



Igor BABAEV

HERITAGE

Volume Three

LIYA





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Moscow

2017







Lida, years spend with you – will always live in my memory and my heart.

Our's was a life so big, so exciting and creative, so full of love, joy and happiness. The problems that did arise were so insignificant they're not worth mentioning, let alone remembering them.

As I continue working on my book, more pleasant memories flood my mind. Oh, how I enjoy writing them down!

As much as we try, we can never unlock the mystery of the human soul alone. Compassion and gratitude are our guides. These are the principles I am trying to learn right now. It turns out that it's no easy task, to look deep inside your own soul and view everything as a newborn – crystal clear, with nothing clouding your vision.

As we reminisce, we rediscover ourselves and we change, sharing our best qualities with our loved ones. We share our feelings, our hopes and fears and together we venture out to seek the one true path

Igor Babaev

I

Why are you up so early?" Lidochka looked at me, still sleepy.

Light snow was falling outside the window. Lida lazily stretched. I smiled.

We went downstairs to the kitchen, where Havo was making noise all morning.

"You went all out, mom!" I exclaimed, looking at the table covered in still-smoking hot food. On the stove, under the pot and pan lids, something was simmering, bubbling, sizzling and frizzling – everything was teasing us with delicious smells.

Havo hugged me.

"Sit, son."

Ran over to Lida, hugged her tightly.

"My darling, I'm so happy you're in our home now."

Still holding Lida in her outstretched arms, she eyed her with admiration, as if she were a beautiful painting. Her eyes were full of warmth.

“Sit here, my daughter.”

“Let me help,” Lida moved towards the stove.

“Oh no, my darling! I’m the hostess here.” Softly yet firmly Havo sat Lida back down. “What will you have?”

Something on the stove sizzled loudly.

“Oh, I almost forgot...” Havo moved back to the stove and began stirring something, somewhat reminiscent of a mother hen.

“Mom, when do you have time to make all this?!”

“The early bird gets the worm,” Havo said affectionately.

Stentorian bass of my father’s voice could now be heard, followed by the cacophonous chorus of Gena and Slava.

The house began speaking in all kinds of different tones.

My father entered the kitchen.

“Oooh! The young ones are already at it! Slava, look, we almost slept through all the food!” he laughed loudly.

“My beauty,” he looked at Lida lovingly.

She smiled shyly. She was still not quite used to our loud house, our way of talking, everything was still new to her.

As we breakfasted, the snow outside picked up pace, and soon it was falling heavily, like something out of a fairy tale, as if nature itself wanted to congratulate us and say: your life is starting with a clean slate.

Lidochka and I were planning to go visit her parents – tradition called for it, and we wanted to see our closest relatives, as well as pick up some of Lida’s personal things.

The clouds above, leisurely passersbys, walking by, quite indifferent to us, the slowly falling snowflakes – everything around us was inebriating and joyful.

“Your father’s friends are so cheery,” chattered away Lida. “They were so attentive to me.”

“They’re always very attentive. But they liked you.”

“They aren’t like others I know.”

“You should hear them when they all get together – it can never get boring!”

“And how they jumped up to dance, when they seemed so respectable, sophisticated, but as soon as the lezginka started playing...”

“Oh yeah, they know how to have fun. I thought they’d break the floor, the way they were dancing.”

We both laughed.

I took Lida’s hand. Everything that I’d wanted had come true. Like my father said at the wedding: “Every man is a letter of the alphabet – in order to make a word, he must merge with another.” I thought that the words we formed were “happy family.”

I looked up, and as I watched the clouds fly above my head, like some kind of fairy-tale birds, I was suddenly overcome with a feeling of complete peace.

“Lidochka, I love you.”

I was so drawn into our chat that I didn’t even notice how we ended up by Lida’s house. It seemed that I would be able to find my way here even with my eyes tied. A shadow of memory flashed before my eyes.

The gate creaked. We didn’t even get a chance to ring the doorbell, when the door swung open.

Lida’s father greeted us with a big hug:

“Finally! The young couple is here!”

“Daddy!” Lida rushed to hug him.

Ilya Vladimirovich hugged her, somewhat shyly. I was still too young back then to realize that when a father hugs a married daughter, he is saying goodbye to her childhood.

It was as if Lida had felt that in her young heart, and was trying to tell her parents: “I’m not going anywhere!”

Ilya Vladimirovich turned to me.

“Hello, Ilya Vladimirovich.”

He gave me a firm and a somewhat solemn hug, which surprised me, as he’s never done that before, always having greeted me with just a firm handshake.

My father sometimes greeted me like that, when I was late coming home. I'd run in and he would already be sitting there with his friends, cheerful and content. He'd get up and hug me, firmly and solemnly, in front of everyone, pointedly showing, how proud of me he was.

"Come on in! Don't just stand there."

Lida ran over to her older sister.

"Lara!"

Larisa turned around, as if caught unawares, and looked at Lida with curiosity, as if she hadn't seen her for many years. A barely noticeable shadow passed between the sister – Lida's childhood was over, she was now a married woman.

"Oh, I'm so sorry I didn't come greet you right away – so busy in the kitchen," Anna Grigorievna officially announced her appearance.

Again, as many times before, I was surprised by how she carried herself. Although she was wearing an apron and her hands were covered in dough, she seemed an aristocrat, as if she didn't come from some far-off Jewish village. Anna Grigorievna came up to me and ceremoniously offered me her cheek for the kiss. It seemed almost like a sign of special favor.

We were all here: Larisa and her husband, Volodia, Lida, Anna Grigorievna, Ilya Vladimirovich, and I. The house suddenly felt so peaceful and harmonious, as if we were all transported into a miracle.

The table was already set in the biggest room of the house. It was as if both families had conspired to feed us to death.

We jollily found our seats around the table. Ilya Vladimirovich got up at the head of the table. He was excited. An attentive host, he looked over to make sure everyone's glass was full, paused for a second until we all got quiet.

"Dear Igor!" he paused. "I'm glad that we're all one big family now. As a father, I want to tell you that in Lida you've found a tower of strength that you can always depend on! Your

own happy life awaits you, I'm sure of it. But please, don't forget that our home is your home now. To the happy couple!"

The room filled with glasses clinking.

I don't know what sort of magic Anna Grigorievna practiced when preparing the meal, but it soon became apparent that to stop eating would be absolutely impossible.

Ilya Vladimirovich loudly inhaled the aroma, exuding from the dishes and looked at Anna Grigorivena with amazement. His gaze did not go unnoticed.

So many appetizers, *ingarpol, chudu, kurze...*

"Anna Grigorievna, you're surpassed yourself – Ilya Vladimirovich couldn't hold back the praises any longer. He bent over his bowl of soup, and, squinting slightly, whispered into my ear – Igorek, try this, I recommend it."

He continued loudly:

"Anna Grigorievna, could you give us some cold vodka?"

"Yes, Ilya Vladimirovich, of course."

She always catered to her husband's whims in public, quite consciously supporting Ilya Vladimirovich's twinkling pride in being the true head of the family. This was something that all of Jewish women who'd moved to big cities but kept to traditions had in common. The husband was, first and foremost, the breadwinner and the master of the house.

I was amazed at the tenderness and mutual respect between Lida's parents. While I was used to everything at home being simple and informal, here the head of the family addressed his wife by her full name, with the patronymic. I'd never noticed it before, but now it seemed incredible, as a newly discovered fact – they behaved with a slight tinge of aristocracy, something lacking in the Babaev household.

"Here is the lamb soup", drawled Anna Grigorievna, setting the porcelain tureen on the table.

Fragrant pieces of meat were floating in the golden steaming liquid.

Ilya Vladimirovich inhaled loudly, never ceasing to be amazed at his wife's culinary marvels.

"The years will pass, Igor, and you'll understand how happy this time of your life was!" He gave me a sly look of a conspirator, then leaned in closer and put his hand on my shoulder. "Igor, we decided not to give you a present, and instead buy furniture for your new apartment when you figure out where you'll be living."

He gave me a searching look.

His past coldness seemed to have fallen into oblivion. It's no wonder Lida loves her parents so much.

"Thank you! I am genuinely grateful for your support and care, Ilya Vladimirovich."

"Remember, as soon as you get your own place, it's as good as furnished."

And so, joking and laughing, we finished our first family gathering at Mikhailovs, and then, full and happy, went for a walk in the park.

The three days flew by quickly.

It was somehow just assumed that I would bring my wife to my house on Katykhina Street, where we were given our own room. Havo treated her as a daughter, warmly and gently, however, it was still the Babaev household and everything here was under my father's rule.

For a few days Lidochka observed how things were in our home. It was a typical family nest with its unique way of life, where everyone lived as one qahal. The most important thing was her relationship with Havo – and it was great. But Lida was used to running her own household.

My business affairs required me to go to Anapa, and even my status as a newlywed was not enough to postpone the trip. Everyone understood. The idea of a honeymoon didn't even occur to me back then. Many things did not occur to me back then. My mind was fully occupied with work related issues,

and Havo, who loved me passionately – Havo who was born in the mountains and was used to austere simplicity, could not possibly know anything about the delicate issues of family life.

On the day of my departure I hugged my mother and said goodbye to my grandfather and the rest of the family.

Lida came out to the car to see me off. We hugged. She looked a little sad. She was quiet for a while and only decided to speak when we got to the car:

“Igor, you know, I’m going to stay with my parents until you get back. When you’re here, I will live here. But I also have to study – and it’s just easier there. Allow me to stay at my place for now.”

I hugged her tenderly.

“You’re probably right. Do what’s more convenient for you.”

I got into the car. Turned around. Lida was standing by the gate, waving.

The honeymoon was over.

* * *

Back then Lida exhibited wisdom not typical for 18-year-old women. She understood very quickly that to live without her husband, without his support and within the Babaev family was too awkward for her. And she did not place herself between Havo and I, did not try to change anything to suit her own needs, but quietly retreated to her parents’ house.

II

In Anapa, preparations for the new season were well under way.

A lot had to be changed in my “inheritance”, reconstruction had to be started. It was impossible to have a laissez-faire attitude about things, to loosen constant control necessary to get things done.

The Bimlyuk tourist base, one of the plant’s holdings, was Georgy Georgievich Chelokyan’s favorite vacation spot. He was the chairman of the Chief Directorate. As my deputy had informed me, Chelokyan came here every summer. He would only come for a week at most, but his wife and child spent a good part of the summer at the base.

The Chief Directorate and the plant had a kind of relationship. I knew that Chelokyan had supported the plant before I got here, and of course, I could’ve just called him directly, but I thought that it would be best to first get the support of the all-powerful Mikhail Kuzmich Silchenko – an instructor of the

Central Committee of the Party, my father's old friend, who had supported my career advancement. In my eyes, Silchenko was a demi-god, and one whom I could access directly.

I called him.

"Mikhail Kuzmich, hello. This is Igor Babaev."

"Hello, Igor! So tell me, how are things with you?" it seemed as if my phone call did not surprise him at all, and his voice was dry, as if he wasn't alone. "How do you like your new place? Finding yourself at home in the director's chair?"

I sensed warmth in the tone of his questions.

"I'm settling down here. The holiday season is stressful. Which is actually why I'm calling."

"More specifically?" he perked up.

"We're getting ready for the tourist season. The plant really needs a wide-scale reconstruction. We need funds, we need equipment, well – we need just about everything. So I wanted to consult you."

"Well aren't you swinging for the fences! I don't think we'll decide anything over the phone. Why don't you come by and see me, and we'll discuss everything in person."

* * *

"Remedy this situation immediately, is that clear?" my voice was hoarse.

There was a knock at the door, and Ivan Stepanovich Gudimov, the head engineer, appeared in the doorway.

"Did something happen?" I asked, motioning Gudimov to a chair, and slammed down the phone. "What the hell is this? We fix up one place, it starts leaking someplace else! We need the equipment!"

I looked at the head engineer quizzically.

"Igor Alekseevich, did you call for me?"

"Ah, yes. I'm thinking that I need to go and solve everything directly, at the Directorate. What do you think?"

“I agree. We’ve always solved everything through Moscow. And it’s best to take Vasiliy with you.”

“Why?” I was surprised.

“It’ll be difficult for you there if you’re alone. We need to solve the hotel issues, to meet with people. It takes time. Vasya had always gone with the director before, he knows how to get in touch with people at the Directorate. It’ll be easier with an assistant.”

“Well, all right.”

I nodded, grateful. Such ardor was laudable.

It didn’t take us long to pack. I took all the necessary papers, including the “political justification” – letter from the First Secretary of the City Committee Ischenko, confirming that the place in question was a children’s resort, a Soviet health center. And so, we were off.

III

This was my first visit to the Old Square – the *sancta sanctorum* of power. The wide deserted streets.

I was here for the first time in my life, here, where the fates of so many were decided on a daily basis, and the feeling of incredible luck quickly changed to one of timidity in the face of the power of that system that was opening its doors to me.

I obtained an entry pass, went through security, and took the first step to the other side of the invisible boundary into the unknown, the land that was off limits to mere mortals.

A giant empty hallway was in front of me, as if frozen in silent grandeur.

I ascended many stairs, up, up, and further up – and my brain kept whispering to me – this is the beginning of your ascent.

Instructor of the Party Central Committee of the Food Processing Industry Department had a small and unassuming office.

I remember being shocked at the dissonance between the scope of the man's abilities and the space that was allotted to him.

The meeting started off warmly. Although Mikhail Kuzmich immediately began to talk shop, I felt his good will towards me, a feeling that stayed with me like an unseen companion through our entire conversation.

