.

I had introduced Nata to cocktails, but how vexing it was that our first, bright impression had been spoiled.

Forgive us, Alyosha, two foolish thrill-seekers.

Now I'll be waiting for your reaction to my messages.

P.S. Such a strange coincidence. Yesterday, after writing to you, I picked up some Böll stories to read (I like them very much) and came across a passage I hadn't noticed before: "By staying silent you preserve others' memories, but the moment you let yourself dissolve them into sentimental words, they instantly fade. Just give free rein to all those 'Remember when...'s, and the past would lose its color."

Can Böll really be right? It seems to me that what is spoken becomes brighter. Not to mention the relief I feel, for instance, after every letter to you.

What do you think?

Zefira Butaeva.

The Scent of My Homeland's Wind

Through the gap between the buildings on the street where I lived until I was eighteen, on clear days you can see Mount Stolovaya (Table Mountain) distinctly. There's a feeling that if you walk to the end of the street, you could start climbing the mountain.

When I left my hometown, for a long time, in my longing, it seemed to me that it was precisely that mountain I was missing.

Now, many years later, I've understood what else I was missing.

...Last summer I was visiting my sister. I couldn't sleep, and early in the morning I went out onto the balcony.

Quiet. A light breeze blowing. Some kind of emotion gripped me, a tightness in my chest. I didn't even understand right away what it was.

And then it hit me — the scent of the wind! The wind was warm, but at the same time it smelled of snow, of mountains, and of something extraordinary, something unrepeatable! Nowhere I've ever been has the wind had such a scent.

So what does “the Motherland begin with”?

I know: for me — with Mount Stolovaya and the scent of my homeland’s wind.

Zefira Butaeva.

Short Beeps

A Novella

Sorting through her March 8th greeting cards, Zaira noticed that once again there was nothing from Tamara Ivanovna. This was so unlike the ever-dutiful Tamara, who always used to send long, detailed letters full of family news, that Zaira grew uneasy. That same evening she wrote to Izyum, expressing her puzzlement and concern. She found Tamara's last letter — it was almost a year old! So much for their promise never to forget each other, since “you and I have the same illness, you and I!”

When Zaira happened to notice a small, firm lump on her body, she thought she must have bumped into something. A month later she caught a cold; the cough wouldn't go away, and she asked the “family doctor” — a neighbor who lived on the same landing and who tended, free of charge, not just their stairwell but the whole building — to listen to her chest, in case it was pneumonia again. Looking at Zaira, who had undressed, Sofya Moiseyevna asked in surprise:

— And how long have you had this?

— I don't know. I noticed it a few weeks ago.

— Why didn't you show it to me?

— I didn't want to bother you over such trifles!

Having listened to Zaira's chest, Sofya Moiseyevna said:

— Your lungs are clear. But tomorrow, without fail, go see a surgeon.

— Well, as it happens, tomorrow I have other things to do. I'll go sometime.

— No, not sometime — tomorrow or the day after!

— I'll go, I'll go. Just don't worry!

But nothing hurt, the surgeon's line was always long, and neither tomorrow nor the day after did Zaira go to the doctor.

On the third day the neighbor came to see her herself.

— What did the surgeon say?

— I haven't been yet.

— You astonish me. I don't want to frighten you, but how can you take your health so lightly? You're an educated woman!

— All right! I promise. I'll go tomorrow, without fail.

And the next day Zaira set off for the clinic, knowing that Sofya, who held to the rule "better to check once too often than to miss something," would not leave her be otherwise. Having examined Zaira, the surgeon sent her to the next office, where an oncologist happened to be seeing patients that day.

— Go consult the oncologist.

The oncologist, with what struck her as distaste, barely touching her, muttered through her teeth:

— I don't see anything alarming. The growth may resolve on its own. We'll keep watching it. Come back in two or three months.

That evening Zaira showed up at Sofya Moiseyevna's.

— Reporting in: I've been not only to the surgeon but to the oncologist too. Nothing alarming. We're to wait.

— Wait for what?

— For it to resolve on its own, perhaps.

— And what if it doesn't? That won't do. There's nothing to wait for. Tomorrow I'm on the first shift, you'll come with me. I'll show you to the oncologist at our clinic.

There was no use arguing with Sofya in such matters, and the next morning Zaira again stood before an oncologist. This one felt the swollen lump for a long time and finally said:

— Don't worry, I'm sure the growth is benign, but there's no reason to carry it around. Here's a referral for tests and for the regional oncology clinic. Don't delay — as soon as you have the test results, go to the clinic and get on the waiting list. It's a very simple operation, you'll be home again in a few days.

A week later Zaira went to the hospital.

The oncology clinic stood on the edge of town, where the city park runs into the forest. The area is actually called Lesopark — "Forest Park." It's the greenest corner of the city. The clinic's buildings are surrounded by fairly dense trees, cut through by avenues and countless footpaths.

Zaira knew every path perfectly well: she had lived nearby for twenty years. She had walked every one of them, taking her small children for strolls. Even after she and her husband traded apartments following their son Alan's marriage, she still walked one of those paths twice a day, since the Dzerzhinets plant, whose design bureau she'd worked in for twenty-eight years, was right there close by. On her way to and from work, Zaira often passed patients out walking and tried to avert her eyes, assuming each of them was doomed. It was especially unpleasant for her to walk past the gloomy one-story building with the sign "Oncology Clinic Boarding House." In summer there were always emaciated people sitting on the bench by the entrance, and it seemed to her that this was where they put those living out their last days.

On a winter morning Zaira walked to the hospital, trying not to think about what lay ahead — there was still time before the operation! And today

the sun was shining, the snow crunched underfoot, the trees were fantastically beautiful under their caps of snow!

Several women with their belongings were waiting in the reception room. Zaira asked how long ago they had signed up.

— I signed up three weeks ago, - said one of them.

— And I a month ago, - added a second.

She felt completely at ease: she wouldn't have to think about this unpleasantness for a few weeks yet.

A nurse filled out her medical chart and told her to wait for the head of the department, who would set her admission date. Soon the head of the department arrived — a tall, good-looking man.

Once undressed, Zaira felt awkward. For some reason she thought: how unpleasant it must be for such a vigorous man to examine an aging body with already-sagging muscles. And then she caught herself: “What am I thinking? He's a doctor.”

He examined her for a long time, pressing painfully on the lump. Zaira herself could now see how much the growth had grown. Finally the doctor asked:

— Did you come with your things?

— No. I was told you had a waiting list.

— Where do you live? In the city?

Zaira gave her address.

— We admit patients until noon. You'll have time to go get your things.

— And, noticing her face tense up, he added: — A bed is opening up today in the first ward. The attending physician is Vladimir Leonidovich Dubovoy, a

candidate of sciences. A very experienced surgeon. And don't be nervous, everything will be fine. Go now, and be sure to come back today.

Zaira walked to the tram stop along the same path, but she no longer noticed anything around her.

She had to gather her thoughts! Someone needed to see her off so she could bring her things. She hadn't told her son about her problem — Alan was away on a business trip anyway — nor his wife Lyuda, who was at work now. Her daughter Fatima had a nursing infant, with no one to leave him with. Her son-in-law Seryozha was at work too. But there was her ever-reliable helper — Lara, her friend of many years. She would see her off. What should she bring? A robe, slippers, a toothbrush, toothpaste. Mustn't forget the magazine — the new issue of Novy Mir had just arrived.

By the time she got home, Zaira had gotten hold of herself.

— You know, Fatima, a bed happened to open up, so I need to check in today, - she informed her daughter calmly. - Pack me everything I need, and meanwhile I'll call Lara.

Judging by how Fatima fussed about, her mother's forced cheerfulness had hardly fooled her. Taking the bag from Fatima's hands, Zaira reached toward her daughter, but seeing her pale face, she understood: if they embraced, they would both burst into tears. So she just waved her hand:

— See you soon!

They made it just before visiting hours for admissions ended. Lara took the bag. Zaira went to the ward. The duty nurse carried her medical chart to the doctors' office and sat her down on a stool next to the first ward.

— Wait until they get the bed ready.

And she waited... half an hour, an hour... No one paid her any attention.

Something was happening in the department. Everyone was bustling about, calling somewhere. From the flickering of white coats her head began to spin. Zaira turned sideways to the bustle and began watching a man and a woman standing by the window at the end of the corridor.

A short, pretty woman in a hospital robe kept talking about something and laughing loudly, clearly flirting. The man — tall, dark-skinned, well-dressed — was almost silent, only smiling. Zaira began to guess: what were they to each other? Husband and wife — impossible: she was pushing fifty, he no more than thirty. Mother and son — that didn't fit either: she was typically Russian, he was a foreigner, most likely Arab. Finally they said goodbye. The man handed her a bag of oranges and juice, she waved to him and went into the ward next to which Zaira was sitting.

At that moment the door opened, a doctor and a nurse came out of the ward opposite, two orderlies wheeled out a gurney covered with a sheet. Walking alongside, holding the gurney with one hand, was a woman in tears. The ward door was left open. The ward was tiny, just one bed. A folded cot leaned against the wall.

Zaira understood: someone had died. It became terrifying. She wanted to run right then, run home, to familiar faces. Someone touched her shoulder. She flinched. The woman who had recently been standing by the window was looking at her with a soft smile.

— Why are you sitting here? You must be new to our ward? Come on in, then. The bed by the door is free, the linens were changed this morning. It's a hard day in the department today. Did you see? That's why they forgot about you. Put your things down and let's go to the dining hall, it's lunchtime.

She didn't feel like eating, but Zaira was tired of sitting, and it felt awkward not to obey this pleasant woman with the gentle voice. In the dining hall the woman looked after her like an old hand, though it turned out she herself had only been in the hospital for two days.

— My name is Tamara Ivanovna. And yours?

— Zaira Kazbekovna.

— You must be from the Caucasus? I thought you were Jewish.

— I'm Ossetian.

— How interesting! I've never known any Ossetians before. Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis I've met, but Ossetians — never.

— Well, then you're in luck now. Though it would have been better if we'd met somewhere else...

— Oh, it's nothing terrible. You probably have the same thing I do. In a week we'll be home. Calling it an operation is putting it too grandly. I'm a nurse, you can trust me.

After lunch Zaira got to know the rest of the ward's occupants, and by evening she knew almost everything about each of them. It's long been noted that in a hospital, as on a train, people get acquainted quickly and are eager to talk about themselves.

In the small room stood six beds with nightstands squeezed in between them. You could only pass through sideways. By the window lay Nadya, an unkempt-looking woman, her hair strangely uncombed. She looked not entirely right in the head, and didn't talk to anyone. Tamara Ivanovna, who had already struck up acquaintances with the nurses on the basis of their shared profession, whispered to Zaira that Nadya had already had her operation a month ago but for some reason still wasn't being discharged. Once a week her husband came from the district; without stepping into the ward he would call the doctor out, talk with him for a long time, then run in to see his wife for a minute, leave her a large bag of food, and go. She ate constantly — both the hospital food and whatever her husband had brought. It was a mystery to everyone why she wasn't being discharged. Patients, after all, are

shrewd, and know just as well as the doctors who should be discharged and when.

On the bed opposite lay Lyubov Vasilyevna, an aging, pale woman who had been transferred from the post-operative ward the day before Zaira's arrival. She had gone through a month of radiation therapy, had a hard time enduring the operation, and now was quietly glowing with the awareness that it was all behind her.