"So, tell me, what happened over there?" began Silchenko, guessing my trepidation, and a barely noticeable shadow of a smile crossed his authoritative face.

"Mikhail Kuzmich, here's the situation: the plant has to be reconstructed as soon as possible. We need money for a thorough overhaul. And that's a problem that can only be solved by the Directorate. These are target-oriented funds. We also need additional equipment."

Kuzmich listened carefully, without interrupting. Then, lost in thought, he tapped his pencil on the desk. His hand moved across his face, as if wiping off old worries.

"Igor, are you sure you should be setting the bar this high right away? Perhaps it would be better to get your bearings? To prepare for the reconstruction. To speak in front of the board at the Krasnodar association, so that the Meat Industry Association could then bring this offer to the Directorate. You know all this..."

He looked at me attentively, and I sensed a trap in his voice. He was testing me. I handled his stare. "I have a solution to this problem", said my firm gaze.

Silchenko kept staring into my eyes, and then pointedly remarked:

"There's nothing worse than rushing, Igor. There is a chain of command that needs to be followed. There's a certain way of doing things. You're being rather blunt – going straight to the head of the Directorate!"

"Mikhail Kuzmich, it's not about me being blunt," I exclaimed. "I'm looking at what was going on before me, and

I see that the plant won't be able to start off well without the Directorate's help. The Directorate has always helped us. And Georgy Georgievich, and all of his deputies – they all vacation at the base. It's Anapa."

"Alright, alright," Mikhail Kuzmich raised his hand, as if backing down in light of my energy, and his gaze became approving, as if I'd taken the right first step in crossing a minefield.

Silently, he dialed, and waited for a second before speaking.

"Georgy Georgievich, hello there! How are things over there? You know, Babaev is here with me, the new director of the meat plant in Anapa. Remember we talked about him? I'm asking you, please, see him, hear what he has to say. He has good ideas that should be heard. If you can, support him. We are talking about an All-Union children's resort here. When can you see him?"

I sat with baited breath.

Mikhail Kuzmich listened to the other end of the line and hung up.

"Igor, he's waiting for you," Silchenko looked bemused.

His gaze changed – he was now looking at me like I had just passed a very serious test.

"You know where you're going?"

"Yes," I said, remembering my assistant.

"And another thing. You go, while I'm going to call Ischenko as well."

I left his office. Everything inside was singing and dancing – the first hurdle (and where, of all places? In the Central Committee!) had been overcome.

A reverent silence in the hallways, a deserted street outside the window – all of it was filling me up with a sense of something incredibly important, that was I now privy to.

My trusted assistant was already waiting for me downstairs.

“Well, Vasily Petrovich, so where is the Directorate?” I began cheerfully.

“Krzhizhanovskogo street, Igor Alekseevich,” he replied immediately.

“Is that far?”

“Fairly far. But we’ll get there quickly” there’s a cab waiting.

“Wow!” I looked at him with respect.” You’ve got it all figured out!

“I did say you won’t regret this.”

Forty minutes later we were entering the Directorate.

We got our entry passes quickly – Vasily Petrovich really knew his way around here, and soon we found ourselves in the boss’s waiting room. Vasily left me there.

In the hallway, in absolute silence, there sat a line of people, all waiting their turn. All of them stern, closed-off, reminiscent of statues. All of them men past middle age. I felt out of place.

“Hello,” I quietly said to the secretary. “I’m here to see Georgy Georgievich.”

She took my pass and coldly nodded.

“He has someone with him right now. Please have a seat. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

I sat down in one of the empty chairs. The silence was ringing. I looked at the clock. How long will I have to wait?

A minute later the office door opened, and a man came out. He was holding a rather stuffed folder and wiping his rather red face. The secretary rushed in, quick as a mouse. I got comfortable, expecting to be here awhile. But only a second or so later she ran out and rushed over to me. Her voice was now sweet as honey.

“Comrade Babaev, please go in.”

The line stared at me in amazement. Who is this young kid, if the chairman of the Directorate sees him without delay?

I straightened out my jacket and timidly entered the office.

A grand, stately man got up to greet me. He was an aristocratic-looking confident Armenian, with a large nose and sparking black eyes. His height made him seem less overweight than he really was. He kindly extended his hand to shake mine:

“Well, hello, Igor! Congratulations on your promotion!” Chelokyan sized me up and chuckled. “But you’re just a kid! I was expecting someone... more seasoned. Well, what do you know! Let’s hope that you’ll make it as a director. How are things over there, have you gotten the hang of it yet?”

His manner of speech was impeccable.

I began to answer his questions, business-like. Chelokyan listened, didn’t interrupt, and then suddenly noted, as if in passing:

“They probably told you, haven’t they? My wife loves Anapa very much, especially the tourist base in Bimlyuk. She goes there every year.” He smirked, as if remembering something, and looked at me, a searching kind of look. “So, we’ll probably see each other over there. She’s planning on going this summer too.” He looked the calendar. “Anyway, so what’s going on with you over there?”

“We need a complete overhaul and remodeling. And new equipment.”

Chelokyan nodded, understanding.

Every other visitor had come to him with exactly the same request. Back then, there was a research and production association for the creation of equipment for the meat industry. It was headed by Korniyushko.

For me, getting that equipment was a matter of life and death.

But how to go about it? Even if it was approved at the very top, obtaining it would still be very difficult. Quantities were strictly limited, allocated for specific plants for years ahead,

and here I was, impudent, out of line. Quite literally – not in the line of those already waiting.

Georgy Georgievich made a phone call. He began explaining something to the person on the other end of the time. Last names, first names, they were discussing something pressing. Chelokyan nodded in agreement to whatever he heard, looked at me, and said into the phone;

“Kornyushko, can you please see what can be done for Anapa? Move someone over. But they need the necessary equipment. See the plant’s director, hear him out, help him.”

He hung up the phone and looked at me in contentment, waiting for me reaction. Nodded himself, as if surprised at his own ability to solve problems. He pushed a button on his desk.

“Zina, call Arias. Ask him to come and see me immediately.”

He smiled with only the corners of his lips, as if saying “You’ll see.”

Less than a minute later, the door opened and a thin, short briskly man walked in.

“Albin, here, let me introduce you.” Chelokyan pointed to me. “Igor Babaev, director of the meat plant in Anapa. Could you see how much can be spared for the remodeling in Anapa?”

Albin extended his hand, and I firmly shook it.

Albin frowned. Chelokyan waved him aside, as if saying, objections are not up for discussion.

“We do have precedent for this. Allocate something, so that he’d actually be able to do something useful. Especially since we have such a young director here,” he pointed to me, as if saying, “Come on, look at him!”, then turned to me. “And you, Igor, don’t you worry. We’ll do what needs to be done. To the best of our abilities.”

“Thank you for your help, Georgy Georgievich. I look forward to seeing you in Anapa, if you do decide to come – let me know.”

I said my goodbyes and left the office, the stares of all those tired men who'd been waiting in line to be called seeing me off. I was overcome with a feeling of happiness. My very first visit – and everything went without a hitch. What's next?

I was like a hound that had found a scent. Hot on the heels of my own success.

From the Directorate I rushed over to Korniyushko, to that production association. He was already waiting for me. I could be open and direct.

"I desperately need a *"Kutor"* at the plant," I began after all the proper introductions." I can't do anything without it."

"A copy of the foreign-made one?" smirked Korniyushko.

"Well, yeah!"

I eyed him inquiringly.

Back then, that's how our production companies solved our problems – they bought Western equipment and recreated its exact copies.

Korniyushko began going through some papers, occasionally making a phone call to confirm one detail or another. He reminded me of a magician who shows the audience how to make three suits out of two meters of cloth. Apparently, solving matters like these was not a new thing for Korniyushko.

He "moved" someone, found some other options – and solved my problem. I couldn't believe my eyes. Everything that I set out to do – was accomplished.

Today I keep thinking back to that day. Why did Chelokyan agree to see me right away? What did he expect of me?

Georgy Georgievich had specific information on me as someone who was not just another cog in the nomenclature machine, information that he obtained rather suddenly. He knew full well that it was no accident that I had been appointed director of the meat plant. After all, this appointment was blessed by Mikhail Kuzmich himself, instructor of the Party Central Committee.

The other thing was the Chelokyan was intrigued by me, by what could be expected of me. He wanted to form his own opinion. Especially since his wife was supposed to vacation at our tourist base. Could he depend on me? Fully depend? And, most importantly, would I be able to accomplish what the more “seasoned” men before me had not? Do I have the inner warmth and strength required to lead the complex staff in Anapa?

And the staff we had really was quite mixed. Streetwise men, capable of chewing you up and spitting you out. Many Armenians, many Kuban Cossacks, many Tatars. One had to understand the psychology of each single member of that crew, find a way to approach them, to work with them. Would I be able to do that, me, such a youngling? In the end, would I be a disappointment?

* * *

I flew back to the hotel as if I'd grown wings.

There was something of a fairytale in all of this, starting at the visit to the Old Square.

I got the money for the remodeling and overhaul, I got the equipment, and now everything depended on me – would I be able to accomplish what I'd set out to do, to continue working at the pace I'd set for myself, would I resolve everything in the short three months ahead?

It was February. Only March, April and May remained before summer. After that – we're in season! So little time to jumpstart everything I had planned.

There was only one odd moment in this entire trip – Vasily, the assistant that came with me. Vasily paid for everything himself. He was well-off enough to be a small czar, and this was clearly beyond his official travel allowance.

When we got back to Anapa, I called him into my office and asked point blank:

“Vasily Petrovich, could you write out what we’d spent during the trip and where, and where did that money come from?”

He looked at me in astonishment. It was as if he was asking me “Are you serious?”

And the show began. He lowered all of our expenses ten-fold or more. I kept having to bring him back to reality:

“What are you saying here, Vasily Petrovich? We spent a lot more here...”

He turned pale, he turned red, he shrugged, he threw up his hands. I kept pushing.

Eventually the truth came out. The men at the plant – manager of the sausage department, manager of the slaughterhouse, sales manager – pooled their money together and funded our trip. They called in Vasily and told him, “Here, take this money, make sure the boss is comfortable during your trip.”

That’s how things were back then.

There always had to be a clear understanding of where the money came from. And I knew where it came from.

I had to somehow regain control of the situation.

So, I gathered the buds together and said:

“Guys, the renovation issue has to be resolved. Without it, the plant won’t survive. But I demand one thing – get your act together.”

It was amazing, but they understood what I meant.

Yes, it was a compromise, I didn’t make a big deal out of their “black cash”.

But the renovations began. Their connections, their grasp of the situation and what was needed to resolve it – I put everything to use. If only we could get it done in time. The days flew by, relentlessly bringing us to the deadline.

IV

I didn't have to come up with anything additional when telling Lida about how busy I was. It was enough for her to hear my voice over the phone – and she understood everything.

To live apart from her was pure suffering. Long-distance phone calls remained the only way for me to be in her life. The plant and its reconstruction had conquered me whole. Even on Saturday, my legal holiday, I was unable to get away.

A meeting in the morning. Then, rounds to check the ongoing work, then meetings with department managers to set current tasks – and the day was over.

I look at the clock – it's already four. Now I must fly. "Have them bring the car around", I snap at my secretary. I get in and get out, and no one knows where I am going...

My personal life was my personal life. Nobody knew anything about it. I tried hard to make everyone understand that we had one common goal – the plant, the production, the is-

sues that had to be resolved, and for that we had to sacrifice everything else. But on a Saturday night I belonged to just me and my car.

I'm driving, and only one thing is going through my head: how to get to Lida faster.

It's dark outside. I press down on the gas, I get the car to go as fast as it can possibly go.

I arrived in Kislovodsk around 3 AM, having driven seven hundred kilometers. Ten hours of an exhausting drive.

Lida hadn't gone to sleep and was waiting for me. A young girl who had just gotten married – she lived apart from her husband. These days that sounds insane. But back then, we had no other choice.

* * *

I ran into the house. Lida was sitting by the window. I called out to her, she turned around, pulled me in with her gentle, almost child-like hands, and began kissing me on the lips, the forehead, the nose.

I hugged her and we froze, holding each other.

I felt a hot rush come over me.

I knew that no victories were possible without her. I stood there, feeling how thoughts, words, time flowed through me. Nothing had to be explained, it was as if she could hear and understand everything I was thinking.

It was the kind of closeness that's impossible to describe, one that can only be given by a woman's loving heart – a heart of a girl, who's given all of herself to her husband.

I told Lida what happened during my trip to Moscow.

"You can't imagine, I got everything done – that never happens!"

"Are you serious?" Lida's eyebrows jumped up to the middle of her forehead.

I briefly described my trip.

Lida listened to me, constantly sighing, her compassionate sighs becoming commas in my story.

She asked me, what I was doing, who I was spending my time with, how I spent my evenings.

I answered everything. I recalled the smallest details, the funniest situations. We couldn't get enough of each other. Then I pulled out the box of presents. I brought them every time.

She would turn red, accepting the presents, being happy, or just the opposite, protesting, saying that she didn't need anything. And then she grabbed me by the hand and kissed me, especially when I pulled out something that amazed her, some pretty thing or a dress.

I had access to all the supply cooperatives in Anapa, so I was able to buy her the best things available at the time. These small surprises made both of us very happy.

I also brought groceries and left Lida money, as I didn't want her to financially depend on anyone.

Today I can say that since the day Lida married me, she was never lacking for anything in her life.

This day and a half with my loved one gave me strength for the coming week, as if someone pumped me full of energy. Come Monday morning, without fail, I was back at work.

V

Aleksey Babaev put the phone down and, lost in thought, drummed on the table with his fingers. He pressed the intercom button and called Zinyakov. Hearing the painfully familiar “I’m listening!” on the other end, he said firmly:

“You haven’t been in to see me in a while, Vasily Stepanovich!”

“What do you mean, Lesha??” director of the 2nd Directorate of Russian Garment Industry squeaked in a falsetto. “We just shared some lovely mutton last week, it was a wonderful evening!”

“Oooh, you keep going that far back, you’ll start telling me about your grandma. I got some fresh sterlet in today, so – I’m inviting you. Only a sworn enemy would refuse my offer!”

There was laughter on the other end of the line.

“Me, refuse? I’m insulted! So, as usual, at seven? Your place?”

“Where else?! Alright, it’s settled then.”

* * *

The doorbell at Novatory Street rang loudly with a pleasant melody. Aleksey opened the door:

“Come in, dear sir!”

Zinyakov tumbled into the hallway. Short, round-faced, with thin light hair, he looked like a Pillsbury dough-boy. His cheeks were red, his eyebrows – frosted over.

“It bites out there,” he said, catching his breath.

Zinyakov took off his fur coat, skillfully throwing his briefcase from one hand to the other.

“Set your briefcase down, what are you clinging on to it for!”

“I’m not clinging. We’ve become one!” replied Zinyakov with a sly smirk.

“Good Lord, Vasily Stepanovich, come in.”

The friends sat down.

“Let’s do a small one, business shouldn’t be done on an empty stomach!” suggested Aleksey.

The two friends clinked their shot glasses, and threw back a shot of an oily liquid. Zinyakov grabbed a piece of the most tender fresh sterlet with his fork and looked up in bliss.

“Mmmm.. he murmured. “Where do you get this stuff?”

My father savored the freshest greens and gave his friend a sly glance:

“Came in today from Kislovodsk. You won’t find anything like this here.”

“You always knew your food,” noted Zinyakov.

“And not just food! I also know what the two of us really need to think about.”

“And what’s that?” Zinyakov was so preoccupied with food that it seemed that it was the only reason for his visit to Aleksey Babaev.

“We have a problem. The issue of the director of the Grozny association still hasn’t been settled. The presentation was sent over at the beginning of the month, and still – no appointment.”

“What, they turned it down? And the reason?”

“Nooo, that’s the thing – there’s no refusal.”

“So then, what’s the problem?”

“The first Secretary over there suggested his own candidate. So our man isn’t being appointed.”

“Well, that’s something...” drawled out Zinyakov.

He looked perplexed, but not upset. His eyes said “Let’s come up with something”.

My father filled up the glasses again and the friends threw back another shot.

“There’s no way we can influence the first secretary of the local party committee ourselves,” noted Vasily Stepanovich.

“Of course. We need a more valid argument.”

“Alex, I can talk to Gena...” Zinyakov smiled thoughtfully.

“With Brovin?”

“Of course,” nodded Zinyakov. “His call could help. He’s Brezhnev’s aide.”

Aleksey nodded.

“You do understand, that someone will have to be responsible for that phone call?”

Aleksey nodded again.

“Leave that to me. I’ll deal with it.”

“He’ll help resolve this,” said Zinyakov, inspired, like a chess player who’d just won a debut match. “I can motivate the appointment, say that it’s necessary for proper management.”

“It would be better to do that in a relaxed atmosphere,” added Aleksey. “So that you could speak freely with him, get him to understand that Chechnya is a far-off part of the country, and that our candidate would provide the best managerial

possibilities in the region. That would be the right thing to do. Do you think a table at Rossiya Hotel would be an appropriate location?"

"Alex, I have to get him to agree to meet first. I'll suggest it to him. If he agrees – great. I can introduce the two of you as well, if all goes well."

Aleksey nodded.

"Well, good," Zinyakov said in a contented low voice. "I've been meaning to tell you for a while now, Alex, you're a wiz!"

"What do you mean?"

"You can get people to agree to anything!"

"Yup, I'm going to get you to agree to another drink right now! More than one, in fact!" smirked Aleksey.

"Yes!" Zinyakov burst out laughing. "I'm a hard case to crack!"

"Melancholy is a sin! Let's have another small one."

They threw back another shot.

Zinyakov listened and happily smiled.

VI

During my second visit in February I noticed that Lida was acting strange. More quiet than usual.

After dinner, as she was putting away the plates, she said quietly, in an almost embarrassed voice:

“Igor, I’m...in a delicate condition...”

My face became one giant grin as I came over to Lida, hugged and kissed her. Words were unnecessary.

It was as if she felt everything that was going through my mind.

“I’m happy too”, she whispered.

Perhaps the cosmic happiness that fills a woman when she becomes pregnant is simply genetic. But to hear this wonderful news so soon after the wedding – that’s great luck.

She cuddled up to me.

There was almost a full moon out that night. The sky was lit up with the milky light.

I felt deathly tired and fell asleep immediately, and I saw wonderful things in my sleep. I was slipping down an icy hill and then I flew up, high, high up, and I was screaming happily, as if I had grown wings.

The next morning, after breakfast, Lida suddenly said:

“Igor, maybe I should switch to the extramural program?”

“Extramural? Why?”

“Igor, I think that would be better...I won’t be able to study as much as I have been so far.”

She gave me a sly look.

“You have to get a diploma – that’s our goal.”

“Yes, but everything will be more complicated now.”

I began to think aloud:

“Well, there’s still time to decide what’s better. In any case, you can definitely finish out this semester...”

We discussed details for a while but decided that Lida should not give up her studies.

VII

In a cozy room at the Rossiya Hotel restaurant visitors could talk in quiet and without extra eyes looking at them.

Gennadiy Brovin, giant, good-natured, looked smart and fit. He shook father's hand firmly, scanning him with his x-ray-like eyes. Brovin was dressed for success: a well-cut suit, a starched collar, an expensive watch on his wrist – everything pointed to his special status, a resident of mount Olympus. His eyes were dark and expressive. Everything about his exuded power and confidence.

They sat across from each other, like professional poker players. The conversation began with meaningless small talk.

“Just got back from Almaty. It's hot, I must say. You lose weight without even trying.”

Brovin laughed, sharing his travel experiences. Zinyakov listened, nodding.

“And we had five meetings there, imagine that – in four days. Right after that – Ashkhabad. For the local plenary session.”

Aleksey listened without interruption.

Brovin spoke well, clearly and concisely, and most importantly – slowly, creating the impression of a notable man, one who's sure of himself and knows exactly what he wants to say, and one who is sure that he'll be able to convince the other party of anything he sets out to.

An outsider would never have known how close this man is to the powers that be. He knew all the pressure points. And he knew what points to hit in order to get things moving in the direction he desired.

"So how've you been?" asked Brovin, looking over at Zinyakov.

Zinyakov looked indifferent.

"Alright. Things are moving along. There is one question..." He looked at Brovin expectantly and exchanged a quick look with Aleksey. "The general director of the garment manufacturers in Grozny..." He coughed. "There is a good fellow out there, but the first secretary is pushing for his own man. If possible, could you make a call?"

Brovin nodded. The movements of his head often replaced not just words, but entire sentences.

Aleksey added immediately.

"Gennadiy Fedorovich, I know the man. He is a real candidate, someone who won't fail. We need a good manager. There are problems in the industry – and this is a tried-and-true candidate. Here is his resume."

Aleksey handed Brovin a piece of paper. He took it and quickly skimmed the text.

"A good service record," he noted and put the paper in his pocket. "I'll try to help."

Brovin looked at Zinyakov.

"We'll owe you one," said Aleksey.

Brovin lifted his glass.

"And how are things otherwise?"

The men switched back to other topics, the jokes started...
It got dark outside.

“Good!!” Brovin smacked his knee with his hand, signifying the end of the conversation. “Glad to meet you.”

He shook Aleksey’s hand.

* * *

Every time we met or spoke on the phone, my father asked me how business was going.

One time I told him that I was shocked to discover the different characters that worked at the plant.

It turned out that people who struck one as just regular workers at first could be vital in making the place work. It could even be said that they played a key role on the team.

For instance, the delivery supervisor. Just someone who supervises delivery, you’d think. But no!

The plant was small, but back then, ten tons of sausage left the premises on a daily basis. Our senior delivery man, Vyacheslav Seminenko, had two trucks. He loaded each of them with five tons of sausage, went out on deliveries and came back to the plant. Same job, day in, day out.

Sausage is a very particular product, as it contains moisture. Of course, there are natural loss standards. And at the end of each month these losses amounted to a hefty sum. The delivery supervisor worked directly with retailers. And so, over the years he became a very well-connected man. And here I was, in the middle of construction, running into problems every day. Not enough of this, or that, or the other thing.

And he was a crafty fellow. I immediately noticed his business qualities.

So I called him to my office.

“Vyacheslav, listen, I need your help. Someone else will drive the sausage around, while you do something else – we need bricks, cement, fixtures... The work is well on the way, you un-

derstand. You're a business-minded guy. You know it's not easy to get these things in Anapa, and you know people, you can do it."

He nodded quietly.

"Well, okay..."

"So why don't you work on that for now, and then you can get back to the delivery business."

Vyacheslav agreed and began working in this new capacity. I saw that he was quite able to get everything done.

"Semenenko's a smart guy, you know!" I once noted to the chief engineer, who'd come to see me. "It was a right decision to move him to acquisition from delivery."

The chief engineer looked doubtful, but didn't say anything.

A month later Seminenko came to see me.

"Igor Alekseyevich, I've been in acquisitions for a month, everything's been set up, anyone can do the job now – nothing to it, just need to maintain contacts."

"Slava, listen, why don't you stay on that job? We don't have a procurement department, we'll create one just for you, and you'll be next in line for a promotion. With an appropriate salary, of course."

Semenenko looked scared.

At that moment, I didn't understand what that scared look meant.

It didn't take much brains to sell sausage with the current deficit. But procuring construction materials – that's where his talent would really pay off.

"Well?" I asked him again.

He nodded, hesitantly, and left my office.

After that, I got very busy. One meeting after another.

At some point, after one of the meetings, chief engineer Ivan Stepanovich Gudimov, a very decent man, about sixteen years older than me, one who I trusted from the very first day I met him, stopped me.

“Igor, could we stick around for a bit, I need to explain something to you. I have a personal favor to ask.”

Everyone left. He came up to me.

“Igor, give Seminenko his old job back. He’s not a bad guy. And he thinks very highly of you. And he’s getting on in years. Trust me, it’s the right thing to do. Consider it a personal favor to me.”

I looked at him in surprise.

“Ivan Stepanovich, I’m not sure I understand. Who’s the director here? But in any case, I hear what you’re saying.”

He shrugged, as if saying that he did his part and the rest was up to me, and left.

A few days later I got a phone call. It was a direct call from the manager of the City committee industrial department.

“Igor Alekseyevich, come and see me. We have some things to talk about.”

We set a time. I went. He shook my hand happily.

“How are things at the plant? How are the renovations, when will you be done?”

Question after question.

“Not enough staff, the slaughterhouse is working at capacity during the summer months... We’re bringing in cattle from the entire region. And of course, we deliver, not only to Anapa, but to Gelendzhik, Tuapse, Novorossiysk, Sochi... delivery volume is increasing.”

“It’s wonderful that you’re so zealous in your work, Igor Alekseyevich. Wonderful.”

He nodded with approval.

“If you need any assistance from the City committee, do let me know.”

We talked some more about the reconstruction. I got up to leave.

“One more thing,” he stopped me. “There’s a small and rather delicate issue. There’s a Vyacheslav Seminenko work-

ing for you. I have a personal favor to ask. If possible, please give him his old job back.”

At that moment I understood that all this talk about plans and help didn’t mean a thing. The main reason for my being here was this – the last thing he said.

“Yeah,” I thought to myself, recalling my conversation with the chief engineer. “Ivan was right.”

The next time I saw Gudimov, I mentioned my visit to the committee.

“Igor, I told you...Leave it be. Vyacheslav isn’t worth ruining your relationship with the committee,” he said.

I opted not to press the issue. Apparently, this Seminenko meant something in this town. Especially in an era when sausage had almost magical powers.

He brought sausage to the most important people in the city – as gifts and favors. Everyone knew him, everyone was used to him – and no one wanted to see another man in his place. Especially since this tradition went back a long ways before him...

After one of the meetings, I asked Seminenko to stick around.

“Vyacheslav, I don’t want to comment on what’s going on with you. We’re mid-season now, just finish out the season and go back to your old job, but help me for now.”

“Igor Alekseyevich, please understand, that’s how it’s done around here. I didn’t come up with it. I didn’t ask for it, it’s been going on this way for a very long time. People noticed my absence.”

“Okay. But keep in mind – the plant feeds all of us. We have to finish the reconstruction. And please, not a kilo of sausage is to vanish without my knowledge.”

I’ve made my point. The times of freedom and lawlessness that existed at the plant before my arrival were officially over.

My father had taught me to work hard and to find my way in any situation from a very young age. This was all very help-

ful now. The ability to invest yourself in everything, to treat this plant as if it was your own personal project – all of this gave me the energy that allowed me to win many victories.

I risked a lot to accomplish what I had set out to do, to build something where no one else had wanted to build, to take what many had wanted – but only a few chosen ones could take.

Motivated by a premonition of luck, I was diving in head first without really thinking, led by my father's blessing and youthful passion.