Tamara Ivanovna's bed stood right up against Zaira's, and they shared one nightstand between them. Tamara Ivanovna lived in Izyum with her husband and a small granddaughter, whose mother — Tamara's younger daughter — had gone off somewhere to earn money. The elder daughter had married a Syrian. He had now come for a training placement, and since his wife was tied down with their small son, Amin visited his mother-in-law every day.

On that very first day Zaira learned all, or almost all, about her attending physician, Vladimir Leonidovich. He was considered the best surgeon in the department. He was about fifty, a bachelor, not talkative, very formal with his patients, which was why they were a little afraid of him, and punctual. He lived with his mother outside the city. He had an old Moskvich. He loved hunting, fishing, and mushroom-gathering. It was beyond comprehension how such details became known to the patients! Only one thing remained a mystery: why Vladimir Leonidovich had no wife — had he left her, had she left him, was it unrequited love?

In the morning a nurse woke her to take her temperature and draw blood for tests. And what was the point of having done all this at the clinic, if it all had to be done again here?

At exactly nine o'clock a nurse looked into the ward:

— New patient, to the doctors' office!

At the desk in the doctors' office sat the physician Zaira already knew so much about. A large man, youthful-looking. Several medical charts lay in front of him.

— Sit down. Who are you?

— Kulayeva.

— Zaira Kazbekovna? — there was some surprise in his voice. —
Ossetian?

— Yes.

— And what brought you to Ukraine? How long have you been here?

— About thirty years. I studied here at the institute and just stayed on.

— Well, get undressed, I'll examine you.

After the examination he began speaking of something else entirely:

— I have an Ossetian friend, though we haven't seen each other in a long time. A surgeon too. Gibizov. Perhaps you've heard of him?

— Why, of course! He's the "patriarch" of the Ossetians here.

— A good man, he's done a great deal of good for me... Go ahead and get dressed. We'll operate the day after tomorrow.

— What, so soon? — Zaira was frightened.

— Why "so soon"? Not so soon — the day after tomorrow. What are you frightened of? Everything will be fine.

Outside the doctors' office Tamara Ivanovna was waiting for her.

— I took your cup and spoon. Let's go have breakfast, and you tell me everything. When's the operation?

— The day after tomorrow.

— Mine's tomorrow. You've gone so pale! Don't be afraid! Well, how did you like our doctor? Gloomy, isn't he? Won't say an extra word.

— No, not really, that's not how he seemed to me.

The day passed surprisingly quickly. Everyone had many visitors. In the afternoon an anxious Alan came running in, back from his business trip. After work his wife Lyuda brought all kinds of treats — she was a great master when it came to baking. Quite late in the evening, the cropped head of Fatima's husband Seryozha poked through the door:

— Zaira Kazbekovna! Hey! Where are you? How are you?

Lyubov Vasilyevna lay in tears: her son had come again, a little drunk, mumbling something incoherent, trying to hug her. When he left, Zaira sat down beside Lyubov Vasilyevna, trying to calm her, but she kept crying:

— It's not the illness that will put me in my grave, it's my own son. His wife can't take it anymore, she wants to take the children and leave. And then he'll be completely lost!

What could Zaira do to comfort her?

Gradually the ward grew quiet. Only from the corner came the rustling of bags and the sound of chewing: the husband had come to see disheveled Nadya, bringing a large parcel of food.

The next day Tamara Ivanovna was operated on. She was gone only an hour. A nurse brought her back. Tamara was smiling, though noticeably pale. She said she hadn't felt any pain at all.

A weight lifted from Zaira's heart. Indeed, everything really was quick and simple. How good that she hadn't allowed anyone to call her sister Aza — it would only have alarmed her needlessly. Aza got anxious over the smallest thing as it was. Zaira loved Aza dearly, and always remembered how much her sister had helped her before the children were grown.

While their mother was alive, for some reason the sisters hadn't shown their feelings for each other very openly. Once, shortly before her death, their mother even called them to her bedside and asked:

— I beg you, in God's name — once I'm gone, the two of you will be all that's left in the world. Don't grow apart from each other!

Every summer Zaira went to visit Aza. On the very first day they would go to the cemetery, and, holding each other tight, stand at their mother's grave, as if wanting to show that they had kept their mother's wish — that they hadn't grown apart. Over the years they grew more attentive to each other; the slightest ailment in one brought endless phone calls and a search for medicine from the other.

The whole day Zaira looked after Tamara Ivanovna. The fuss and errands kept her mind off the coming operation.

The next morning a nurse from the operating room came for her.

— Come along, you'll be first. That's better.

Everyone wished her “neither down nor feather” — good luck, in the old superstitious phrase — and Tamara Ivanovna, already recovered enough, walked her all the way to the operating room door. Zaira remained calm right up until she stepped into the operating room itself — all white tile, with an enormous lamp over the table. But when she saw Vladimir Leonidovich's stern eyes above his gauze mask, the long dark oilcloth apron worn over his white coat, his raised hands in rubber gloves, and heard the sound of the nurse sorting through instruments, she understood that however much they'd assured her it was all very simple, this was a real operation. Zaira also noticed how unlike himself Dubovoy seemed. Where had his usual slowness gone! Quick, focused, he suddenly seemed younger.

— There, there, Kulayeva. Don't be nervous, just lie down calmly.

Zaira lay down on the operating table. About twenty minutes later it was all over. The whole time, Vladimir Leonidovich talked with her. He asked about her education, her work, her family. It took her mind off the unpleasant sensation of someone working inside your own body. There was no pain at all. Only once did the surgeon warn her:

— It'll hurt a little now, bear with it. There, that's it. Can you walk on your own? Sister, better see her to the ward.

There was something new in the ward: a small television that Amin had brought for Tamara Ivanovna. Everyone was watching the cartoon "Mowgli." Zaira walked into the room just as Mowgli was pronouncing his famous line: "We be of one blood, thou and I." Overjoyed that it was all behind her, Zaira exclaimed:

— Here I am! You and I have the same illness, you and I!

Everyone laughed.

On Thursdays the department held professor's rounds. When a crowd of doctors filed into the ward, filling every bit of free space, Zaira could barely make out an elderly professor among them. At first she thought he was just a figurehead, brought along for show, but she was apparently wrong: people listened closely to what the professor said, and it was clear it wasn't only out of politeness.

They didn't linger at Zaira's bed. Vladimir Leonidovich said only:

— Sectoral resection. Everything's fine. Discharge in about two days.

The professor examined Lyubov Vasilyevna. He advised her to walk more, to do special exercises to work the arm back into shape. They didn't even go over to Nadya's bed — the professor just smiled at her like an old acquaintance and asked:

— Is everything all right with you?

Nadya nodded her head happily.

Finally, Tamara Ivanovna's bed.

— A sectoral operation, but visually... — Vladimir Leonidovich began speaking in medical terms. — Tomorrow we'll get the results, then everything will be clear.

Tamara grew anxious, but the professor put his hand on her shoulder and said gently:

— Now, now, why worry. Everything will be fine.

For two days there was peace and quiet in the ward. Lyubov Vasilyevna got up and came back to life: her son had visited sober. Tamara Ivanovna's husband and daughter came to see her. Zaira's family, too, came in turn. Zaira and Tamara exchanged addresses and phone numbers. By their reckoning, Tamara was to be discharged on Friday, and Zaira on Saturday.

On Friday, in the middle of the day, Tamara Ivanovna was called to the doctors' office. She came back half an hour later, pale, choking on sobs, and collapsed onto her bed. Zaira ran over to her, made her drink some water, and began asking questions.

— The results came back. Bad. I need a radical operation... I need radiation... And I already told them to bring my things! — Tamara said through her tears.

Zaira tried to comfort her, though she herself knew she was only saying banal things. Lyubov Vasilyevna came over — her words, of course, carried more weight.

— Tamara Ivanovna, just look at me. I had radiation, I went through the operation. And so what? I'm alive, as you can see. My sister had the same kind of operation twenty years ago, no consequences at all. And my neighbor's grandmother died at eighty, having lived thirty-five years after such an operation.

How often, in the years after her own operation, would Zaira hear phrases like this! Everyone who learned of the illness would start remembering relatives and distant acquaintances who had gone through exactly this kind of operation and had lived, or were still living, many years afterward. Everyone spoke with the best of intentions, but they had no idea how little comfort it was to someone under the shadow of a terrible illness.

For the rest of the day Zaira and Lyubov Vasilyevna stayed close to Tamara. She came back to herself a little, and started worrying about her granddaughter, who was in her care. She called Amin, and, without going into details over the phone, told him there was no need to bring her things. But Tamara apparently didn't fall asleep until nearly morning. Zaira woke up several times: Tamara kept pacing around the room and sometimes bumped into her bed in the dark.

That night more snow fell than during the entire rest of the winter. The snow reached almost to the windowsill of the ward. Alan, who stopped by to see Zaira before work, said the transport had come to a halt, and everyone had been pulled off their jobs and sent to clear the roads.

The daily doctors' rounds passed. Vladimir Leonidovich said nothing about discharging Zaira. And she wanted so badly to be home by Sunday! Several times Zaira looked into the doctors' office, hoping they would discharge her that day after all. But Vladimir Leonidovich was nowhere to be seen. After lunch she gave up looking for him altogether: he always left at exactly two o'clock.

Unexpectedly, around three o'clock, when everyone in the ward was about to lie down for a rest, the door opened and Vladimir Leonidovich came in. Zaira thought he must be looking for Tamara and started to go get her — she had seen Tamara in the lobby with her husband — but the doctor said nothing, and Zaira remained sitting on her bed.

Vladimir Leonidovich walked slowly between the beds to the window, stood there a while, came back, stopped by Zaira's bed, picked up the magazine lying on the nightstand, and read aloud:

— Daniil Granin. "The Bison." A novel? Is it good?

— Not quite a novel. It's about the scientist Timofeyev-Ressovsky, very fascinating.

— Never heard of him. — Vladimir Leonidovich went back to the window. — Just look how much snow has come down. — Then he turned abruptly and came over to Zaira. — Well, Kulayeva, we're going to do another operation. The test results came back today, not entirely favorable, so it's better to be safe. You'll get five double sessions of radiation therapy, the remaining twenty after the operation. We'll operate at the end of next week. Kulayeva, are you listening to me?

— Yes...

— Why are you so quiet?

— I'll burst into tears if I start talking...

And then Vladimir Leonidovich sat down on the bed, put his arm around Zaira, and spoke with unaccustomed gentleness:

— Now why cry? This is just extra precaution, you know, just in case... The illness hasn't gotten out of hand. You did well — you came in on time. — And since Zaira had started crying anyway, he added: — Wipe your tears and calm down. By the way, do you know how to bake Ossetian pies? What are they called again? I've forgotten...

— Olibakh. Of course I can.

— That's it, olibakh! And could you manage to brew beer too?

— I'd need hops.

— That's no problem, we'll find hops. Your pies must be delicious. Gibizov's wife, even though she's Russian, always bakes them. Once you're discharged, bake some pies, treat me to them. I'll compare whose are tastier.

— Then he stood up and said in his usual dry tone:

— In an hour the doctor from the radiology department will come, she'll explain everything to you. You'll go for treatment together with Cherednichenko.

Tamara Ivanovna came back. Now it was she who comforted Zaira. And it seemed to make things easier, that neither of them was alone, that everything was the same for both, and that they would go through it together.