* * *

Despite the fact that my thoughts were preoccupied with the plant's reconstruction, I kept thinking about Lida. What was she doing? How was she dealing with our constant separation? Does she feel me thinking about her at this very second?

Lida's face kept appearing before my eyes. In the dark, I could see her as clearly as if she was right next to me – her high clear forehead, her dainty small nose, her lips, pursed in a small smile, her large almond-shaped eyes. I felt closer to her; I felt her reciprocity, her devotion

Such thoughts gave me strength, an explosion of emotions. All the best moment of our lives smiled at me along with her and kept me warm with loving tenderness.

My feelings were very strong – it was as if I felt drawn to her. But even to this day I sometimes think that she loved me more than I loved her. Her internal warmth was greater than mine, manifold.

It so happened, that when I came to Kislovodsk, I never spent the night on Kotykhin Street, at my parents' place – always at Mikhailovs', on Gogol Street. It was as if I was kidnapped from Babaevs! It was funny, but that's what happened – the wife didn't come to live with me, but rather the husband moved in with his wife.

I must say that I was more comfortable at Mikhailovs.

VIII

So, tell me, how are things?” my father began. I came to see him at his hotel room during his visit to Kuban. He was in an especially good mood. Kept joking. There was food on the table. Aleksey Naumovich was expecting visitors. We sat down, chatting, sharing our news.

I laughed.

“If I start talking – I won’t be able to stop! I never thought that was possible.”

Father looked at me with curiosity. He always closely followed how I was doing.

“What are you talking about?”

“If I think back to what I was taught in college, what all those babbling theoreticians said about plant management, well, it turns out they know as much about it as I do about the Moon.”

“Where would they know that stuff from?” my father agreed. “They spend all their days at their department, trying

to figure out which is the smartest of them all. So, what happened?”

“Eh, there was this thing recently...I sort of noticed this one girl among our workers...Tall, thin, pretty...”

“Well, don’t you just remind me of someone,” smiled my father.

I threw a piece of herring into my mouth and went silent for a bit.

“And?” my father asked with great interest. His eyes lit up.

“And, so, I’m walking with our chief engineer Gudimov through the plant, and I see her walking towards us. Just making eyes at me. Well, so she’s walking and walking. But see, I can’t stop staring at her breasts – just recently, they were normal, and now they’re just impossibly giant! So I’m coming back from the slaughterhouse, it’s separate from the other buildings, on the outskirts of town. I walk by her, I just don’t get it. So I told our security, “Guys, can you take a look at that girl? Something’s going on, take a look,” – and I kept walking.”

My father’s eyes sparkled mischievously.

“I did my rounds, I talked to my deputies, to the department managers. So I’m walking back, and there’s some sort of commotion at the entrance, security officers are all standing around a table, and that girl, Lenochnka, is sitting in a chair, bawling her eyes out and writing something. “What happened here?” – I ask. “See here, she was trying to sneak out sixteen kilograms of meat in her bra. Just stuffed her shirt full of it.” I’m looking at this beauty in amazement. Dad, our meat from the fridge – it’s like pure ice!! I couldn’t even find the words. What kind of torture did she subject herself to? “My God, Lenochnka,” I said,” What are you doing? You’ll kill yourself!” Can you imagine that?” I looked at my dad, laughing.

“And what did you do?”

“I told them to deal with it, to give her a good scolding, but not to fire her. Not necessary.”

“Oh, Igor!”

“She’s just so pretty! If she was a man, I would’ve fired him in a heartbeat!”

My father burst out laughing.

In general, we fired all thieves on the spot. The plant occasionally had people control raids, plus we had the Department Against the Misappropriation of Socialist Property keep an eye out – thought that didn’t really help much, people kept stealing small quantities, and I was unmerciful in punishing them. But yes, there were some exceptions.

* * *

I was aware of the fact that no matter how drastically I wanted to change things at the plant, it wasn’t a secluded desert oasis. Its entire life was firmly rooted in the socialist economic system. Its crooked laws kept bringing to the surface moments of such oddity that one wouldn’t believe they were possible until one experienced them firsthand. You walk around the plant, you watch how everything is done, you encounter regular people, each with their own fate, and you begin to understand life just a little bit better.

* * *

Lida called me sometime in early June.

“I passed all of my exams,” she blurted out.

When news are good, they’re good for all. I grinned.

“Congratulations.”

Lida paused, waiting.

“Igor!”

“What’s up?”

“Igor, are you not hearing me at all? I didn’t get married to live far away from my husband. I want to live with my husband. We’re a family, we’re going to have a child soon, we have to be together.”

“But you know the conditions here...The apartment is still being renovated.”

“Are you talking about those renovations again?” her voice hinted at imminent protest.

It seemed that she was about to start crying.

“You know that I don’t have a decent place to live here.”

“I’ll be fine with whatever you have.”

“I don’t “have” anything at the moment.”

“That’s nonsense! I’m moving in with you.”

She hung up. The beeping phone line sounded like her victorious “hooray” in my brain.

“My wife will be coming soon,” I said to Gudimov later that evening. “I must get ready for her arrival.”

“If you need help with anything, you just let me know, Igor Alekseyevich!”

“Nah, I don’t need anything, I’ve gotten almost everything done. Why are you smiling like that, Gudimov?”

“It’s nothing, Igor Alekseyevich. I think your freedom’s just about run out, is all.”

* * *

The plant had its own tourist base by the sea, in Bimluyk. About thirty small houses that were owned by the Ministry of Meat and Milk Industry.

We moved into one of those houses, not a very comfortable place – a stove in the corner, that Lida used for cooking, a hot room, an outhouse for a bathroom, and a shower shared with the neighbors.

“Here, Lidochka,” I said, walking Lida into the room. “This is our home. This is where you’ll make your nest.”

* * *

Lida had changed, gotten rounder, her face was glowing. We were together, and she didn’t care about anything else.

Every evening she waited for me to get home. Supper was always ready on the table...

She was in her element here, a domestic goddess. All of that coupled with her being eighteen years old made her absolutely irresistible.

We often talked about our future. Lida never made important decisions without thinking them through.

That morning I had just sat down at the table when Lida said:

“Igor, we have to talk.”

I looked at her with curiosity.

“I thought about my studies... I have to switch to an extramural program.”

“What’s the problem? Withdraw from your current program, make the switch.”

“I have to figure out what to switch to, what’s the best way of doing this.”

The thing was, that the only university with an extramural pharmacology program was located in Perm.

“It’s probably not that easy to get in,” I said, thinking out loud. “But that’s not even the point. Look at where we are, and where Perm is! Can you imagine it?”

“Why not?” Lida was surprised.

“How will you get there?”

“But it’s only twice a year! And after all, planes do still fly!”

“But you’ll be the one flying,” I said, pointing to Lida’s growing belly.

“So, I’ll be the one flying if I must,” she said stubbornly. “I’ll get my documents together and go there. Will you help me?”

Instead of answering, I got up and walked over to her.

Her hair smelled like the sea. I was in a hurry, but still, against my will, I touched her and my whole body felt an electric shock.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“I knew, I knew that you would!” she exclaimed.

“Okay,” I looked at my watch. “And now, I must run.”

* * *

The summer season had started and I was stuck at the plant round the clock.

“Lida, I won’t be able to go with you,” I told her after a couple of days.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because of work! But I took care of everything.”

“Tell me!” Lida’s eyes lit up.

“I called Chelokyan, explained the situation to him, asked for his advice, and he said he will help. So, don’t worry.”

“What should I do?”

“He gave me all the addresses and phone numbers.”

I smiled victoriously.

“So, everything has been decided?” asked Lida.

I nodded happily.

“All the formalities have been taken care of. You can go there now.”

Lida threw her arms around my neck, and suddenly her face looked frightened.

“Igor, what if they don’t accept me?”

“Don’t be silly! I told you, everything will be taken care of.”

“Taken care of, sure, but what if something goes wrong? You remember the kinds of grumblers who usually work at a dean’s office?”

“You’ll charm them,” I whispered, kissing her.

We were alone. You could hear the sound of the sea outside our window. The wind sent ripples down to the shore. Only in the mornings is the world so indescribably beautiful, so expectant of happiness and full of hope.

IX

The clock on the wall struck noon just as the phone rang. The man in the office flinched. The ring was authoritative and decisive. He picked up the receiver. The secretary, in a worried tone, informed him:

“Vasily Stepanovich, the first secretary of the Grozny regional committee wants to talk to you.”

Zinyakov stood up in his chair.

“Connect me.”

The line rustled, and then a dull, unemotional voice came through on the other end of the line.

“Vasily Stepanovich, good day.”

“Good afternoon, Alexander Ivanovich,” Zinyakov’s voice sounded cautious.

“We looked at your candidate and have found him to be satisfactory. Thank you for taking initiative.”

The first secretary's voice continued to be dispassionate.

"Thank you. I think this is a very important step for the industry. A leap in development. I'm grateful that you understand our position on the subject."

"Yes, all the best," the first secretary's voice was dry. "Goodbye."

Setting down the receiver, a glowing Zinyakov pressed a button.

"Aleksey!"

"I'm here."

"Alex, the first secretary just called from Grozny. We got the go-ahead."

"Well, that's some news!! Our friend's magical call?"

"Yes. Tomorrow he'll meet with our man out there. They'll introduce him to the team. It's done, Alex!"

"Our Gena is a miracle worker. Thank God everything went smoothly."

"You're a miracle worker too, Alex," Zinyakov's voice got warmer. "People are ready to do absolutely anything for you."

"Anything or not, this calls for a celebration!"

Zinyakov smiled. When Aleksey got involved, everything went as it should, and there was never cause for extra headache.

* * *

I took Lida to the airport in Krasnodar myself. We passed endless fields, filled with sunshine. Everything seemed so pure, so fragile and unique.

She had almost no luggage. Before we reached the security check-point, I stopped and hugged her. She cuddled up to me with her entire body and touched my cheek with hers.

"Unshaven."

"I'll forget my own head soon with this job. Oh, what's this now?" I hugged her. "Are you shivering?"

"I'm a little scared."

Lida was shivering. I hugged her, held her close. I felt that at that moment, nothing else existed in the entire world. Like a needle is pulled to a magnet...

"You're prickly," she said.

"Wait." I tried to look serious. "Do you remember everything? Who to see, what to say?"

"I do, I know it all..."

I almost opened my mouth to tell her everything all over again, but an airport employee began to hurry us along. I kissed Lida.

"Alright then, have a good trip."

She turned around, her thick gorgeous hair flying behind her.

I watched as she went through security, then entered the waiting hall, full of other passengers. She looked like the Virgin Mary, in her light cotton dress, with a slightly protruding belly.

I stood there for a while, thinking about her, about me. The departure hall emptied out. I came out of my trance, looked around, smiled.

I looked up at the sky when I got to the parking deck – a plane was flying overhead, maybe the one with my Lida. Its silver trail became less and less visible, until it vanished completely.

The sky was endlessly blue once again. The sky that has no trace of our earthly life, the sky without time, pain, or sadness.

Sky eternal.

The world seemed shockingly transparent, light and happy, as if it was getting ready to welcome the bundle of joy that was growing inside Lida.

When I got back to Anapa, the town seemed empty and cold without her.

* * *

Lida later told me what she first thought of that city. There was a constant burning smell in the air. Even the wind that should've carried that smell away smelled burnt.

There was an oil refinery plant in Perm.

The road from the airport went past it.

The faces of the locals were imprinted with the suffering that their ancestors were subjected to, having escaped from the European part of Russian to this end of the world place due to various, and often unpleasant, circumstances.

The eyes of the local girls didn't sparkle, like they did for every single girl out in Kuban.

Their cheeks didn't have a healthy blush, their eyelashes weren't thick and flirtatious, causing inexplicable longing in a man's soul, there were no braids as thick as your arm here.

Such was the city where Lida was going to go to college.

The university was located in a former merchant house. A high stairwell with worn down steps led up to the main entrance.

The walls were dirty and covered in graffiti.

Lida, in her pretty dress, so alive and direct in her approach, seemed out of place here. Feeling extremely shy, she entered the dean's office.

"Good afternoon, I'm Lidiya Babaeva."

The office women lifted their heads in surprise.

"It's about my transfer. Here is my paperwork."

"Come over here," an elderly woman sitting next to the window called out to Lida.

"You were supposed to get a phone call," Lida said timidly. "I'm Babaeva."

The secretary studied Lida for a moment and then nodded, thoughtfully.

"Yes, we were told about you." She got up, slowly and heavily. You could tell that there was a problem with her legs. "Come with me," she said.

She led Lida into the main office.

"Can I have your paperwork?" said the dean's assistant.

"Okay, here you go," Lida complacently opened her bag and began taking out papers.

"Records, transcripts, other college paperwork. No rush, there's plenty of time!" the woman smiled.

"Where are you from?" she looked at Lida's belly.

"From Pyatigorsk. Rather, from Kislovodsk. I was studying in Pyatigorsk, but, well, you see...My husband and I decided it was better to transfer to an extramural program."

"Right, right," said the dean's assistant. "You'll see. We have wonderful instructors. They'll send you everything, all the assignments, explain everything. Don't worry."

Lida nodded.

"I assure you, there won't be any issues with the program of study. Sign here, and you can go."

Lida signed.

"What's your relationship to our director?"

"What director?"

"The director of our meat plant. He called about you, asked that we help you."

Lida looked at the dean's assistant in confusion.

"Alright," the woman interrupted the awkward pause and put Lida's paperwork into a folder.