By evening, by the time Alan and Lyuda arrived, Zaira had pulled herself together and told them the news calmly, or so it seemed to her. But the tremor in her voice betrayed her anxiety. She asked them to bring her a coat, boots, and a hat — to get to the radiology department she would have to cross the courtyard.

And so for five days Zaira and Tamara went to "the cannon," as the patients called it. Of the whole month spent in the hospital, these five days were the hardest. The radiation session itself lasted only a few minutes. But when Zaira entered the concrete room, lay down on the cold table, and the nurse, quickly aiming the beam, dashed out almost at a run, and then came the metallic clang of bolts sliding shut, and the machine began its steady hum as it switched on — Zaira was gripped by terror. It felt as though she would be left in that room forever.

The session would end, and, unhurried, trying to fill their lungs with fresh air, they would go back to the musty corridors of the long-unrenovated building, smelling of that particular hospital odor mixed with the stench of broken toilets. Besides that, there was something else oppressive here too, something Zaira, who had been in and out of hospitals many times before, had never felt anywhere else. The nearness of death? Perhaps... The tiny ward

Zaira had watched on the day of her admission was where they placed those already beyond hope, and the folding cot was for relatives who were allowed to look after the dying if there was no way to take them home. Zaira happened to see them wheeling a man out of there once more. All that remained of his face were his enormous eyes and lips stretched in an attempt to smile. A nurse was leading a woman with a gray face and inflamed eyes by the arm — the dying man's mother. People said he was a soldier (though Zaira thought he looked like an old man!), doing his compulsory service in the missile forces, who had accidentally received a massive dose of radiation in some kind of accident.

...Many times Zaira had read that in the minutes before death a person manages to remember their whole life. Zaira knew perfectly well that this was nothing more than a literary device. Who could know what a person thinks about before death? Has anyone ever come back and told of it?

Zaira had no intention of dying, but she had only five days left before a difficult operation. The days passed in one errand or another, but at night she could think and remember in peace. Zaira knew the sleeping pill took about an hour to work, so she took it only after lights-out, once everyone had settled down. True to her habit of neatly sorting everything into its own compartment — a habit her friends liked to tease her about — she tried not to think about everything at once, all jumbled together, but in order.

Her earliest memory was moving to a new house. Zaira was three years old. She was walking along with two relatives, one of whom carried a samovar pressed against her stomach, the other a basin for making jam tucked under her arm. Both the basin and the samovar were yellow; Zaira remembered how the sun reflected off them, and how sometimes a stray sunbeam would land on her, making her squint and laugh with joy. They walked for a very long time. As Zaira learned later, her father had bought two small rooms and a little hallway closer to his work. Their previous house stood on the last street of the town, and across the road stood a church. Zaira dimly remembered it being

demolished. Years later a school was built on that spot. The ruins of the church stood near the new house too.

When, already grown, Zaira was left alone in that apartment with her mother — in '37 her father had been taken away, a car had run over her grandfather, her brother had died, Aza had gotten married — she could never remember just how they had all fit into those tiny little rooms. And on top of that, one of her father's nephews or another was always living with them, along with guests from the village who came into town for shopping. It defied comprehension...

Zaira also remembered well the first day after ration cards were abolished in 1934. They had gotten in line the night before, signing up everyone, young and old, because it was known that only one loaf would be given out per person. All day long more and more bread was brought in, but the line barely moved forward. Zaira was already dozing when her brother shook her awake, and they ran to the shop just as their parents reached the counter. Zaira clutched the warm loaf to her chest, proud that she too had brought something home. By midnight a whole mountain of loaves towered on the table, and their grandfather muttered, chuckling: "Praise be to you, Lord, you've blessed us! Now we'll survive!"

That was the year Zaira started school. The deputy headmistress enrolling her asked:

— I hope you won't give us as much trouble as your brother?

Zaira didn't understand her, but answered obediently:

— I won't.

Only in eighth grade, when the deputy headmistress taught her Russian language, did Zaira understand what kind of trouble her brother had given the teacher. Well-read, he often put her in an awkward position, asking questions she found hard to answer. And her lessons, as Zaira already knew from her

own experience, came down to simply retelling the textbook. Of course her brother dragged books to school and read through every lesson. And when the teacher pulled a Maupassant out from under his desk, it caused a scandal that swept the whole school. Their father was summoned to the headmaster's office, and her brother got it badly. At his exams the teacher held it all against him and gave him a failing grade in literature, a subject he hardly knew worse than she did.

The period from 1937 to 1945 had been so hard, so much grief and misfortune had been lived through, that she had no strength left to remember it now, in the hospital, with a stone already weighing on her soul. Zaira mentally set that time aside. For some reason she found herself thinking about how long the sense of smell holds onto scents. It seemed to Zaira that even now she would recognize her father's and brother's belongings by their smell.

Zaira ended up in the large Ukrainian city by pure chance. She had dreamed, of course, of Moscow, but was afraid she wouldn't survive the admissions competition in the capital. Her technical education, too, was an accident. She should have gone into the humanities! But two of her girlfriends sent their papers to the Ukrainian Institute of Civil Engineering and talked Zaira into doing the same. Nothing especially remarkable happened in her student life: the institute, the reading room, the dormitory, exam sessions.

The most important thing was the trips home for the holidays, to her own people, to the familiar, to what was hers.

In her fourth year she met Ruslan. She met him... at a cemetery.

In this large Ukrainian city there is the grave of an Ossetian Hero of the Soviet Union, Akhsarov, whose tank was the first to break into the city when it was retaken from the Germans. There is a school named after him in the city, and the street where he died is also named in his honor. For many years, on May 9th and on the anniversary of the city's liberation, a rally was held at noon by Akhsarov's grave, with schoolchildren standing an honor guard. All

the local Ossetians gathered for this ceremony too. They got acquainted, talked, spoke their native language, then broke up into groups by age and interest and went their separate ways — some to drink to the memory of Akhsarov and all the fallen, Ossetian and non-Ossetian alike, the younger ones heading out of town for shashlik. The organizer of this ceremony was the doctor Gibizov, who, it seems, had also taken part in the liberation of the city.

And this tradition, like many others, has been lost. Gibizov died, many Ossetians moved away. Two years ago Zaira and an Ossetian friend went to the grave. There wasn't a single person there. True, there were fresh carnations on the gravestone — someone had come before them. Glancing back as they left, they noticed one more man approaching the grave with flowers. And that was all...

It was at this very grave, on Victory Day, that Zaira met her future husband. He was older than Zaira, had just defended his candidate's dissertation, and had come to work at some numbered, classified enterprise. They left the cemetery together, walked a long time through the park, and then he saw her back to the dormitory; as they said goodbye he gave her his phone number and asked her to call. Zaira liked him: solid, calm, well-traveled, having seen a great deal of life. Having waited a decent week, Zaira called him, and he invited her to the cinema. Later they went to the theater too. With Ruslan there was a sense of security, of calm, after all the bustle of the dormitory. They had promised Ruslan an apartment, but for the time being he was renting a room. Once he invited her to his place. He served her soup — very thick, thick enough that a spoon stood upright in it — but delicious. They washed it down with kompot brewed in a milk churn. The room was clean, everything in its place, the bed neatly made, but you could tell right away that it was a bachelor's room. Ruslan had a gramophone. Before Zaira left, he suggested they listen to some music and put on one of the records.

“Spring has come, and my heart began to beat...” “My whole soul unfolded, like a flower at dawn...” — sang Zara Dolukhanova. Why, out of

several records, had Ruslan chosen this very one? They hadn't talked about music, and he couldn't have known that Dolukhanova was Zaira's favorite singer. How well those Dalila arias matched her mood back then! Or perhaps his too?

Soon exam session began, and right after the exams Zaira got ready to leave. She called Ruslan to say goodbye. He came to the station with two parcels, and asked her to drop one off with his mother.

— And this is for you, — he said, handing her the second package. On the train she unwrapped her parcel. A bottle of “Red Moscow” perfume — the most expensive there was at the time — pyramidon tablets (she had complained of frequent headaches), and a Zara Dolukhanova record. Zaira was touched by his thoughtfulness, and on the second day after her arrival she delivered the package. His mother received Zaira very warmly. It turned out Ruslan had already called her and warned her that someone would be stopping by. She served Zaira tea, asked about her family, her relatives, studied her closely, and it was clear this was no accident.

A month later, when Ruslan came home on leave, a formal proposal was made for Zaira's hand. And soon came “the morning of roses,” as Zaira called that June morning when she and Ruslan drove out to a greenhouse outside the city, and the gardener cut roses of her choosing, glistening with dew in the light of the rising sun. That evening was the wedding, and, breaking with Ossetian tradition, the best man, having asked permission of the elders, seated her with Ruslan at the shared table of the young people. Zaira lived with the feeling that this happiness would never end.

The five years she lived with Ruslan were remembered as if through a fog. Her final year at the institute, defending her thesis, the birth of her son, diapers, laundry, the stove, sleepless nights. Four years later — the arrival of her daughter, and again diapers, again the market, endless laundry. And always she wanted to sleep, to sleep... It was hard to believe there were people in the world who got enough sleep.

Ruslan was given a three-room apartment — more worries: furnishing it, keeping it in order. Around the house, her husband was of little help. From morning till midnight he was at work, and on his rare days off he was withdrawn into himself; it seemed his thoughts about work never left him for a single minute.

Now Zaira understands that she wasn't the best of wives: all her time and attention went to the children and the household. But at twenty-three, how could she have known what really mattered! Her mother-in-law, who came to see how they'd settled into the new apartment, noticed everything at once and said openly:

— As a mother you're good, I can't say anything bad about that, but as a wife you're not up to much — you take poor care of your husband.

Her mother-in-law was especially outraged when she found Ruslan's boots and his military cap lying together in some box. They had moved in a hurry, and Zaira, holding the baby in one arm, packed things with the other, without giving much thought to what she was piling on top of what.

— Who would even think of such a thing, — her mother-in-law couldn't calm down, — putting a man's hat on top of shoes!

— But he hasn't worn a peaked cap in ages, he wears a fedora now.

— Doesn't matter! A man's hat is a man's headwear, and throwing it about like that means you don't care about the head that wears it either.

Zaira swallowed her tears, but didn't dare talk back to her mother-in-law.

...Fatima was two months old when she came down with a very severe case of pneumonia. Whenever her temperature climbed past thirty-nine degrees, the baby was seized with convulsions, and Zaira would freeze in terror, thinking it was the end. An ambulance was called, and it took Fatima and Zaira — clutching the burning little body — to the hospital. For several

days Fatima was given so many injections that there was hardly a patch of unbroken skin left on her body. Finally her temperature began to drop, and the coughing grew calmer and less frequent. For the first time in a week Zaira managed to fall asleep, but even in her sleep she never let go of her little daughter's tiny hand.

It was on that very day that the tragedy happened... Ruslan was riding in a car to a partner organization. The car collided with a minibus that had unexpectedly pulled out across their path. The two men sitting in the back got off with a bad scare, the driver was cut by broken glass, and Ruslan, sitting beside him, struck his temple against the sharp corner of an instrument he had been holding on his lap. Death was instantaneous...

Ruslan's relatives came to take his body home. It was simply assumed that Zaira would travel to Ossetia too. But the attending doctor warned her that if she left her weakened baby without breast milk, she would lose the girl as well. And so Zaira did not go with Ruslan's coffin. All of her husband's relatives turned against her and never forgave her what they saw as her "betrayal."