"That's it!"

"What do you mean, that's it?"

"That's it!" the woman smiled kindly. "Everything is fine. You signed the transfer request. You can go home now. Unless you want to stay here, of course."

Lida was amazed and her face showed it.

"We'll let you know about exams. Don't worry."

"Thank you so much. You're so..." Lida couldn't find the right words to express her gratitude. "Thank you so much, again."

Her face was glowing with happiness.

* * *

“Igor, I did it!”

I was swept off my feet with a wave of happiness from hearing her voice on the other end of the line.

“Were are you calling from?”

“The airport.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m flying back.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Nothing! I was transferred. Everyone at the dean’s office was so nice!”

“I told you, and you were scared they wouldn’t be!”

“Who is the director of the local meat plant? They asked me at the dean’s office how I knew him.”

I thought for a second.

“Oh, him...” I laughed. “Chelokyan called him and asked him to help you with the transfer. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh that is so great!” exclaimed Lida. “Thank you. Now I just have to wait for my flight.”

“When is it?”

“In seven hours.”

“Are you crazy? Go to a hotel. Why are you spending the night at the airport?”

“I don’t want to go to a hotel. This city is awful, there’s smoke everywhere. I can barely breathe there. It’s better here.”

“Well, alright. If you want, I can book you a room at a hotel.”

“Don’t. I know you can do anything! But I’d rather wait here than spend the night in some awful hotel.”

Her sweet voice was music to my ears.

“Do you miss me?”

“Lidusia! I miss you so much and was incredibly worried.”

“Well, now you know – nothing to worry about.”

“How are you feeling? How’s your belly?”

“Everything is fine.”

We said our good-byes. I was in the best mood, now that the situation with Perm had been so wonderfully resolved.

X

It was the middle of June. I was running around between the plant, the tourist base in Bimlyuk, the airport, and the train station.

Crowds of people flooded the South in the summer, including “special guests” – important people who had to be met personally by me. To miss these meetings would’ve been equal to suicide.

People, regardless of their social standing, are all the same. Everyone wants respect. If you get on someone’s good side, one day you’ll be repaid for your efforts. So it was important that they noticed not only what you’ve done for them, but also that you cared.

That was something I’d learned from my father.

“There goes another god!” joked chauffeurs who were picking up my guests at the airport.

“Where, where? Who?”

“That one right there, the fat one!”

“Which? The bald one?”

“You’re an idiot. The bald one is just a department manager. It’s that one, the one with the short legs.”

“Seriously? Who told you?”

“I’m telling you. Look at that cash sticking out of his pocket. And the address he’s going to – Old Square. You see?”

The young chauffeur nodded.

Of course when I looked at my guests, I didn’t think about whether they were good or bad, I thought about whether they got a warm welcome. Were they happy with everything? I chatted with them day and night, forgetting about Saturdays and time off. The success of the plant, as well as your personal success, in this era of deficit was dependent on establishing the right relationships with people.

* * *

The summer heat was intolerable. Even the nearby sea didn’t help.

I was in my office, feeling an adrenaline rush. Annoyed, I threw aside a report from the refrigeration manager, whom I’d just kicked out of my office. When you work in production, more often than not you see that people only understand brute force.

“Igor Alekseyevich, excuse me, Moscow’s calling. Kornysushko”, my secretary whispered, poking her head through the door.

I nodded and picked up the receiver.

“Good day! I’m listening.”

“Hello, Igor! I hope things are going well? Listen, there’s this thing, my wife is planning on going to Anapa. She goes every year.” His voice became very serious. “Could you set it up?”

“Do you even have to ask? Everything will be top notch. Don’t even worry.”

“You know, she likes the quieter areas.”

“Of course, of course.”

“Good, then I’ll stop worrying. Igor, if you need something other than the Kutors for your renovations – call me, we’ll see what we can do for you.”

“I’m all set for now.”

“Wonderful, but I’ll say it again – if you need anything, call. Don’t be shy.”

I said goodbye warmly and hung up.

There were a lot of guests at the tourist base during the high season. Each of them required personal attention. That wasn’t easy.

No matter how late it was, every time one of the guests saw me, they felt obligated to call me over:

“Igor Alekseyevich, come, join us at the table!”

“Igor Alekseyevich,” someone else would yell out from the other end of the street, “don’t forget about us! You can’t only think about work!”

Invitations were thrown at me from all sides.

“Come on by!”

“Look at how lovely this evening is. It’s like a special gift from above!”

“And the air! How great the air is out here!” the voice of some important Moscow bureaucrat’s wife would chime in.

These people’s vacations were a part of my job, and a part that I invested my heart and soul in.

One time, my friend Valera Baranov came to visit me.

He was the director of the Moscow Meat and Milk Production plant, and his main business was delivering equipment and materials necessary for sausage production. A gregarious guy and a constant flirt, he always came down south with his girlfriend. This time, for some reason, he came alone.

I organized a picnic. Invited Valera, Kornuyshko’s wife. People that ran in the same circles, so I thought it would be good to get them together.

We drove pretty far from the city, where there was no signs of civilization, only nature in its most pristine form.

A most picturesque spot, right by the sea. A wild beach. Steep hanging cliffs, going down right to the water. Peace and quiet.

Tables were already set in the shade, the grills were going – meat was marinating in onions, ready to be barbecued.

“Wow! What a reception! Welcome to the “In a Ditch” restaurant!” exclaimed someone.

Everyone laughed.

“I’m ready to move to this particular ditch and live out the rest of my days here!”

“You won’t make it to next year – you’ll explode from all the food!”

Jokes were coming in from all sides, everyone was having a great time, relaxing, forgetting their stressful jobs. Everyone but me.

But I loved moments like these. Something primordial woke up inside of me, something to do with fire and meat, with life in all of its most majestic forms.

We sat down at the table and started on the appetizers. The smell of marinated meat on the grill was tantalizing. My God, the smells were unimaginable. Laughter, jokes. Life seemed so wonderful.

“I’d like to make a toast! I second that wish! Let’s drink to our women!” the men joyfully interrupted each other.

“We’ll drink to men!” replied the women.

We lifted our glasses.

Only when you’re young and life seems beautiful, and nothing looms ahead other than calm happiness – only then can you feel this way. We were almost possessed.

Ah, those were the times. The guests laughed, chatted...

“Listen to my joke,” said someone...

And so it went on and on. Jokes, laughter, peppered tongues and peppered meat...

“So this one time, Pete goes to Chapayev and asks....” the end of the story drowned in laughter.

“And you, madam, what will you be drinking?” Valera asked Kostyushko’s wife.

She stood out among the other women at the picnic. A glamorous blonde of about 35. Her face was almost perfect, one of those faces you’d expect to see on the cover of a fashion magazine, with delicate features, a slightly upturned nose and almond-shaped eyes of the deepest blue.

She was chic in the way common for society women, used to getting men’s attention. But she had a special kind of aura about her – something light, tender, that made one was to admire her. With a look of a bored aristocrat she listened to the jokes the men were making, many of them quite crude. She did not react. She occasionally looked over at me with a look that reminded me of a naïve child at Christmas, wondering if Santa is coming – will there be anything else interesting?

She didn’t hear Valera right away, didn’t understand that he was addressing her.

She looked at him as if he wasn’t even there and gave a light smile.

“Thank you, I don’t drink.”

“No, no, that won’t do, come on, mademoiselle! Are you here to relax or what?” Valera’s eyes twinkled.

“Hey, hey, Valera,” I reined him in. “Be polite.”

He winked at me, as if to say, don’t worry old boy, it’ll be alright.

I shook my head in disapproval.

Stealing a moment when everyone else seemed occupied by another joke, I took him aside.

“Why are you flirting with that girl?”

“Igor, what’s gotten into you?” Valera looked at me in surprise.

"It's not what's gotten into me, it's what's gotten into you. Do you know whose wife that is?"

"Who cares? I'm not exactly proposing marriage here."

"Listen, it's Kostyushko's wife. Don't even think about pulling that again."

The wind messed up my hair. Valera looked insulted.

"You quit this stuff, you got it?" I lost my temper. "I'm serious, it won't end well."

"Igor, what's wrong with you?"

"You stop this, and you stop this right now. We're not here to pick up broads. You get me?!"

"I got it, I got it..."

Valera muttered something else and was polite for about five minutes. But the evening was just starting. Soon I saw him pick up right where he left off.

"Mademoiselle, which do you like better?" he started flirting with the poor woman again. "Three stars or four stars?"

Happy with his own joke, Valera laughed.

"I'm talking about the Big Dipper, by the way, not about cognac!"

He laughed again. My guest smiled dryly and looked over at me in confusion. But at that moment other guests needed my attention and I briefly forgot about Valera and Korniyushko's wife.

Evening set in. The sun jumped into the sea.

Night had risen from the dark depths of the sea and was settling in on land. We began getting our belongings – together.

"Something's missing," I thought.

I looked around. Valera was nowhere to be found. And neither was Korniyushko's wife.

"Hm. That's weird," I thought.

I began looking over the cliffs. Many of them were quite steep.

“Have you seen Valera?” I asked someone.

“He was somewhere around here.”

“Damn it. Alright, stay here. I’ll go look for him myself.”

I went in search of Valera.

“Where is Sveta? Kornyushko’s wife?” I asked the girl that was sitting next to her.

“She was just here, I dunno,” she said drunkenly.

“Just here, just there...Where did she go?!”

I caught someone else from the group.

“Hey listen, have you seen Sveta, Kornyushko’s wife?”

“Who?” the man looked at me with the dumbest possible smile, as if I’d just asked him if there’s life on Mars.

Right.

I left the group. Many of them were already having so much fun, that nothing else mattered to them.

I, on the other hand, found myself very uncomfortable with the situation.

“Where is Valera? Find him!” I yelled.

The loud group looked at me in confusion.

“Igor, what’s up?”

“He’s not a kid, you know.”

“Damn him to hell!”

“How are we going to find him? Valeraaa! Where areeee youuu?”

“Never mind the lot of you!” I started running along the shore.

“Igor!” I heard behind me. “Come on, what’s the big deal! We’re not his babysitters!”

And then I heard:

“There he is!”

“Where?”

“Right there!”

The guests were pointing in the direction opposite to where I was going. I stared. Valera’s large figure came out of

the dark. Staggering, he was trying to make his way to the campfire. I ran to him.

“Where is what’s her name?” I was so worried that the name of my guest escaped me.

“How should I know?”

“What do you mean, how should you know, you were hitting on her all night.”

“I was just talking. And then she disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared? Where did she go?”

“I mean...vanished.”

“That makes no sense! Did she go for a swim?”

“Nah, she ran off somewhere over there,” a woman from the group drunkenly waved in some direction.

I ran along the shore. Of course, I didn’t find anyone.

“Go to hell!” I thought angrily. “You’ll show up. Where else would you go?”

We decided to drink more. I looked at my watch.

“What? It’s midnight!”

“Let’s do another shot! A small one!”

“Listen to this joke...”

The festivities did not stop.

Someone touched me on the arm, I turned around sharply. It was one of the guests.

“Why are you so jumpy?” he asked.

“Where is Kornushko’s wife?” I yelled.

“How should we know? She’s not a little girl. She’ll be back.”

“Listen, Valera!” I turned to my friend. “Tell me honestly, where is your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. And I haven’t seen her.”

Valera was drunkenly hiccuping and wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

“You better be honest with me!” I screamed at him.

“Maybe she went for a walk and got lost?”

“Heh, she’s not the type to ever get lost. She’ll be back. Where’s she going to go?” someone suggested.

We walked around the shoreline, yelling and calling her, for about twenty minutes. The woman was nowhere to be found.

I began to look towards the cliffs, as my head started filling with unpleasant thoughts. What if she fell? Went to climb up a cliff and slipped? Or maybe, something else happened....a million possibilities...

Overcome with worry, I looked over the cold rocks. Thoughts of death were sobering me up.

“Igor, why are you so on edge?” someone asked.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, not even knowing what to think. “It’s 4 am. Where is my guest?”

The search had almost completely sobered us up.

“Let’s go home,” someone started whining.

“How can we go home without her?!”

“Come on, let’s just go!”

I didn’t know what to do.

Suddenly, the bushes near the fire rustled and out she came, Kurnyushko’s wife. It was a miracle. I was so happy that at first I almost ran over to hug her. Then again, on second thought, my Babaev blood began to boil.

Livid, I ran over. I’m going to hit her so hard right now, she’ll never forget it.

Pale, she saw my twisted face, got scared, started mumbling something.

“Let’s go!!” I yelled at her.

We got into the cars. The “lovely mademoiselle” was quiet the entire ride back.

When we got to Anapa, she pulled me aside and whispered.

“I must apologize to you. I was so frightened yesterday. Your friend...” she hesitated. “He was so persistent in his flirtation...”

“Valera?”

“So I just hid. To be safe.”

That’s how that story ended. She flew back home, taking her memories of a warm southern welcome with her.

I couldn’t help fearing that she may tell her husband what had happened. I couldn’t even imagine the scandal that would ensue.

Kornyushko called some time later and thanked me for my help, said that his wife was perfectly happy with her vacation. I was amazed. What a woman! Not a word, not even to her husband.

Still, life back then was like one continuous festival. Yalta, Anapa, Sochi – they were holiday cities. And the stories that happened to us there were holiday stories.

* * *

Sometimes I’d be coming home quite drunk, after spending the evening with some vacationing bureaucrat from Moscow.

“Your work will kill you, Igor,” sadly sighed Lida on those types of nights.

One time she greeted me with a question.

“Igor, who do you think we’re having?”

“Either a boy or a girl.”

She laughed.

“Come on, I’m serious.”

“Don’t torture yourself with futile questions. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Back then, there were no ultrasounds, and the sex of the baby remained a mystery till birth.

Lida was six months pregnant already. And the future loomed ahead.

“I already know how we’ll set up the baby’s room in our new apartment! You know, we can buy a cupboard. I saw one

at so-and-so's place, she named one of my acquaintances. Have you found out, will they be done with the apartment soon?

"They report to me daily. It'll be done soon."

Lida went on dreaming about the future.

Sometimes, when I was quiet for a while, she'd notice and try to figure out why.

"Tell me what you're thinking?"

"To stay with you for a whole week and do nothing else."

"That would be great."

"Hey, what's that bag over there?"

"I went to the market today."

"Are you crazy?" I lifted up the bag, feeling how heavy it was. "Carrying something so heavy! You're not supposed to."

"It's not a big deal. I'm strong."

"No, you stop that."

Lida listened as she put on mascara.

I was sure that she paid no attention to my comments until she said a second later:

"Well, okay, I won't go to the market alone anymore."

Sometimes I watched Lida's face, when she couldn't see me looking at her, and was amazed at how charming she always looked, without trying, without having to do a thing to accomplish it. This made me feel something so deep for her that I wasn't quite sure how to express it in words.

"Do you want to give birth in Anapa? That's a bad idea."

"What's a good one?"

"The best thing would be to give birth at home. With your mother there. There will be help, and they'll take care of you. We have none of that here."

"Alright."

She nodded.

"I'm dying from the heat. Let's keep the doors open."

That summer was very hot. No one knew what air conditioning was back then.

“Let’s go to the shore. Go for a swim,” Lida suggested.

“I’m always at the shore.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

We got up simultaneously, almost knocking heads, laughed, and ran to the beach.

Lida walked up to the water and squatted. She wet her hands in the sea, washed her face.

“Let’s go swimming?”

“Are you allowed to go swimming?”

“Water’s the only place to hide in this heat.”

Lida started picking up small stones and throwing them into the water.

“I want a watermelon.”

“I’ll buy one tonight.”

“I want one now.”

“Here’s a replacement for you.”

I poured some sunflower seeds into her hand.

“I want to have just as many diamonds!” Lida laughed.

“Just wait. You’ll be showered with gifts after you give birth.”

It began to get dark. The sun disappeared. A refreshing breeze came in from the water, the air was fresh and clear.

We held each other’s hand and entered the dark water. After the hot air it seemed cold.

“Aaaa!!!” Lida screamed, shuddering.

“What, is it cold?” I laughed.

Slowly, we went in until the water was up to our shoulders and started swimming.

The exhaustion vanished immediately. It seemed to be that something important entered our soul when we entered the water – purity that I needed so much back then, something to wash off all of my meetings, greetings, official dinners, receptions – the unavoidable attributes of my work.

XI

After another meeting, after tearing into some careless workers right on the production floor, I was on my way back to my office. As soon as I got in and sat down, barely having a second to catch my breath, my intercom rang.

“Igor Alekseyevich, Georgiy Georgievich Chelokyan would like to talk to you!”

“Transfer the call to me.”

A second later, Chelokyan’s somewhat muffled but warm voice was heard on the other end of the line.

“Hello, Igor. How are things going over there?”

“Things are well, Georgiy Georgievich.”

“High season, huh? I can hear it in your voice.”

I smiled.

“Somewhat, yes. But everything is under control.”

“Listen, I have a small favor to ask of you. Can you please welcome someone going on vacation out there – general director of Moscow Meat, Soldatov.”

“No problem. I’ll welcome him personally.”

“He’s a normal guy, not very capricious, just help him get some rest and relax.”

“Georgiy Georgievich, don’t worry.”

“Igor, be attentive.” Chelokyan warned me. “He’s a very good man. He’s been so overloaded with work lately that I’m actually worried about him. He really needs a good rest, and to not think about work. It’s one of those cases where you need to welcome this man and get him back into a normal state.”

“I’ll be here, with bells on, and everything will be top-notch!” I promised Chelokyan.

He kindly wished me luck in putting up with my guests’ demands, and we said our goodbyes.

* * *

I personally went to pick up Soldatov at the airport.

I was standing at arrivals. People kept coming out. Different people. Thin, fat, sparkling eyes, tired, but all of them in anticipating of their vacation.

Suddenly I noticed a large man. Dull eyes, not paying attention to anyone around him. Despite the heat – dressed up, in a suit and tie, with a brief-case.

I tried to come up with his psychological profile, to guess his personality traits. On the outside, he seemed an important man, sure of himself. What was he like, really?

I came up to him.

“Yuri Ivanovich!” I addressed him officially, “Good afternoon. I’m Igor Babaev.”

He smiled kindly.

“Yuri Soldatov.”

He extended his hand and I noticed a dull sparkle of an expensive watch on his wrist.

I looked around. People usually go on vacation in pairs – with wives, mistresses, but here...

“Are you alone? Or are we waiting for someone?”

“No-no, I’m alone,” he grumbled.

We got into the car. I thought, in passing, yup, no need to bring coats to Newcastle. This man needs a vacation. And I know just the thing.

I observed him from the corner of my eye – he was obviously a heavy-hitter. But he barely looked around. Closed off.

“We’re here,” I said.

“It’s not bad, what you’ve got here,” he looked around for the first time.

“Once you learn your way around, you’ll like it even better. Why don’t you get settled in, and I’ll come pick you up in the evening.”

“Thank you,” he warmly shook my hand, again.

“What do you think of our guest?” I asked the driver on our way back to the plant.

“A strong man. It’s obvious right away,” replied the driver.

“Strong,” I thought. “That’s precisely the right word.”

* * *

That very evening I took him out to dinner in a restaurant, to celebrate his arrival. Soldatov sat at the head of the table. We drank, talked a lot – about the business, about how things were going.

“And how are things here? Getting better?” Soldatov asked me once we’d finished with the formalities. The moon had just come out, lighting up the night sky.

I shrugged.

“I sometimes feel like a magician who’d forgotten which hat contains the rabbit, and which is empty,” I laughed.

He liked my little joke and immediately started joking back.

The conversation flowed.

“And how’s your experiment going?” he asked a little while later. “Did you finally see that nothing is like you expected it to be?”

I shook my head.

“I knew the plant was complicated when I took it on, but that it’s this complicated....?!”

We both burst out laughing.

“A lot of energy is needed to get things really going out here. That’s why you got this gig.”

Soldatov smiled softly, grabbing a piece of the most delicious salmon with his fork.

I didn’t like discussing what went on before me, so I just quietly nodded.

“It’s obvious what you inherited here,” he pressed on.

“But it’s Anapa.” I couldn’t contain myself. “The Black Sea. One could really get things going out here. When I saw that, I couldn’t turn it down. It was a challenge – and I accepted it.”

I wanted Soldatov to understand my motives. And I thought that eventually he did.

“Support is an important thing”, I thought as I walked him to his hotel room.

A few days flew by.

I showed the plant to my guest. He saw almost all the departments and facilities.

We enjoyed some trips outside of town, barbecued, laughed, talked. We felt like schoolboys cutting school.

I saw for the first time how light-heartedly he could laugh, as if the weight of his responsibilities and cares had been lifted.

He kept patting me on the back and making jokes.

Well-rested and somewhat drunk, we went back to the hotel. I walked my guest to his room.

"Yura, there are...girls in the room. You have a good time," I said to him as I was leaving, and went home.

* * *

A day later Vasily came to my office. He was the one who'd brought those two girls to the hotel.

"Hi, Igor. I was passing by and decided to stop in. My mother-in-law is flying in today, it'd be great to get her some sausage for her vacation. Help."

"Of course, Vasily. Was everything alright the day before yesterday, by the way?"

"Oh. Well, you can say that it was, indeed, alright."

"Meaning?"

"The girls said he came in and passed out. And that was it."

"Wow. Guess he must've gone too drunk..."

* * *

On Soldatov's fourth day in Anapa I said to him:

"Yuri Ivanovich, let's go to a banya."

Back then the banya was an almost ritualistic spot for important meetings.

Keeping things polite and brief (a quality that clearly appealed to the powers that be), one could get a lot accomplished at the banya.

The men became relaxed and cordial, as they sat around in clouds of steam.

After the banya I walked Yuri Ivanovich to his room, as he seemed a little drunk.

"Let's have a drink, Igor. I'm in an odd mood..."

We sat down, had a drink, began chatting about something...

Suddenly I felt his hand on my knee.

There are different ways to touch someone. I can put my hand on someone's knee as an expressive gesture. But this was different. This felt as if I'd just been scalded by boiling water. I jumped up.

What just happened?!

Soldatov was quiet, as if nothing had.

I ran out of his room.

The next day, when we saw each other, I noticed a shadow of embarrassment in the way he looked at me, but didn't say anything.

I showed him the plant. Told him what used to be here, what was here now, explained my plans for the future.

Soldatov watched me with interest. I could see that my ideas interested him.

After we made the rounds, I set the table in my office.

We drank a little. Soldatov relaxed.

"Igor, tell me. Are you afraid of making mistakes?"

For a second there, I was flabbergasted.

"Honestly, I try not to think about it."

"I was much like you when I first started," smirked Soldatov. "One part of me was constantly whispering 'Do whatever you want, kid! Fortune favors the brave!'" While another nagged: "be careful!". I think I recognize my younger self in you."

"If I have a role model at all," I admitted freely, "it would be my father."

"And what about the whole not dying at work concept?"

"You know, I'm not afraid of that. What are we if not our work?"

Soldatov nodded approvingly.

"Yes-yes, sometimes we tend to pursue something made-up, indulge a vain hope. And then our sad life experience stops us in our tracks, and we've got nothing left to say. And that's what life's made of."

He paused.

“If I hadn’t met you, I never would’ve thought that something could be done here. But I do believe that you will succeed. Your predecessors did not have your gusto.”

He chuckled. When we were saying our goodbyes, he shook my hand and said:

“If you ever need help – let me know, we’ll help you.”

I must say that he turned out to be a man of his word. We developed a decent business relationship. And due to the plant’s reconstruction, this was very important to me.

I asked for his help quite often later on. When I needed something, I called, explained the issue to him. He always helped – with equipment, technology... And for that, I will always be grateful to him.

XII

My efforts in expanding the Anapa plant's product distribution geographically were very calculated. I was like a captain, guiding his ship, turning the helm right or left, and never being afraid to run aground.

One time, our procurement specialist came to see me. He was a businesslike man, with good intuition, and pushy when he needed to be. That day, he did not look happy.

"What happened, Vasily Petrovich?"

"Igor Alekseyevich, help!"

"What's up?"

"They rejected a shipment in Gelendzhik, claim it's no good. I just got the paperwork for its return. We need to send a car and bring it all back."

"Are you insane? It's ten tons! It'll all expire while we drive it around. Who rejected it?"

"I contacted the local diner and restaurant trust. Their director is this woman... she's an animal. Petty, tyrannical, dumb..."

“Who is this woman?”

“What do you mean, who? It’s Bella?”

“Who the hell is Bella?” I didn’t know what he was talking about and was starting to get annoyed.”

They call her “Iron Bella”. Don’t laugh. She started out as a salesgirl, and eventually made her way up.”

“What is she, some kind of genius?”

“She’s some kind of something, all right. She’s got connections. They say she knows some people from the Politbureau.”

“Yeah, right, come on...”

“I’m serious. Everyone knows that about her. Everyone wants to deliver to her.”

That was a fact that I could not dispute.

“Iron or not, I ‘ll go talk to her.”

“I just wanted to warn you, be careful with her.”

* * *

A typical office waiting room – Soviet furniture, faux-leather couches against the walls. A clock on the wall.

The secretary pointed me to a chair.

“Please wait. Berta Naumovna is busy,” she squeaked politely.

I silently nodded. Opened up the Kuban Pravda newspaper.

“Go to hell, Iron Bella,” I thought, and looked at the clock. It was exactly 3 PM.

“What did you say?” asked the secretary.

“No, nothing,” I muttered. Everything’s great.

I continued to wait. At 4 PM I was still sitting in the waiting room.

“How much longer am I supposed to wait?!” I asked the secretary. I was beginning to feel my blood boil. Tell Berta Naumovna that someone is waiting for her.

The secretary was eyeing me skeptically, just as the office door burst open and a giant and very energetic woman came into the waiting area.

I got up.

A pair of eyes pierced me.

“Berta Naumovna...”

“Berta Naumovna what?”

I felt that the tone of her voice could actually burn a man.

“I’m Berta Naumovna. Who sent you?”

“I’m from Anapa. You were expecting me. Igor Babaev.”

“Who’s Babaev? I don’t know any Babaev. Who sent you? You want to poison us with your sausage? We don’t need your crap here!”

“Hang on a minute, let me explain.”

“What explanation can there be, if the goods you sent us were spoiled? You want me to feed people rotten meat?!”

“Perhaps there’s been a mistake? Let’s examine this situation...”

“There’s nothing to examine! Take back everything you sent here!!!”

No one had ever spoken to me like this. I flew out of the waiting room like a scalded cat.

“Ass! She’s just a regular, rude ass!” was running through my head.

She didn’t even hear me out. Do women like these actually exist? Truly – Iron.

Thank God, I never saw her again.