Zaira was twenty-eight when she was left with two children on her hands — five-year-old Alan and two-month-old Fatima — with no relatives, in a foreign city. True, there were fellow Ossetians, friends, but the people closest to her — her mother and sister — were in Ossetia. They pressed her to move back, but she didn't want to: she was afraid that the pity and sympathy her family would surround her with would be a constant reminder of the tragedy. She gave herself entirely to the children. As they grew, they became stronger, fell ill less often. Zaira jealously made sure her children looked no worse than the neighbors' children — the ones with fathers. She learned to sew, made clothes not only for the children but for herself as well. It became fashionable to teach children English — she enrolled Alan in a class, then Fatima too. She bought an old piano, hoping that even if only through her children, her long-held dream of learning to play might come true. But the children studied

music only under duress, and after a few years she understood that teaching them was simply a waste of money.

When Fatima turned one, Zaira went to work at the design bureau of a large plant that produced televisions and parts for spacecraft. Her neighbor Andrei had helped her get the job. He and his wife Lyusya gradually turned from neighbors into something like family. They too had two children, the same age as Alan and Fatima, and the children were inseparable. In fact, if it hadn't been for Andrei and Lyusya, she would hardly have stayed here at all. It was they who talked her out of upending her life by abandoning everything she had already built and settled into.

As her time and thoughts gradually freed up from the children, she felt her loneliness more and more, aware that she was still young. It couldn't be said that she was entirely without male attention, but none of it was quite right.

Valera... She wondered how his life had turned out. He must be about fifty now. But back then, when Andrei assigned her a thesis student, giving her a chance to earn a little extra, he was only twenty-three. He was the third such student she had helped, but the first two had been girls. It was more convenient for Zaira to work with them at home, so they often came to her with their questions. She would give them tea, remembering how important a bit of family warmth was for people living in a dormitory. And now here was her third thesis student — a tall, intelligent, serious young man. Very soon Zaira realized that he preferred coming to her home over meeting at the lab. Once the thesis work was settled, he would play with the children, bringing them postcards he had collected over many years as gifts. It never even occurred to Zaira that she might interest him as a woman — the age difference was so great! She was already past thirty, after all. All the more so since Valera had told her he had a girlfriend, sweet, modest, clearly in love with him.

...Zaira came out of a parents' meeting — Alan was already in first grade — and saw Valera standing by the school.

— What are you doing here? — Zaira asked, surprised.

— Waiting for you. I want to invite you to the cinema.

— Me?

— Yes. The thing is, Lena is busy, and I really don't want the tickets to go to waste. Besides, I think the film might interest you — "The Great Waltz."

— I saw it about ten times when I was in school. I could watch it that many times again, but there are the children...

— I know, I know. I stopped by your place, the neighbor promised to put them to bed.

And Zaira went. And once again she immersed herself in the enchanting music, in someone else's passions and sorrows, so unlike her own.

They came back home somehow enlightened. But everything was ruined. They were already approaching home when some hoodlums piled onto the tram. One of them, tipsy, muttering obscenities, began pestering her. Had Valera stayed silent, everything would have passed without incident: they were already nearing their stop. But Valera, shielding Zaira, shoved the young man away. Zaira hadn't expected this and didn't manage to stop him in time. And that was exactly what the thugs wanted. They set upon Valera, started beating him, and the first thing they did was break his glasses. And instantly Valera became so helpless, so pitiful, that something maternal welled up in Zaira toward him. She flew at the offender in a fury, and, losing all control of herself, began hitting him in the face. Finally the other passengers intervened, the young men were thrown off the tram, and Zaira and Valera rode past their own stop and had to go back. Zaira could feel how ashamed Valera was, while her own heart overflowed with gratitude that he hadn't cowardly stayed silent.

At home Zaira dabbed his scrapes with iodine and gave him tea. The whole time he didn't utter a word beyond "thank you" and never once looked at Zaira. For a week Valera didn't appear, and she began to worry. But then he showed up in new glasses and with tickets to the philharmonic.

— I'll go if you promise this won't end in bloodshed again.

And then they both burst out laughing. The whole incident no longer seemed so tragic.

— So it turns out you're a tigress. How you scratched up his face!

— Oh, hush. I realized all your strength is in your glasses — the moment you lost them, you completely fell apart.

They went to a concert given by a visiting violinist. With Valera it was very easy and pleasant to listen to music. The music affected Zaira so deeply that after the concert she didn't want to talk for a long while, and she was glad of Valera's silence. He invited her to the philharmonic a few more times. Then Valera defended his thesis and left for the town of Zhukovsky, where he had been assigned to work.

Exactly a month later Zaira received a small parcel, valued, however, rather expensively — forty-five rubles. She unwrapped it: inside was cotton wool, crumpled paper, and finally a letter and a small case. A ring! Gold, with a clear rock-crystal stone. Valera wrote that the ring had been bought with his first paycheck. It was gratitude not only for her help with his thesis, but for the fact that Zaira had been part of his life; he had chosen a clear stone specifically as a symbol of the purity of his feelings for her. He also wrote that he had broken up with Lena, because after knowing her, Zaira, he could only marry a girl who resembled her.

Two years later another letter arrived. Valera reported that everything was going well for him, that he was happy with his work, that they had promised him a room. At the end, a postscript: "I got married recently."

And that was all! But was that really so little? Even if only for a while, she had seen his admiring glances, and they had helped her feel like a woman again.

Once, having sent Alan off to Pioneer camp, Zaira took eight-year-old Fatima to the plant's holiday home not far from the city. They settled into the same cottage as her friend Lara and Lara's daughter, who was Fatima's age. Good weather, a river nearby, a forest, the girls playing together all day. Zaira and Lara knitted, and there was plenty to talk about. They had already been resting there a week when a Moskvich pulled up to the cottages, and out stepped a middle-aged man in a tracksuit; he quickly pitched a tent and began pulling fishing rods out of the trunk. Zaira and Lara, with nothing better to do, watched him. At lunchtime they met him in the dining hall. It turned out he was the head of one of the plant's workshops. Zaira knew him only by sight; Lara was acquainted with him, having crossed paths at work. He came up to their table, said hello, introduced himself to Zaira: "Nikolai Vasilyevich" — and asked permission to eat at their table, explaining that he had come without his wife and it was boring alone. No one objected. He was cheerful, sociable, made the girls laugh, showed them magic tricks. By the end of lunch both girls were looking at him with delighted eyes. In the evening Nikolai Vasilyevich lit a campfire by his tent and boiled a kettle. Lara and Zaira, having put the girls to bed, went to the fire and listened to Nikolai Vasilyevich's endless hunting and fishing stories until midnight. He was also passionate about sports — he played tennis, was a master of sport in skiing. He told everything with humor. When Nikolai Vasilyevich left ten days later — he and his wife had tourist vouchers for Bulgaria — it became very dull. Zaira and Lara could hardly wait for the vacation to end.

About three weeks later Nikolai Vasilyevich called Zaira and said he was ready to share his impressions of Bulgaria. Zaira was glad:

— We'd love to hear about it. Come by our place in the evening, I'll call Lara and let her know.

— No, Zaira. Let's do it differently. I've realized you're a homebody, never get out in the fresh air, and I have a car. Come out to the highway after work, I'll show you places you'd never see on your own. The autumn forest is beautiful!

— Others have noticed that before you. Pushkin, for instance.

— One-nil in your favor. I'll be waiting for you at five.

Zaira came out to the highway at the appointed time. The car pulled up within a minute. She stepped toward the front door, but noticed the back one had been thoughtfully left ajar. A little flustered, she got into the back seat. Nikolai Vasilyevich smiled at her in the mirror and drove off, watching the road intently. As they passed the intersection where plant workers usually waited for the tram and trolleybus, he turned quickly and whispered:

— Duck down, please!

She didn't understand, but ducked automatically. Once they'd passed the stop, he sighed:

— Phew, I think we got away with it. There were a lot of our people there. I didn't want anyone to see us together.

— Then why did you invite me?

— Don't you understand why? You're not a child. I like you, but I don't want my wife to find out. Do you know who she is? Gurvich's daughter!

— And who is this Gurvich?

— What, you don't know who Gurvich is! Ah, right, you're not from here. Every longtime resident of the city knows the name. He's a luminary of medicine!

— So it's fine to cheat on your wife, but God forbid, if she's the daughter of someone famous, that's different, is it?

— Don't be sarcastic, Zaira, it doesn't suit you. You're gentle, feminine, stay that way. Well, here we are, at this marvelous spot I really wanted to show you. See the trees dressed "in crimson and gold"? And the air, what air! Relax, breathe in deeply, enjoy the beauty, and I'll tell you about Bulgaria.

Zaira listened to his genuinely interesting story, but the unpleasant aftertaste didn't fade, and soon she hurried to get home, citing the children she'd left behind. Before reaching that unfortunate intersection, she asked him to stop the car, thanked him for the drive, and walked home, firmly resolved never to go with him again.

But a few days later an excited Fatima met her.

— Mama, hurry and get ready. Nikolai Vasilyevich called, he's waiting for us. We're going to get wild apples. He says you can make delicious jam from them.

Alan was already standing ready with a backpack. And Zaira was forced to go. Nikolai Vasilyevich was waiting for them not far from home. A girl of about three was sitting in the car.

— Meet my daughter, little Nina.

Little Nina was more suited to being his granddaughter than his daughter, but Zaira said nothing. He drove them to a spot with several wild apple trees. They hardly spoke, busy gathering apples. Finally all the containers were full, evening was already falling, and they drove slowly back into the city. Nikolai Vasilyevich dropped them right at their building, and Zaira understood that he had deliberately dragged out the time so as to wait for darkness.

A couple of times Zaira declined to meet him, and then Nikolai Vasilyevich called the children instead. This time they went for wild pears,

bringing Lara and her daughter along too. And gradually she began to get used to him and his calls. What won her over was his attitude toward Alan and Fatima. He evidently loved children in general — he had none of his own. They had taken Nina from an orphanage when she was six months old. And although Zaira kept seeing him, much about him didn't sit well with her. She was especially annoyed when he started lecturing her on how to raise her children. The most important thing, in his view, was to get them into sports. Privately agreeing with him only made her angrier. He simply didn't understand that she barely had enough of herself to go around for everything. When he called her after tennis, excitedly recounting which set he'd won, she hated him and thought: "If only I had your worries!" But in winter, when he bought skis for the children, rented some for Zaira, and practically dragged them all into the forest by force, she saw their flushed familiar little faces, felt an extraordinary lightness in her own body, and understood that Nikolai Vasilyevich had been right. Gradually skiing trips became habitual and necessary, and Zaira was grateful to Nikolai Vasilyevich for introducing them to it. For about ten years, while she lived in Lesopark, she went skiing every winter.

The forest was Nikolai Vasilyevich's element. He knew every tree, every bird, every blade of grass. The sheer volume of his knowledge was even tiring. He could talk for hours about the forest's inhabitants. If only he loved people the same way! He hardly ever spoke well of anyone, teased his acquaintances, mocked everyone. At one point Zaira couldn't take it anymore:

— Do you think well of anyone at all? Is there even one person you love? (Her tongue still, despite their closeness, couldn't bring itself to call him "ty" — the familiar "you.")

— What do you mean? What about you? Though actually, I suppose I'm not in love with you. Usually, when I fall in love, I write poems. But about you, nothing comes...

— Or maybe it's not about me, but about you? You're not at that age anymore...

— I don't think so, people in love write poems at any age.

And there was one more thing Zaira couldn't reconcile herself to: in the three years they had been seeing each other, she had seen him in a suit only once. At work he walked around the whole plant in a lab coat; outside of work, in rumpled tracksuits and worn-out jackets. And even when they once found themselves in Moscow together — if you could call it “together” — he was wearing that same old jacket.

It was a strange trip. Zaira was sent to Moscow for four days. When Nikolai Vasilyevich found out, he was delighted:

— Let's go together. I actually need to buy some parts for the car. There's a good flea market near Moscow.

— But I already have a ticket.

— No matter, I'll go to the station right now. Which carriage are you in? Seven? We'll meet on the platform before the train departs.

They met, and Zaira recoiled: not only was he wearing his rumpled clothes, he was carrying an antediluvian suitcase with a hole in the side. All Zaira could manage to say was:

— What's that hole for?

— What do you mean, what for? I carry this suitcase to tennis. The hole is for the racket handle, otherwise it won't fit.

— But couldn't you have brought a different suitcase for Moscow?

— But I'm going for car parts. They're covered in grease, so this suitcase is exactly right for that. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a ticket for your carriage. Never mind, wait for me in Moscow by your carriage, I'll come find you.

Zaira thought bitterly: “Not unfortunately — fortunately!”

On the platform in Moscow, Nikolai Vasilyevich asked matter-of-factly:

— Do you have somewhere to stay?

— Yes, I always stay with my cousin.

— Very good. And I have to call my brother’s wife. True, my brother’s divorced from her, but I think she’ll put me up for a couple of days.

They started looking for a payphone. Once he’d arranged a place to sleep, they went shopping — Zaira wanted to buy herself some shoes. She would go into a shop and try on shoes, while Nikolai Vasilyevich waited outside, reading posters. She bought nothing, said goodbye to him, and went off to attend to her work business, agreeing to meet the next day at two o’clock. That evening Zaira told her cousin she hadn’t come alone.

— So invite him to lunch tomorrow, - her cousin suggested.

— I’ll think about it.

At two o’clock Nikolai Vasilyevich wasn’t at the agreed spot. He was half an hour late, running and pushing through the crowd, a pastry in his hand. He looked radiant, still carrying the same battered suitcase.

— I got everything I needed! What luck! It’s because I’m with you!

“You’re with me,” Zaira thought bitterly. Lunch was now completely out of the question! She imagined her cousin’s bewilderment at the sight of such a guest.

— Yes, and there’s more good news: my brother’s wife gave up her theater ticket for me, so I got to see the Moscow Art Theatre yesterday.

— I’m very happy for you! And now I have to go, they’re expecting me at my sister’s.

— Of course, of course. I think I'll head to the station. If I manage to get a ticket, I'll go home today. And when are you leaving?

— I'm staying two more days.

— Well, then, see you back home.

Zaira firmly decided that after this trip she couldn't see him anymore. But when, having returned from Moscow, she told him so, Nikolai Vasilyevich was taken aback:

— Why? I've grown so used to you, to the children. I thought you were happy with me too.

He couldn't understand any explanation, didn't want to listen.

— Just admit there's another man. That I could understand.

Zaira had no strength left to argue, and simply walked away, leaving him standing in the street! Then began the endless daily calls, the exhausting scenes of clearing the air. A month later Nikolai Vasilyevich caught her by her building and said he had something important to discuss.

— Let's go up to my place. We can't talk about something important on the street, - Zaira suggested.

When they got up to the apartment, he solemnly produced a sheet of paper and handed it to her.

— Here, read it. I've decided to divorce my wife. I can't live without you.

Zaira read the petition for divorce and thought about how he must see himself as some kind of hero, parting not simply with a wife, but with Gurvich's daughter. She wanted so badly to say it out loud, but held her tongue. She was very tired that day, had no strength for long conversations, and Zaira said she needed to think it over.

— Only please, think quickly. If you don't agree, I won't divorce into a void. I've already been divorced once — Gurvich is my second wife, after all.

That evening at dinner Zaira said to the children, smiling:

— Nikolai Vasilyevich has proposed to me. Should I marry him or not?

Alan shrugged in a grown-up way and said gravely:

— Whatever you want, Mama. It's your decision.

Fatima jumped up from the table and ran to her room, slamming the door. Her reaction surprised Zaira. She had thought that, of the three of them, Fatima was the most attached to him. And if for even a moment the thought of accepting Nikolai Vasilyevich's proposal had crossed Zaira's mind, it was only for the children's sake. She went to Fatima, called to her, but the girl stayed silent, pretending to be asleep, and Zaira too went to bed. She had just started to doze off when Fatima came padding in, sniffing, climbed under her blanket, and pressed close.

— Mommy, my dear mommy, forgive me. Don't think I'm like that selfish girl in the movie. Get married, but why to Nikolai Vasilyevich? He doesn't love you! He only loves his car. If you marry him, he'll roll it right into our apartment. It's so good, the three of us together, and he'll come, a stranger, and live with us... - Fatima said through her tears.

Truly, "out of the mouths of babes"! For it had seemed even to Zaira herself, watching how lovingly he stroked "Travka" — the car was green — that there was no dearer creature to him. He watched over the car and God forbid if he found a scratch, a spot. He clearly took great pleasure in driving. Behind the wheel he grew still, focused entirely on the road. The car ran smoothly, and if it hit any potholes, he'd curse the authorities for not maintaining the roads.

The next day Lara called Zaira and said she needed to see her. They met, and Lara told her that Nikolai Vasilyevich had come to her home the previous evening, said he'd decided to divorce his wife and marry Zaira. He had wanted

to find out from Lara whether Zaira's word could be trusted: "I'll get divorced, and at the last moment she'll turn tail and I'll be left with nothing."

— And he also clearly tried to fish out of me whether there were any 'dark spots' in your past, - Lara finished her account.

And Zaira was still wondering how to refuse him more gently, without hurting him. But then, as a parting shot, she remembered it all: the trip to Moscow "together," her own humiliating ducking down whenever they passed through crowded places, his abnormal love for his car... He listened, bewildered, said nothing, and only when Zaira said the children were afraid the car would show up in the apartment did he say quietly:

— Why would I roll the car in? Well, maybe in winter, I might bring the engine in for repairs...

They parted. Zaira walked away feeling crushed. She felt like some shrill market woman, and regretted her own harshness. And in the end, if it had only ever been bad with him, then what had kept her with him for nearly three years? She hadn't been attached to him, after all!

About two months later Nikolai Vasilyevich tracked her down at work. In his hands was a clearance form: he was quitting, had found a suitable job at another plant. Saying goodbye, Nikolai Vasilyevich handed Zaira an envelope, saying:

— I lied when I said no poems came about you. Here's the last one. Keep it as a memento.

About ten years later Zaira happened to run into Nikolai Vasilyevich on the street and barely recognized him. He was dressed beautifully, still dashing though heavier now. He boasted that he'd married very well. His wife was constantly on business trips abroad, and he stayed home with her grown son from her first marriage.

— I saw Fatima from a distance once. A beautiful girl. It would be nice to marry her off to my stepson. Though it probably wouldn't work: he's a talented young man, very demanding.

— Oh please, please! We're nowhere near talented young men! And how's your Nina? She must be finishing school by now?

— Nina turned out very unsteady: dropped out of school, spends her nights God knows where, in attics.

Zaira never saw Nikolai Vasilyevich again.

But the poems really had been very good! She kept them for several years, until...

The 100th anniversary of Lenin's birth was marked at the plant just as solemnly as across the whole country. The plant had no club of its own, so the opera theater building was rented for the evening's meeting and concert. A plant-wide cleanup day was planned for the following day.

Zaira couldn't decide whether to go to the opera house or not. They had promised a good concert, but she was so tired of always being the third wheel next to some married couple that she was leaning toward staying home to do housework or read. But an hour before the meeting was to begin, her neighbor Nyusya stopped by and said she wouldn't be able to go, so she was "entrusting" her husband to Zaira for the whole evening. Soon Andrei himself arrived, dressed up, animated: apparently the birthday celebrations had already begun at work.

Zaira and Andrei were walking to the trolleybus stop when a passing car honked and stopped. The doors opened; Andrei got in beside the driver, Zaira next to... Viktor Sergeyevich, the head of the design bureau's largest laboratory, a talented engineer known for his inventions not only in the country but abroad. Intelligent, practical, he never knew rest, charging his subordinates with energy — they adored him, though, despite his seemingly

open and simple manner, he could reportedly be strict, even harsh at times. Zaira had no work dealings with him: he headed the leading laboratory, while she was a rank-and-file engineer in the neighboring one. But not a single family celebration at Andrei and Nyusya's ever went by without Viktor Sergeyevich present: he and Andrei had studied in the same student group and had remained close friends ever since.

From the first day she met him, Zaira had noticed him. And it was impossible not to notice — tall, with handsome gray hair, faintly resembling a well-known actor.

Sometimes Viktor Sergeyevich came with his wife, an unremarkable-looking, short, plump woman, not unintelligent but very self-assured, categorical in her opinions. Watching them, watching how pointedly attentive he was to his wife, how he fussed over her, how he fell silent when she cut him off rudely, Zaira could never understand what bound together two such seemingly different people. Zaira had heard that he loved his son Igor to distraction, and that it was through this, many believed, that his wife kept her hold on him. She must have had some virtues, if such a man had stayed with her for two decades.

When Viktor Sergeyevich came to Andrei's without his wife, he was an entirely different man — cheerful, unguarded. On such evenings Zaira would catch his attentive, warm gaze, one she was ready to respond to, but she always caught herself, remembering how he doted on his wife.

And now here he was, sitting right beside her. A few minutes later the car stopped again, and Zaira's immediate supervisor, Alexei Fyodorovich, got in. Both men smelled faintly of cognac. Zaira sat squeezed in the cramped car between two such distinguished men and thought that even for this short ride alone it had been worth leaving the house. And they were showing off — trading witty remarks, tossing light phrases back and forth. Zaira understood that this performance was for her, and she felt a rush of joy.

At the theater all three of her companions went off to the presidium, leaving her sitting between empty seats and promising to return to their places for the concert. But they never appeared. And Zaira sat alone like that until the evening ended.

After the concert she decided to go find them after all. It was late, and going home alone was somewhat frightening; besides, Nyusya had asked her not to let the easily-distracted Andrei out of her sight.

Where could they be? In the buffet, of course. She saw them through the open door, noticed the full glasses in front of them, and understood she would have to make her own way home. But they caught up with Zaira just as she had one foot already on the step of the trolleybus, pulled her back, and started flagging down a taxi, making enough noise to fill the whole central street. Finally a taxi stopped. Alexei Fyodorovich, who lived nearby, said his goodbyes, gallantly kissed her hand, and Zaira found herself again in the car with two men.

They pulled up to her building. It was a warm spring evening. Her mood was buoyant. She had no desire to go home, to her solitude. And, as if sensing this, Viktor Sergeyevich suddenly asked:

— Zaira, are you in a hurry? Shall we take a walk? What a beautiful night!