As soon as I got back, I told my deputy:

“For God’s sake, just bring it all back. Pick it up, write off whatever you need to, just, get it done as quickly as possible. There’s no getting through to that woman.”

And yet all of this was commonplace in a situation where someone, as fate would have it, worked with deficit goods, especially important ones, like sausage.

* * *

My favorite days were the Sundays I spent with Lida. We didn't do anything special, just had fun, went out to restaurants, sat on the beach, talked. We'd go to parks and movies, or just stroll along the shore.

We were just happy.

At the same time, I could hardly have been called perfect during those hot (both literally and figuratively speaking) days. My work-style, the whole concept of the job was based on meeting so many different people, that the days inevitably ended with drinking in Anapa's best restaurants.

Every time I came home exhausted and less than sober, Lida sighed.

"Work will kill you, Igor!"

"I'm sorry. They were very important people.

"And I'm not important?"

"Oh, Lida..."

I awkwardly kissed her.

"I spent the whole evening waiting for you..."

"I did warn you in advance."

Lida's soft and velvety voice was beginning to sound angry.

I walked up to her, hugged her. The floor and the ceiling started swimming in front of my eyes.

"These restaurants would drain the strongest of men..." I muttered.

Lida escaped from my embrace. I practically fell on a chair.

"Try to eat," Lida put a plate in front of me.

"I have to get up early tomorrow," I muttered. "I'm going to bed. And you go to bed. Important people are coming in from Moscow tomorrow. From the Chief Directorate."

Lida shook her head in dismay.

"If you keep taking care of your plant like this every night, it'll eventually just self-destruct."

“Stop it, Lidochka! It’s work. Everyone wants to experience the wonders of being at a resort. Everyone needs the beach, the barbecues...Nothing is going to happen to me.”

I shook my head. It started to hurt more. I got up with great difficulty.

“Thank you, I’m going to bed.”

“Go, rest,” Lida began putting the dishes away.

“No, listen to me...”

For some reason, I wouldn’t let things go.

“You want to know why I come home so late? Because these meetings take away all of my...” I didn’t finish the sentence.

The chair inexplicably vanished from under me, and I fell on the floor.

“Ow!”

“You’re drunk, go to sleep!” Lida exclaimed, laughing.

I got up with some difficulty.

“It’s all shaky at our place! Like on a boat during a storm!”

“Aren’t you my little drunk,” she said almost tenderly.

“These people came to see us...” I started again.

“I don’t want to hear it! Go to bed!”

“No, no, listen. Tarada came. A tiny plant in Anapa supplying all children’s camps! Can you imagine?! And I can do this!”

Without saying a word, Lida walked me to the bed.

Awkwardly, I tried to kiss her...

XII

Igor!”

I woke up and couldn’t quite figure out how much time had passed. It felt like I’d just closed my eyes for a second.

“Igor!!!” Lida’s voice sounded far off, like coming through a fog.

“What happened?” I sat up in bed, still half-asleep. The wine fog had not yet completely lifted from my mind.

Lida was laying next to me, clutching her belly. Her face was distorted from the pain.

“What happened?” I asked, barely understanding where I was.

“It hurts. On the bottom there. Right there.”

She pointed carefully, as if even the thought of pain was too much.

I got up.

“We have to go to the hospital? Okay, let’s go!”

Lida tried to get up, and immediately bit her lip.

“It’s wet,” she said, scared.

Not understanding, I looked at her.

“Let me help you.”

I leaned down and tried to help her get up. With every second her body seemed to get heavier and heavier.

To top things off, the car wouldn’t start. An eternity had gone by when we finally left. Lida’s face was covered in sweat, her eyes were half-closed.

I kept asking her something while I drove, but she did not reply, her eyes kept staring ahead, frightened, not able to fixate on anything.

“Something’s happening to my wife,” I muttered, walking Lida into the hospital.

“How far along are you?” a nurse asked.

“Six months,” Lida whispered.

The nurse looked at her indifferently, then looked at me, and silently walked away.

Some people in white coats came out and put Lida on a stretcher. They took her away. I tried to go with them, but they wouldn’t let me.

I sat alone in the waiting room, not knowing what to do, when a nurse came out. Another indifferent look, and then she said -

“You can go home.”

“What’s happening with my wife?”

The nurse didn’t say anything. I stood there, not knowing what to do. I was in a fog. Then I obediently turned around and went home.

It was incredibly hot and stuffy on that day. The air felt like a swamp, making it hard to breathe. I drove and tried to figure out what happened with Lida.

* * *

The next morning, as soon as I walked into work, I called the birthing hospital. I heard all the mutterings from their receptionist and eventually got through to the on-call doctor.

"My wife was brought in last night. I want to talk to her doctor."

I introduced myself. Stated my last name.

"Wait," said the on-call doctor and hung up.

I waited for about 10 minutes and called back.

"My wife, Lidiya Babaeva, was admitted last night."

The doctor on the other end of the line fell silent and then said in a colorless voice:

"She had a miscarriage. But your wife is fine. She's alive."

"What?" for a second, I stopped comprehending what was going on.

"Your wife had a miscarriage. Twins." repeated the impartial voice.

It was as if I was falling in the abyss.

I was unable to utter a single word, completely breathless. I felt a physical pain, and then, it seemed, I'd lost the ability to feel anything at all. I listened to what the doctor was telling me and didn't understand a single word. It felt as if I was being led to my execution. Or I'd already been executed, but I was still alive for some reason and that horrifying feeling suddenly brought on cold acceptance. The important thing was, Lida was alive. Now I had to save her.

I no longer felt helpless.

"Can I see my wife?" I asked the doctor. I felt as a man who'd woken up from a coma.

"It's too early," the doctor said quietly. "Perhaps tomorrow. Don't worry. We're doing everything we can."

Much later I'd learnt that the doctor who first saw Lida yelled at her. "Where were you before this? Why did you come so late?"

“Late” – the fateful word that rung in my ears for a while. It’s not as if we knew about having to come in “earlier”.

I was drunk. Couldn’t think straight. Maybe I did something while drunk, something I wasn’t supposed to, and this happened to Lida.

Everything else was clear.

I didn’t tell them whose wife she was. She was brought in, like dozens of other women that the obstetricians and gynecologists see every day. She was probably just thrown on the operating table, where the doctors decided if they should fight for this woman or just let things take their course.

All the worthless, accidental and low aspects of my life – my carelessness, guests, hangovers – all came together, multiplied by how young we were, how inexperienced and uneducated in these matters, and the lack of normal living conditions and low-quality medicine.

Obediently, as if this was my best quality right now, I hung up the phone and walked up to the window. People were running around outside, going about their business, giving orders, taking orders... But something had irreversibly changed.

Nothing extraordinary was happening – the sea could be heard a little ways away, people were falling in and out of love, they went to work and went home. And I was standing by the window: so successful, so trouble-free...

At that moment I felt that another being was living inside my body – some sort of demonic creature that occasionally rears its ugly head. I could really feel his presence now. I understood, that something horrible has happened and there was no hope for salvation. But it was too late to fix anything.

It was a tragedy that stayed with us for the rest of our lives. Lida was devastated, she couldn’t forgive herself – we didn’t even get a chance to bury the children. She cried all the time and didn’t talk.

* * *

Anna Grigorievna was the first to come see her daughter.

I was stuck at the plant.

Anna Grigorievna spent every second with her daughter, trying to compensate with love and care for something that couldn't be compensated. Sometimes, looking at Lida's thoughtful, melancholy face, I thought that her mind has moved to someplace else, some place where only grief and sorrow existed, and I would have to dig her out of that hole...She was a changed person.

One good thing was that youth and time did their job. Lida spent only two weeks at the hospital.

Slava and I went to pick her up. Lida came out, supported by Anna Grigorievna. She was nothing like the person that went in just two weeks earlier – her previous cheery disposition had left her, forever. She changed, it was as if something had warped her entire worldview.

She looked confused, like a light had gone out inside. She walked without looking at anyone. She lost a lot of weight – her face was just two giant eyes. She lifted them up and looked into mine. Her lips quivered and she burst out crying.

She kept her hands on her belly, as if afraid of dropping something.

Anna Grigorievna tried to calm her down. Carefully, I helped Lida into the back seat, and we took off for Kislovodsk.

Lida didn't say anything for the entire trip, her face was getting paler and paler, and I was afraid that she would start to feel sick again.

We stopped by Slava's for lunch. The trip was long and dreary, but home and care awaited at the end of the road.

Anna Grigorievna had made all the arrangements with doctors.

They started to work on curing Lida. She was tortured with shots, as they tried to ease her constant pain. Anna Grigorievna did not leave her side. Soon Lida began to feel better.

And one day the doctors have us a flicker of hope. They said she could still become a mother.

* * *

Fall came. The woods were slowly changing their colors to the yellow and red shades of withering. The trees, the skies, the earth and the water all smelled of exhaustion. Life was preparing for a long battle with cold and loneliness.

I was again living in two cities, visiting Lida on the weekends.

Lida was starting to live for the future.

By the time she got better I was able to finish the renovations in our new apartment in the center of Anapa.

I remember calling her in Kislovodsk and telling her, happily:

“Lidochka, you can start packing. Everything is ready for your arrival.”

“Really?” she didn’t believe me. “So everything is okay? I can be with you again?”

“There’s no hurry. The most important thing is for the doctors to say that you can travel.”

“Of course I can travel. Igor, don’t be silly. I’m perfectly healthy.”

“I’ll come and get you as soon as I can,” I said tenderly.

In two weeks Lida moved to Anapa.

I picked her up myself. For the first time, she crossed the threshold of our new home. It was a simple but very cozy apartment.

Our relationship was full of tenderness and affection. Lida was changed by what happened to us. She became more feminine. She even hugged me with a different kind of warmth and flutter.

I promised to do whatever she wanted for her. I no longer recall the endearing details of our daily life back then, but

I clearly remember the tenderness and care that filled our life together.

Sometimes she thoughtfully looked at me.

"Igor, I'm afraid I won't be able to graduate college. I picked up a pharmacology book a few days ago, and, can you imagine – I was reading it, and I didn't understand a thing. I've forgotten everything. How can I possibly pass my exams?"

She smiled guiltily. She looked lost.

"Don't worry, darling, you'll catch up. Everyone goes through this. You'll get your diploma. You'll see."

"No, Igor, I won't be a pharmacist," Lida said in a serious voice.

One day, when I came home from work, she seemed more mysterious than usual. She looked at me and said:

"Igor, I'm pregnant."

The overwhelming news gave new hope for the future.

"I promise you, everything will be fine," I said very seriously, hugging her.

"We'll try," she whispered so quietly, I could barely make out the words.

"All broken hopes will be glued back together. All happy moments will be resurrected." I read that somewhere recently."

She smiled.

"It's definitely about us."

We talked about something else, not able to let each other go, until we were both too exhausted to sit up straight. I picked her up and carried her to bed.

"Everything will be different now, I promise you," I repeated quietly.

"Just don't leave me alone for long, promise?"

I nodded. Happy, we went to sleep.

The next morning I woke up with a decision.

"Lida, I think you should go back to Kislovodsk!" I said, as soon as we had breakfast. "I don't want to take any more risks."

Lida nodded in agreement.

“I was thinking about that all night.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

Lida didn’t respond. Her face was thoughtful.

“Things are calmer at home. My mom is there, and I don’t need to do anything around the house.”

“So it’s decided, we’ll take you back home,” I smiled.

“Just please, let’s decide what to do with Perm. I can’t fly back there, but I don’t want to just quit things either.”

“So you’ll transfer to Krasnodar, or we’ll think of something else. Once you’re further along, you won’t be able to travel anywhere.”

Lida nodded.

“Oh, I so don’t like that town...”

“Lida, we’ll go to Kislovodsk tomorrow. You’ll stay there, and I’ll go to Perm myself and fix everything.”

XIV

P perm greeted me with cloudy, dark skies. I came out of the airport and looked around. Passengers were running past me. No joy, no passion in their eyes – nothing like they are in Anapa.

A car was waiting for me, sent by the director of the local meat plant.

“Where to?” the driver asked indifferently.”

“The pharmaceutical institute.”

The car started. I took in the views with great interest.

“Is it always like that here?” I asked the driver, pointing to the black smoke coming out of smokestacks everywhere.

“That’s nothing,” the driver muttered. “That’s considered clean air here.”

I saw why Lida disliked this town so much. Gray, gloomy, no sun.

“A cesspool,” I whispered, to myself.

Thoughts kept running through my head. "Why did Lida come here? What was all of that for? Why did she have to breathe all this smut?"

I suppose I must have muttered something out loud, because the driver looked at me:

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"What was the point of coming to this hole?" I kept thinking. "I've got to transfer her out of here."

* * *

The dean's office was on the third floor.

"Good afternoon!" I said, walking into the waiting room. "I'm Igor Babaev."

The secretary pleasantly smiled. The director of the local meat plant had already let everyone know I was coming.

"Please come in," she opened the door for me. "Vadim Evgenievich is expecting you."

I came into the office.

It was a giant room, at the very end of which, by the window, there was a massive desk, covered in papers.

A heavy man in horn-rimmed glasses was sitting at the desk.

"Good afternoon!" he said, getting up and extending his hand.

"Babaev," I introduced myself.

"I know, I know," he greeted me, all smiles. "Have a seat!" he pointed to an armchair. "Would you like some tea, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. You see, we have a situation... We need to transfer. My wife cannot continue her studies here anymore.

"How's that?" The dean's eyebrows shot up. "But you yourself had asked that she be transferred to the extramural program? Less than a year ago."