— Yes, yes! Let's walk! - Andrei was the first to respond. They made three circles along the path around the building. Viktor Sergeyevich stayed silent, Zaira waited tensely to see what would happen next. Guileless Andrei chattered on nonstop about something. When they next approached the building from the side where Andrei's windows faced, Viktor Sergeyevich said to him:

— Look, there's a light on in the bedroom. Nyusya's not asleep, waiting up for you.

Judging by how hastily Andrei said his goodbyes, something had finally dawned on him. Andrei's footsteps could still be heard in the stairwell when Viktor pulled Zaira to him with strong arms and began kissing her. Then, now just the two of them, they walked the path again, stopping by every tree, kissing, kissing.

When they parted and Zaira climbed to her floor, she couldn't get the key into the lock for a long time — her hands were shaking. She looked in the mirror — her face was flushed. She lay down and began replaying the whole evening in the smallest detail all over again. With this feeling of joy, she fell asleep.

The first thought that came to her in the morning — none of this would ever happen again. She didn't want to go to the cleanup day, where she would inevitably run into Viktor, who, shamefacedly averting his eyes, would pretend nothing had happened, or, if it had, that it was only the drink. She had been through that before!

Zaira was running a little late for the cleanup day. She spotted Viktor from a distance. He was standing right by the entrance to the plant's courtyard, talking to someone, while at the same time scanning everyone who approached. She had come fairly close to him when his gaze landed on her. His face was transformed in an instant, lit up. He took several steps toward her, and she panicked, thinking he was about to sweep her into his arms right there, in front of the whole plant. Zaira noticed, for the first time, his intelligent, bright, youthful brown eyes — eyes that would remain in her memory for the rest of her life.

The whole cleanup day he shuttled back and forth between his own laboratory and her. He grabbed the stretcher-handles, carried trash with her to the far corner of the yard, and, walking back, talked and talked. It seemed as though yesterday's intoxication hadn't worn off yet.

— I think I've lost my mind in my old age! I couldn't sleep all night, wanted to run to you. What's your name shortened to? Zaira is beautiful, but long. You're just Ra! You're Ra to me, that's what I'll call you now. When will we see each other? Tomorrow? No, that's too long. Come by Andrei's tonight, I'll come too.

Thus began a years-long fairy tale of complete dissolving into one another, of misunderstanding, of closeness, of a passion inappropriate to their age, of mad jealousy, of warmth, of tenderness, of quarrels on the edge of breaking apart, of self-forgetfulness, of estrangement...

Suddenly it turned out the two laboratories had shared business that required not only phone calls but personal meetings too. Viktor would pass by Zaira's desk on his way to Alexei Fyodorovich's office, and, not taking his eyes off her, would leave on her desk either a long letter expressing his feelings and turmoil, or a note with sweet phrases and pressed violet petals attached. Viktor later told her that his secretary was baffled about what had happened to the flower on his office windowsill, why it had become so plucked bare.

They searched for every excuse to see each other, even briefly, even from a distance, and if on some day that didn't work out, Zaira grew frightened: he had thought better of it, he, like any married man, was afraid a lonely woman would "wrap him around her finger." She wanted Viktor to understand that she wouldn't burden him and didn't want to break anything in his life, as long as he was near — in whatever capacity!

At all the countless meetings — union meetings, production meetings, open party meetings — they would sit next to each other, passing joking notes back and forth. At one such meeting she wrote to him: "1. I guarantee secrecy of our meetings. 2. I make no claim to formalizing our relationship..." and something else, now forgotten. She had no idea what a mistake she was making!

Zaira's birthday was approaching, and she had thought through how she'd celebrate it with Viktor, but the day before he sent her a note that he was going to Moscow for a week. Of course she was upset. The next day Alexei Fyodorovich called her into his office.

— Zaira, here's the thing: you need to leave for Moscow today, an urgent contract needs delivering. The ticket's already bought, file your travel papers.

— Alexei Fyodorovich, why me? Tomorrow's my birthday.

— Never mind, you'll celebrate when you're back. I have no one else to send, everyone's tied up with urgent work.

And suddenly it dawned on Zaira: she knew Viktor was staying at the Rossiya hotel, easy to find. Could it be... Alexei Fyodorovich was averting his eyes just a bit too much.

Zaira didn't have to go looking for Viktor. He was standing on the platform with an enormous bouquet of tulips, watching the windows of the slowly approaching train car. He looked so solemn that everyone passing by turned to stare. Zaira threw herself around his neck, unable to hold back tears of joy, of happiness.

— My beloved Ra, happy birthday! Let's go, they're waiting for us in the car.

Zaira asked nothing. How long she had waited for someone to look after her, to lead her somewhere, so she herself wouldn't have to decide anything!

In the car sat a man with a distinctly Georgian appearance.

— This is Givi, an old friend of mine. He's doing his doctorate now, staying at the Rossiya. He's booked you a room too.

They went into the room. On the table: fruit, sweets, champagne, a bottle of perfume. They put the flowers in a vase — it became truly festive. Everything was like in a movie, and, as it had seemed to Zaira until that day,

something that never happened in real life. They drank. Givi delivered an elaborate toast to the birthday girl's health.

— See, Givi, what a woman I have? And you said, “Listen, why do you need an Ossetian, they're...”

But Givi didn't let him finish:

— Enough, enough! I take back my words.

Zaira never did find out what, in Givi's opinion, Ossetians were like, but for Zaira he remained a loyal friend to the end.

After breakfast they went to buy Zaira a gift. In the department store Givi threw himself into the role. He walked along the racks of hanging dresses, inspecting them fastidiously, finally chose three, and Zaira had to try them all on. Putting on a dress, she'd step out of the fitting room, and they would critically examine her, and it was hard to say who was enjoying it more — her or the two men. They settled on a beautiful blue dress. Zaira stayed in it when, having said goodbye to Givi, they drove to her sister Olya's. Viktor charmed Olya and her husband with his simplicity, his ease. From Olya's they went to a concert: for every day of his stay in Moscow, Viktor had prepared theater tickets. And after the concert they walked along Kalininsky Prospekt back to the Rossiya, arms around each other, like young lovers.

During the days Zaira went with Viktor on his errands — her own business amounted to just dropping off a contract at the ministry, which, as it turned out, hadn't needed to be delivered urgently at all and could easily have been sent by mail. Viktor was received warmly everywhere, and he introduced Zaira to everyone: “My friend!” — with pride ringing in his voice. Zaira suddenly seemed beautiful even to herself, more beautiful than she had ever been, even as a girl.

That summer Lara and her daughter went on vacation to the Sea of Azov. A few days later she called Zaira:

— It's so nice here! Not many people, the beach is pure sand. I'll rent you a room, come on down.

Viktor's wife and son were in the Crimea for a second month, Alan was doing his internship, Fatima was on a river trip down the Volga — nothing was holding them back, and they went. They were on the road all day. By evening they reached Kirillovka, and settled in with a pleasant elderly Ukrainian woman. In the morning they went to the beach with Lara and her daughter. There really were very few people, everyone visible at a glance. The first person they saw was the plant director's all-knowing secretary. Noticing them, she grew flustered, turned away, but Viktor went up to her, chatted about the weather, asked whether the water was good.

Zaira was a hopeless swimmer, barely able to stay afloat. Afraid Viktor would grow bored fussing over her in the shallows, she soon came out onto the shore and sat on the warm sand, watching how quickly he swam out to the buoy. Then she lay down, closed her eyes, and tried to figure out why she had the feeling this had all happened before. This was her first time at the sea without the children — what could feel so familiar? She remembered! "The Fugitive" — a novella by Dubov she had recently read. Two people pitch a tent by the sea not far from a village, whose residents watch their relationship to each other with tenderness and envy, taking them for a married couple. A storm. The man drowns. His wife and grown son come for the body, petty and quarrelsome people. She's left alone, unable to get away, under the mocking, malicious stares of the village women.

Zaira felt uneasy, and got up. Viktor was nowhere to be seen. How similar this was to the situation in the novella. Though — no, there had been a storm there. Finally she spotted a smiling Viktor, talking with someone.

In the evening they went for a walk along the shore. They climbed a slope, looking down at the village lights below, at the sea with the silhouettes of ships in the distance. Zaira stood pressed against Viktor, he put his arm around her shoulders, and again it felt as though this weren't happening to her, but in a film. She had never imagined such a tangible sensation of complete happiness was possible.

They had planned to stay in Kirillovka for about two weeks, but a few days later, in the evening, when it was already time to go to bed, an agitated Lara came running in. Her landlady, who worked at the telegraph office, had warned her that starting the next day a quarantine would be imposed because of a cholera outbreak. If they didn't manage to leave in time, they'd be stuck there for forty days! An unappealing prospect, and within half an hour all four of them were sitting in the car. They drove without stopping for about five hours, and only once they'd cleared the possible quarantine boundary did they stop for the night. At home Zaira found Fatima, who had been sent back from halfway through her trip because of the cholera scare.

A few days after returning, Zaira made her second irreparable mistake. In a moment of candor, Viktor told her about his previous infatuations. Zaira, suspecting he might have heard about Nikolai Vasilyevich from someone at the plant, had long been looking for a suitable moment to tell him about it herself. And now the moment presented itself. She told him everything, even showed him the poems. He read them, his lips curling in disgust, and silently handed the sheet back to her. Soon after, he left.

He didn't call her for two days. That had never happened before! No one picked up when Zaira called. She decided he must have had to leave somewhere urgently. Viktor came, unannounced, on the third day. Zaira reached toward him, but he coldly pushed her away.

— I came to talk to you. We won't see each other anymore! This isn't easy for me to say. I wanted to avoid explanations, but that wouldn't be honest. For several months now you've been taking up more and more room in

my life. I fall asleep thinking of you, I wake up and reach for you again. Unfortunately, I've fallen in love with you, but you can't be mine...

— But I told you from the very start I wasn't claiming anything.

— That's exactly the problem. I mean nothing to you. Yesterday it was Nikolai Vasilyevich, maybe someone else too, today it's me, tomorrow — who knows. Besides, you've already spent all your feelings on Nikolai Vasilyevich. You're with me, but you live on memories of him. It's no accident you've kept his poems all these years, and you never part with the ring...

— The ring has nothing to do with him!

— Don't lie! You should have seen yourself while you were telling me about him — your eyes were shining. I don't want to walk down a well-trodden path. You take up too much of my strength and time. It's not even about me — everything I put into you, I take away from my son, from my mother. I haven't visited her in a month now, afraid to go a single day without seeing you. So, I want to end our meetings while I'm still able to. I don't think you'll grieve too much — you never took me seriously from the very start, you were even afraid of my attachment, otherwise your very first condition wouldn't have been — how did you put it? — “I make no claim to formalizing the relationship.” Can a woman in love really “make no claims”?

Zaira looked at him, not even trying to take in what he was saying, thinking in horror: “Can this really be him, Viktor, who only a few days ago looked at me with such loving eyes?” She'd never suspected he could have such a voice — cold and hard!

He left, and Zaira, hollowed out, sat without moving; all she could hear was her own heart pounding. She lay down and fell asleep at once. She woke toward morning. What was weighing on her so? Viktor! It was over, he was gone! She didn't want to get up, to go to work, didn't want to live at all. If only she could fall asleep again! She heard moaning. Who? Fatima! Zaira jumped up.

— What's wrong with you?

— My side hurts a lot.

— Why didn't you wake me?

— I wanted to. I came to you, but you were tossing so strangely, and I didn't dare.

Zaira called an ambulance. Appendicitis. The emergency hospital was on the other side of town. Zaira waited until Fatima's operation was done, then stopped by work and took three days off. In the evening she went out to head to the hospital. Viktor's car was standing outside. He opened the door, she got in, pushing aside a bag of apples and lemons. They drove off. After a while Viktor spoke:

— Don't worry, I called the hospital during the day, spoke with the doctor. Everything's fine.

They went into the ward together. Fatima already looked good. They rode home just as silently. Zaira opened the door to get out when Viktor asked:

— Won't you even offer me a cup of tea?

— Come in.

They went into the apartment. He pulled Zaira into his arms.

— For God's sake, forgive me! I hurt you, I know. I can see how hard this is for you, but I've been tormented myself these past two days. Try to understand me, I keep feeling like you don't need me. And then there's your story... I never liked that self-satisfied, aging Nikolai Vasilyevich, and now I hate him. Why him, of all people? It wouldn't hurt so much if it had been someone else. I keep thinking you'll show my notes to that other man too, after me...

Zaira pulled away from him, took out the sheet with the poems and tore it into tiny pieces. She thought for a moment, then tore up Viktor's notes as well.

— Now you can rest easy, I won't show them to anyone, even if I wanted to.

This was their first quarrel. And how many more there would be! One every year! But Zaira could never get used to them; each time it felt like the end, that he would never come back. She cried on Fatima's shoulder, who comforted her:

— Mommy, it'll be all right. Remember? It was the same last year, and the year before that too.

The cause of every quarrel was jealousy. All it took was for Viktor to catch someone's glance at Zaira, or for him to imagine she'd smiled the wrong way, and everything would resurface: Nikolai Vasilyevich, and the ring (though it had disappeared somewhere, no one knew where), and the long-kept poems, and the easily torn notes...

Justifying herself was useless. Not right away, but eventually Zaira understood that he needed these quarrels. Given his open, proud nature, it was hard for him to live a double life. He needed some solid self-justifications, and he tried, perhaps even unconsciously, to shift onto her the blame for not having taken a decisive step at the very beginning. At first he'd been held back by fear of traumatizing his son; later, once Igor had his own family and no longer needed his father's care, Viktor's position changed — his high post obliged him to keep up the appearance of a model family man. And it evidently became convenient, too, not to mix feelings with everyday life. Zaira, too, had grown used to the position of unofficial wife. With Zaira, Viktor found something he lacked at home, something he was used to at work — power. He was in charge, he was “conducting the parade”! And she, taught by life by now, played along, trying to seem even more submissive than she actually was. To

all his proposals Zaira answered with the line from the heroine of an unpretentious short story by Yuri Nagibin, which they had read together in Kirillovka: “As you say, Aurelio!” And it’s an open question whether such a strong attachment would have survived so many years, into their no-longer-young age, any other way.

They were together for fifteen years! Much water had flowed under the bridge in those years, much had happened. The children finished their institutes, the sons married. Zaira traded her apartment so Alan could build his own independent life. Fatima was married off. They buried their mothers. They went through the painful loss of their faithful friend Andrei. Viktor became head of the design bureau.

Every year Zaira and Viktor marked the anniversary of their “wedding.” For their fifteenth anniversary she prepared his favorite olibakh. She set the table, put out a bottle of araka, sealed with a corncob stopper. They would drink something else entirely, but by tradition araka was always set out, and not just any araka, but with a protruding corn cob sticking out of it. Once, when her mother had come to visit Zaira, she had brought a bottle like that. It had touched Viktor and Andrei so much that from then on they insisted on keeping to the custom established under her mother. Viktor in general had a deep respect for Caucasian traditions. He knew Georgian and Kabardian customs well — he had many friends there — and later transferred his attachment to Zaira onto Ossetia as well. If he ever heard or read even a few words about Ossetians somewhere, he would immediately tell her about it, take notes. He also used Ossetian sayings. He was delighted when Zaira retold him a story she’d heard from her mother.

In the village where her mother grew up, there was a simpleton who, in response to the usual Ossetian greeting offered to someone met on the road — “May your path be straight!” — would always exclaim: “Why? Let the road wind, I’ll walk longer, maybe I’ll come across something interesting.”

Ever since, there was never a time when, setting off somewhere together, Viktor wouldn't ask: "Shall we go straight, or in zigzags?"

Once, having spoken unflatteringly of someone, he added: "Then again, maybe I'm wrong. You said it yourself: 'The one you don't love chews with his mouth open and shuffles when he walks.'"

Once he was praising his son at great length, then caught himself and said to Zaira with a laugh:

— You're listening to me, but you're probably thinking: "To a frog, its own tadpole is a ray of sunshine!" — right?

And there was another phrase they used, from an Ossetian parable Zaira had once told Viktor.

A mountain man was riding down a road in an ox cart. Suddenly he sees a man standing there, holding up a cliff. "Why are you standing like that?" the mountain man asked him. "Oh, a great disaster is about to happen: the cliff will collapse and everything living in the valley will perish!" — "What's to be done?" — "You stand in for me and hold the mountain, and I'll take your oxen into the forest for some props." He jumped onto the cart — and that was the last anyone saw of him. And the simple-hearted mountain man stands there to this day, still holding up the cliff.

If Zaira was ever running late, Viktor would call and always begin with the phrase: "How much longer am I going to have to hold up this cliff?" Though, in truth, lately it had been Zaira who more and more often had to "hold up the cliff." Ever since Viktor had been appointed head of the huge design bureau, they'd had a hard time carving out time to meet. When, before agreeing to take the post, he had consulted her, he'd warned that they probably wouldn't be able to spend as much time together anymore, freely traveling around the country. Zaira understood perfectly well that consulting her was pure formality. For a long time already, the scope of a single laboratory, even a whole department, had been too small for him. Working

under an incompetent head of the design bureau tied his hands and irritated him. And when the head was finally removed, it was hard to imagine a better candidate than Viktor. Zaira was told that when his candidacy was discussed at the party committee, one of the more righteous Communists among them asked: “Do the members of the party committee know that Viktor Sergeyevich is having an affair with Zaira Kazbekovna?” Alexei Fyodorovich answered the question: “This isn’t an affair, this is Love!” This explanation apparently satisfied the party committee members: they unanimously recommended Viktor for the post.

Much changed with Viktor’s new appointment. Zaira began to discover traits in him she hadn’t noticed before. That Viktor was ambitious, she had always known. But that he would so easily fall for flattery, that he wasn’t very good at judging people and would soon find himself surrounded by some far-from-worthy hangers-on — that she hadn’t expected. Zaira was present at the official celebration for his birthday; she was ashamed to listen to the sycophantic praises heaped on him, and kept expecting Viktor to cut them off any moment, but he sat through it all in silence. The next day Zaira expressed her indignation to him, but he waved it off: “Let them talk, I know what they’re worth.” But that was just talk. A handful of flatterers wormed their way into positions as his deputies and assistants — some of them started greeting Zaira from a mile away — while Andrei and Alexei Fyodorovich, the only ones who still told him the truth, were pushed aside.

Mulling over all this, Zaira was “holding up the cliff,” standing by the window, worried the pies would get cold. Viktor got out of the car and, watched by the neighbors sitting on the bench, walked into the entryway, carrying calla lilies in his outstretched hands, the way men do. Along with the flowers he handed her a newspaper clipping.

— I won’t try to reinvent the wheel. Everything I feel and would like to tell you has already been written by Boris Lavrenyov, to the woman he loved.

Zaira read the passage he had underlined: “How much has been lost and squandered wandering across uneven, patchy ground, and how the heart clenches at the realization that so little time remains to breathe and to live for you, when one could have been filled with this illicit joy for a whole lifetime. But perhaps it is better this way, perhaps this is how it should be.

Perhaps, in order to feel with unprecedented sharpness and clarity the piercing power of true love, one had to walk a hard road, through thorns...” How often Zaira herself had thought the very same thing!

Somehow subdued, they sat for a long time at the table. Then they drank to happiness, to health, and remembered Andrei, who had died a year earlier. The pies turned out wonderfully!

This was on a Friday. For Saturday Zaira had planned a spring cleaning of the apartment. They agreed to go out for lunch somewhere the day after, once the plant’s volunteer workday was over.

Saturday morning began with Viktor’s daily call:

— Good morning, my dear one! What are you up to?

— Getting ready to wash the windows.

— Well, get to work. I’ll sign some papers, see some people, then call you.

About two hours later he called again:

— Ra, I looked in my briefcase — found the gift I forgot to give you yesterday. I’ve gotten so run off my feet that I’m even forgetting things like that.

— Never mind, give it to me tomorrow.

Zaira washed the window, started sweeping. Another call:

— So, maybe I should bring the gift over?

She looked at the half-cleaned room, not wanting to leave the work unfinished.

— Don't trouble yourself, we'll see each other tomorrow anyway...

Viktor called again half an hour later:

— Well, I suppose I'll head off. I'm a bit tired today for some reason.
Until tomorrow, my dear!

Zaira hung up the phone, and felt a wave of unease: Viktor had clearly been fishing for an invitation, and she, over some trivial cleaning, had been stubborn. Five minutes later she dialed his number — the phone rang and rang unanswered. So Viktor had gone home.

The next day, right at ten o'clock, Zaira and Lara arrived for the volunteer workday. In the plant courtyard, people who had come for the workday stood around in groups, but for some reason no one was working yet. Zaira went into her laboratory to change her shoes. The phone rang. Lara's agitated voice:

— Zaira, something terrible has happened. Viktor Sergeyevich.

— Tell me! What is it? An accident? Is he hurt?

— He's gone... he died yesterday...

Zaira dropped the receiver. She ran out of the lab. Lara must be confused about something. What do you mean, dead? She'd only just spoken to him yesterday...

At the door she ran into Alexei Fyodorovich, looked at him with hope, but he said sadly:

— Yes, Zairochka, Viktor is gone.

She went back into the lab and began to weep quietly, though what she wanted, as any Ossetian woman in grief would, was to scratch her cheeks and

tear her hair. Then it began to seem to her that she had to do something, find something out, run somewhere. She stepped out of the lab; Alexei Fyodorovich was standing by the door and wouldn't let Lara in:

— Let her be alone for a while, let her cry it out.

Zaira walked across the plant courtyard, not even wiping away her tears. It was completely indifferent to her what the people she passed thought of her, whether with sympathy or curiosity. Where to go? Who would understand her now?

She went to her daughter, the closest person to her!

— What's wrong with you? What happened? - Fatima asked, frightened.

— Viktor died...

— Oh, mommy, my poor mommy!

They sat together, embracing, and both wept bitterly...

Then Zaira went to Nyusya's.

— Have you heard about the tragedy?

— Yes, Zaira, yes. Igor called me during the night.

— Why didn't you call me?

— I wanted you to at least sleep peacefully through the night. I know from my own experience what kind of grief this is. And Andrei and I have known about you two since the very first day, we just pretended not to suspect anything.

Nyusya told her that the duty officer at the plant had discovered Viktor late in the evening, in the rest room next to his office. Apparently he'd felt unwell and lain down on the sofa. The family had been notified, an ambulance called. Presumably — a myocardial infarction.

— He's at the morgue now. The funeral is the day after tomorrow, from the plant, they won't be bringing him home first, - Nyusya finished her account.

On the day of the funeral, the coffin with Viktor's body was placed in the lobby that morning. Zaira, arm in arm with Fatima, walked with Nyusya and her son past the long line of design bureau colleagues, plant workers: Viktor Sergeyevich had been loved, and the grief was sincere. As Zaira approached, the conversations died down. They were already at the doors when the party committee secretary, having let Nyusya through, blocked the entrance.

— Zaira Kazbekovna, you needn't go in. I know: you were the person closest to Viktor Sergeyevich, but... it's awkward right now...

— Do you want me to stand in line?

He hadn't managed to answer when Fatima, shielding her mother, stepped right up to him and said in a ringing voice:

— Get away from my mother! Let us through!

— Yes, yes, of course, - the secretary stepped away from the door.

Everything was strewn with flowers. Through the shoulders of those standing in the honor guard, Zaira caught a glimpse of an unfamiliar face in the coffin, her gaze lingering on the lapels of the black jacket. Why were they shining like that? She couldn't understand why, but it seemed very important. She didn't want to look there anymore. That wasn't Viktor lying there! His voice still rang in her ears, his quick, mobile figure flickered before her eyes, her shoulders still remembered the feel of his hands... What lay there was someone else entirely. She didn't feel like crying. She stood there, silently talking to him, mechanically watching the honor guard change. Now Givi stepped in, with a mourning armband. When had he flown in? Probably just now, otherwise how could he not have called her? Though now, perhaps, he could have... The guard changed, and Givi went over to Viktor's wife and son,

sitting by the coffin, and, bending down, embraced them. Raising his head, he noticed Zaira. She tensed — would he come over? Skirting the seated relatives, he came up to her, his head bowed in sorrow. He didn't manage to say anything — someone called him away.

At the cemetery Zaira stood just as detached, off to the side, arm in arm with Fatima. She listened to the words usually said over the coffin of a distinguished man: how talented he had been, how wise, a leader and mentor of young people, an exemplary family man, gone too soon, forever to remain in memory...

Alexei Fyodorovich came over, stood beside her, took her hand...

At home Zaira took a sleeping pill. To sleep, to sleep, so as not to think of anything!

It was already dark when Fatima woke her. Givi had arrived, along with a colleague who had known Viktor.

And there, finally, on Givi's shoulder, she wept out all the tears that had built up over the whole long day. He wept too, grieving the death of a close friend. They sat at the table for a long time, remembering how they had spent time together in Moscow several times, how Zaira and Viktor had visited Givi's dacha near Sukhumi. They remembered buying the dress — Viktor's first gift. Then Givi grew indignant:

— Such a man died, and they dressed him in an old suit! So that's why the lapels were shining!

...When Fatima's son was born, they named him Viktor.

On the day of the operation Zaira woke very early. After all the necessary pre-operative procedures, she went to the intensive care ward and learned from the nurse that Tamara, operated on the day before, was doing satisfactorily. She performed the "cup" ritual, which everyone considered very

important for a smooth recovery: you had to leave your cup on the nightstand, put a lemon in it, and under the lemon, three rubles. After the operation, a nurse's aide from intensive care would come for the cup and the lemon, keeping the money for herself. Zaira didn't have three rubles, wanted to put in five, but everyone protested in unison against breaking the established rate. She had to get change. There was nothing left to do, and there was still a long hour left before the operation. Zaira wandered around the ward, then went out into the corridor and waited for Vladimir Leonidovich — what if he had something important still to tell her? Seeing the doctor at the end of the corridor, she went to meet him.

— Why aren't you in the ward? - Vladimir Leonidovich asked. - Is something bothering you?

— Yes.

— What is it?

And, realizing she was about to say something foolish, Zaira forced the words out:

— Couldn't it happen that I haven't fallen asleep yet and you've already started operating? Or that I wake up and you haven't finished yet?

Without smiling, the doctor answered:

— I promise you: neither of those things will happen. Be calm. Go on, we'll begin soon.

And again the operating room, the bright light, the cold of the table...

Zaira woke to someone's words:

— She's still asleep. Right across from the door there.

Zaira opened her eyes. Through the doorway she saw familiar, beloved faces: Alan, Lyuda, Fatima, Seryozha. She realized she was already in the

intensive care ward. She managed to wave to them before the nurse closed the door.

On the neighboring bed lay Tamara. They were together again!

A day later they were moved to the large, noisy post-operative ward, where both Zaira and Tamara felt very uncomfortable. They'd only been there a day when Vladimir Leonidovich sent for them, suggesting they return to their own ward while their beds were still free, and they gladly resettled into their already-familiar, home-like room.

That same day a new patient was admitted to the ward — Vera Nikolayevna, a middle-aged woman with a haggard face, evidently educated, judging by her speech. Two sons brought her in, holding her by the arms, carefully laid her down, tucked her in. A nurse gave her an injection, and she soon fell asleep. In the evening Vera Nikolayevna came to and told them she was sixty years old, that she had been chief engineer at a large plant, had left her job three years earlier when her husband was paralyzed after a stroke. Both grown sons lived apart, and though they often visited their father, the main burden of caring for her immobile husband fell on her. For six months now her side had been hurting, right in the spot where her sick husband's knee pressed against her when she turned him over. She had endured the pain, never having time to see a doctor, and put her severe weight loss down to exhaustion. Her sons had forced her to go to the clinic, and now here she was, in oncology. On her very first day the attending physician examined her for a long time, the head of the department came too, and then she was taken off to a consultation. One of the other patients had seen Vera Nikolayevna's sons coming out of the doctors' office, both looking lost.

Worry over her husband never left Vera Nikolayevna for a moment. Whenever she saw her sons, she bombarded them with questions:

— How's Papa? Who's with him today? The clean linens are in the top drawer of the dresser. He wakes up at eight in the morning. Crumble some

rusks into the broth. The porridge should be just barely warm. He needs to be turned three times a day.

Her whole self remained at home, with her husband; she worried only about him, giving no thought at all to herself, even though, judging by the doctors' behavior, her own situation was far from good.

After lights-out, Zaira couldn't fall asleep for a long time; she wanted to toss and turn, but the bed creaked so loudly she was afraid of waking everyone up.

— Not asleep? - Vera Nikolayevna called to her. - Neither am I, I slept enough during the day after the injection.

And they began to talk quietly. Vera Nikolayevna turned out to be very well-read. They had read the same books. Both loved Paustovsky, Vasil Bykov, Aitmatov, Iskander.

They talked about Maurois's "Letters to an Unknown Woman." And Vera Nikolayevna won Zaira over completely when she recited from memory a poem by Veronika Tushnova from the collection "A Hundred Hours of Happiness"; Zaira remembered Viktor giving her just such a collection once.

At the end, Vera Nikolayevna asked:

— Do you know your native language?

— Yes, of course.

— I only know one of your poets — Kosta Khetagurov. I've never heard the Ossetian language spoken. Could you recite something for me?

Zaira thought for a moment, then recited Kosta's "Testament," which she still remembered from school.

— Thank you, Zaira! - said Vera Nikolayevna. - How nice, in such a gloomy place, to meet an interesting person.

— If I said the same to you it would sound like “the cuckoo praising the rooster” — better I stay quiet. Good night!

A week after the operation Zaira and Tamara started going to “the cannon” again. But it no longer seemed so terrifying — the frightening operation was behind them now.

Once, coming back from the radiology building, Zaira found Aza in the ward. However hard they had tried to hide her illness from her, she had suspected something was wrong, since Zaira hadn’t called in a month, and had come with her daughter. The sisters embraced, and Zaira felt Aza trembling; and Aza looked so unwell that it was hard to say which of them was actually the patient.

For several days Aza came to the hospital every day, and then Zaira arranged for Vladimir Leonidovich to discharge her, so that for the remaining ten sessions of radiation therapy she could come from home — Alan lived nearby, it wasn’t far to go.

On the day Zaira was to be discharged, Vera Nikolayevna was operated on. Zaira waited for the doctor to get her discharge certificate, but he was gone a very long time — the operation was clearly taking longer than expected. Sometime around midday, through the open ward door, Zaira saw Vera Nikolayevna being wheeled past. Zaira quickly went out into the corridor and walked alongside the gurney. For some reason Vera Nikolayevna wasn’t asleep. Barely moving her lips, she seemed to be trying to say something. Zaira bent down and heard her whisper.

— Don’t disappear...

— No, no, Vera Nikolayevna. I gave your son my phone number, took yours. I’ll come the day after tomorrow to see you.

A day later Zaira and Aza came to the hospital. First Zaira went into the doctors’ office. Vladimir Leonidovich was in a bad mood. He sat at his desk,

staring gloomily at one spot, not touching his wrapped breakfast. Zaira handed him a bouquet of flowers and set a plate of hot Ossetian pies on the table.

— Enjoy the pies I promised. Though I confess I didn't bake them myself — my niece did, but hers turn out tastier than mine.

— Give the flowers to a nurse, but thank you so much for the pies. I'll take some to my mother too, I've been singing their praises to her for ages.

In the ward Aza handed pies around to everyone.

— You stay here, I'll go see how Vera Nikolayevna is doing, - Zaira told her.

A silence fell.

— Zaira, there's no need to go anywhere, - Tamara finally said.

— Why not?

— Vera Nikolayevna is gone... She died the night before last, her heart gave out...

Stunned, Zaira stood there, holding back the foolish phrase that everyone usually blurts out on learning of a death: "But I was just talking to her not long ago!"

Heavy at heart, Zaira left the ward. In the corridor two women stopped her.

— Excuse us, could you tell us how much you gave?

— Gave what? To whom? - Zaira didn't understand, still thinking about Vera Nikolayevna.

— To the surgeon, of course. He's going to operate on us too, and we don't know how much to give him. We were told he treats you very well, but no one knows how much you gave.

— I gave nothing at all, - Zaira answered sharply.

Both women looked at her with disbelief, then, interrupting each other, began assuring her that they'd never reveal her secret to anyone.

— Leave me alone! I told you, I gave him nothing, he was good to me for free!

Offended, they finally moved away from Zaira, and she, arm in arm with Aza and Tamara, went off to her next radiology session.

About two weeks later a letter arrived from Izyum. An unfamiliar handwriting:

Hello, dear Zaira Kazbekovna!

I read your letter and decided to answer. I remember you, and Tamara told me a lot about you too. It's been eight months since my dear Tamarochka left us. In winter she was taking our granddaughter to kindergarten and slipped. The bad fall brought her illness back again... We still can't come to terms with it. And for me the light went out after my beloved wife's death.

All the best to you! Take care of your health!

Cherednichenko.

Zaira couldn't come to her senses. It was hard to picture the always-smiling, blooming Tamara, who had seemed so completely recovered, dead. Zaira couldn't forgive herself for having only written to her after a year, as if, had she done it sooner, something might have been different. And with Lyubov Vasilyevna, too, they called each other less and less often now, hadn't seen each other in a long time, even though they lived almost next door.

Zaira dialed Lyubov Vasilyevna's number, wondering whether it was even worth upsetting her with the sad news about Tamara. A man answered.

— May I speak with Lyubov Vasilyevna?

— Who's asking for her?

— We were in the same hospital ward together four years ago. You must be her son?

— Yes.

— Is your mother home?

— Mama...

— What's happened to Lyubov Vasilyevna?

— Why are you even asking, if you were in the ward together?

And... short beeps.

Zefira Butaeva, 1993.