He looked through some papers.

“Yes,” I shook my head impatiently. “But my wife is no longer able to come here. It’s not a whim. She’s pregnant, and the doctors won’t let her travel back and forth.”

The dean nodded.

“Of course, I understand. Perhaps she’d like a sabbatical then? And then, once everything is settled, she could continue her studies. Why give everything up so drastically?”

“Unfortunately, that will not be possible.”

The dean made a helpless gesture.

“We could come up with some sort of relaxed schedule for her.”

I shook my head in protest.

“I have nothing against her studying here, but she cannot continue studying with you because of her health. There’s just one request. Could you please send the transfer to Krasnodar polytechnic? It’s much closer to home.”

“We don’t do transfers,” the dean noted, embarrassedly. “I simply cannot do it. There is no pharmaceutical department in Krasnodar.”

“Then please expel her.” I exclaimed.

The dean froze in shock.

“What do you mean, expel her? She’s a good student, there’s no cause to do that.”

“Just, expel her, and that’ll be that,” I held my ground.

I had already figured out what we would do.

I called Yakov Dmitrievich Rudakov – the dean at our polytechnic institute, and had Lida admitted to Krasnodar polytechnic, where Slava and I had once gone to college.

And that’s how that problem was solved.

XV

Not long had passed from the tragic day we lost the twins. Sometimes I was still afraid. But despite all our fears, the pregnancy was moving along just fine, without complications. I took care of Lida.

Lida was living in Kislovodsk, where she had a very good doctor, who had been recommended to Anna Grigorievna by some relatives.

* * *

I threw myself into reviewing the reports given to me by Gudimov. Soldatov helped us obtain whatever the plant needed. It was now clear – we would be able to finish the reconstruction on schedule, and the plant was already showing some new figures. My efforts had not been in vain. My father would be proud.

For some reason I thought of him when the intercom rang. The secretary informed me:

“For you, from Chief Directorate.”

“Transfer. it”

I picked up the receiver.

“I’m listening.”

“Good day, Igor,” I heard Albin’s hollow voice on the other end. We had by now become good friends.

I smiled.

“Hello-hello! You can’t be planning on coming to see us again?”

“You just keep waiting! But no, it’s too early. Lots to do. How are your renovations coming? There are some questions about the latest transfer, talk to your accountant – have him send us copies of the financial reports, we’ll fix everything.”

“Okay, we’ll do that. And – thank you. We bought the equipment, we’re setting everything up now. And all that – without halting production! Delivery is a constant process.”

“Alright,” Albin chuckled, then paused. “Have you heard the news?”

“What news?”

“Yura Soldatov died.”

“What do you mean, died?” I couldn’t believe my ears. “I just thought of him today. Was he sick or something?”

“No. It...wasn’t a natural death...”

Albin paused again, and then, lowering his voice even more, began to tell the story. It turned out that Soldatov fell victim to domestic violence. He was gay, and one of his jealous lovers decided to settle the score. I thought back to that odd evening – in Soldatov’s hotel room, when he put his hand on my knee.

All of this was spinning in my head as I was talking to Albin.

We said our warm goodbyes, but I couldn’t get Soldatov out of my head.

What a way to end a life!!

Although Soldatov was one of the higher ups from Moscow Meat, a workaholic and a professional, his funeral was like that of some lowly pariah. None of the management came to see him off. It was a direct order – to make sure no officials were present at the ceremony.

That incident opened my eyes on the essence of human nature: so complex and contradictory, that not everyone was able to cope with, but again, today, in my memoirs, I'd like to pay my respects to that man. He was a great professional and much could have been learned from him.

* * *

Aleksey Babaev looked at the clock – work was done for the day. How odd life is. And on the other hand – how simple! Here it is, spread out before you. The most important thing is to have a goal – and you'll achieve whatever you set your mind to.

Aleksey Naumovich pressed the intercom button and asked to be connected to Tarada.

"He's in a meetings," said Tarada's secretary.

"Let him know Babaev called," my father asked cheerfully.

"Okay," the voice replied politely.

The next day Aleksey called back.

"He's left with Medunov," said the impartial polite voice at the other end of the line.

A day went by. The call was not returned. This was unusual, because Taraga was always glad to hear from Aleksey, and always called back – right away or later, but without fail.

Father couldn't understand what was going on and called Lenya Bodnev.

"Lenya, good day!"

"Hello Lesha, good to hear from you!"

"Listen, are things okay there?"

"Yes, everything is fine."

"I can't seem to get Anatoly on the phone."

"Oh? That's strange, I talked to him yesterday."

"That's what I figured, so I wonder why he's avoiding me."

The person on the other end of the line fell silent.

"Lesha, I'll try to find out. There's a big dinner tomorrow. I'll mention you. We'll see how he reacts."

"Alright, I'll be waiting for your call."

Father put the phone down. He had to go to Kuban once or twice a month on business anyways. The next trip to Krasnodar was coming up. He didn't like waiting, but right now – he didn't have a choice.

* * *

The next day turned out to be very busy. Bodnev's massage therapist arrived in the morning.

She came over three times a week to massage Bodnev and his wife.

"Leonid Arkadyevich, you seem somewhat nervous today," she said, massaging Lenya on all sides." Very tense.

"It's my work, Lena. Nerve-wracking."

"So leave your job, if that's what it's doing to do! Come work at our clinic. Nothing nerve-wracking there!"

Lenya chuckled.

"Not interested in moving to where you work, Lena. Instead, you should come work with me!"

The massage therapist finished her massage and began gathering her things.

She left quietly, leaving behind a trace of something victorious. The presence of a massage therapist in Leonid Bodnev's life was evidence that that life was definitely successful.

He began getting ready – there was an important meeting ahead.

Outside, Lenya looked up at the sky. He thought it might rain, so he went to get his car. He walked regally, in a dignified manner.

Boys were running around in the yard. A street cleaner was sweeping dust. Lenya walked by them, not looking at a soul.

“That man sure does love life,” the street cleaner muttered as Lenya walked by him.

“What are you talking about?” asked a neighbor. She was sitting on a bench, eating sunflower seeds.

“That one, that just walked by!”

“Who?”

“Our resident. Did you see what kind of car he has?”

He pointed to the burgundy Volga.

“So what?” asked the woman.

“So that. Some people know how to live. Do you know where that man works?”

“How would I know?” the woman was surprised.

“He’s a watch-maker. And he has a Volga! Like the regional committee secretary! You see?”

“No.”

“First he had the “21” model here,” the street cleaner went on. “Over there,” he pointed to a row of small garages in the yard. “That one had a small deer on the hood. Then he got the 24 model. And now – this one.”

“And?”

“And that’s that, and! A big man! Even though he’s just a watchmaker.”

“Some people have all the luck,” the woman exclaimed.

“Don’t I know it.”

And the street cleaner went on sweeping.

Lenya Bodnev was going to the market.

* * *

Back then, one of the most common and friendly ways of spending your time was a traditional Russian *zastolie* – the lengthy, leisurely meals that went on for hours on end. Each of us had his own approach to the food and drink culture. While

the alcohol choice was fairly limited – vodka, wine, cognac, champagne, the food menu was where one could truly use his imagination.

Lenya Bodnev liked having guests and knew just what to serve.

He was one of those men that preferred to do the grocery shopping himself. It wasn't done to make his wife's life easier but rather was a sign of just how particular Bodnev was about his sense of *joie-de-vivre* and welcoming guests in his home.

* * *

Lenya entered the market like a god, and started slowly making his rounds through the aisles.

Dozens of sellers immediately tried to get his attention.

"Darling, listen!" could be heard from the grape-seller rows. "Try the fruit, they're intoxicating! They're like wine, not fruit!"

Their eyes sparkled mischievously, but it was the sparkle of hunger.

"Tangerines, tangerines! Pure gold!" yelled a woman with a whole row of gold teeth and a barely noticeable mustache.

Lenya heard all of them, but knew that to react was not an option.

"Tomatoes, tomatoes! Hey, man, look at the tomatoes! Or you're not a man, eh? Look at how red they are, they're like blood, not tomatoes! Look!"

But Lenya did not look.

Dozens of pairs of eyes, black, sparkling like black olives or dull like agate appealed to Lenya's moving figure.

"This is sugar, it's pure sugar, not just a fig! Come here, darling!" could be heard from the left.

Lenya paused, turning around untrusting. A woman, dark as a raisin and just as dried up, was handing him the juicy southern fruit.

“Show me the figs.”

“Are you crazy!!” the fig seller yelled as if Lenya had already show signs of doubt. “Look at these figs! *Creme-brulee*, that’s how soft these figs are!”

She opened up the purple fruit like a flower and put it to Lenya’s lips.

“It’s bitter,” Lenya winced with disgust.

“How’s it bitter? You look here, this fig, it’s sweet as sugar! May the skies punish me if I’m lying!”

“Yeah, right, they’ve got nothing better to do up there.”

“As I live and breathe! Take some figs, you won’t regret it! I’ll make you a deal.”

“Alright, but later,” Lenya waved her aside and kept walking.

“Good man, you want plums? Freshest plums! Try our plums!!”

Lenya walked by. That voice did not sound credible to him.

The women were standing and sitting in rows, the sparkle of their eyes reminiscent of precious stones.

“Sir!” the next woman chattered at him, “try my apples. The best apples, you won’t find apples like these anywhere else.”

“Take mine, take mine!” her neighbor yelled passionately and started shoving apples right into Lenya’s hands. “I’ll make you a better deal.”

The fifth one silently grabbed him by the sleeve and wouldn’t let go, until Lenya bit into one of her pears.

“How is it? Will you take it?”

Lenya stoically shook his head.

He passed all of them, only giving a passing glance to one woman, who sang about her product like a muezzin. He always went to the same two or three trusted sellers, whom he knew by name, and who always gave him the best product. They weren’t cheap, but Lenya wasn’t out to save money.

He knew that the black caviar he bought would be of the best quality.

He knew that the salmon he acquired would be salted in the most delicate way.

The cucumbers were of a shade of green than one can only see in one's dreams, with bumps tiny like baby teeth.

The tomatoes he picked looked like they were about to burst with the energy of the sun they've been collecting while waiting for Lenya.

He was sold a lamb so succulent it seemed that even when he was still running around the local fields, he was already dreaming of the fire he would be roasted on.

This trip to the market was also a sort of a victory march for Lenya Bodnev, proof of his real standing in this city.

All in all, our Kuban market was a unique occurrence – the complete opposite of planned economics.

If regular shops only came alive when they got a shipment of deficit products, the market was always stocked with whatever your heart desired: the most appetizing meat, milk fresh from the farm, sour cream so thick you could stand a spoon in it, the most scrumptious caviar.

Yes, it all cost money. But it was there. And the market was a place Krasnodar could be proud of. So we had no idea about how bad things could be elsewhere, because here everything was right for the picking – in this oasis of private trade.

Cabbage was boiled in big caldrons right at the market, and immediately used as filling in the freshest pastries, sold on the spot for 5 kopecks a piece.

I will forever remember liver pastries for 4 *kopecks*. You could always come and for only 25 *kopecks* buy enough pastries to stuff yourself with. A cucumber, a mug of beer – and life couldn't get any better!

And if you throw in the beautiful women that went to that market, you'll see how Krasnodar Krai, also known as Kuban,

after the river that flows through the region, really was the local branch of heaven.

Life was bustling. Observing it from the side, one could seriously believe that USSR could have been a happy society.

* * *

By midday, the Krasnodar sun had cloaked the city in sweltering heat. But Bodnev's big apartment right in the center of the city remained cool. Chinese silk drapes created a cozy semi-darkness, dissipating the bright sunlight. The apartment's owner was having a lazy nap, when the doorbell rang.

Nina, his wife, went to get the door.

"Anatoly Georgievich!" Bodnev heard her excited voice. "Lenya! Lenya, look who's here!"

Lenya jumped up and ran out into the hall. There, in the darkness of the hallway, stood his famous friend.

"Ooh! Anatoly! Hi!" Lenya went in for a hug. "Come in, my dear man."

"Oh, everything smells so delicious." Tarada sniffed loudly. "Honestly, I'm quite hungry."

"I'm almost done, almost done! Do come in, go in there, please," Lenya's wife was talking a mile a minute. She started setting the table with everything that had been prepared for the important guest – appetizers, fish, caviar, freshly baked bread, greens.

Old friends sat down in the living room. Lenya's immodest apartment looked like it was owned by an Eastern Shah: antiques, paintings by artists from days long gone by, whose last names he was possibly confused by – Ayvazovsky, Filonov, gold, bronze – everything was mixed together into one big 120 square meter room.

Fluffy carpets on the walls. Intricate woodwork on the floors.

"I always look at this picture, and I can never turn away." Tarada pointed at the wall. "I'll be honest, it's impressive."

Lenya Bondev smiled, flattered.

"We do what we can, Anatoly Georgievich."

Lenya picked up an antique silver tea cup from a shelf.

"Russian silver," he explained, noticing Tarada's questioning look. "It's quite popular these days."

"And what's that?" Anatoly pointed to a purple egg.

"Faberge," said Lenya proudly.

Tarada picked up the eggs, looked at it from all sides.

"How do you know if it's real?"

"You need to be a specialist to know if it's real," Lenya noted slyly. "Moscow antique stores, on Arbat, they're full of fakes. But mine is real."

Lenya knew all about *la dolce vita*.

"Look at what I've got here!" Lenya opened the doors of his mini-bar and took out a moldy bottle. "Bordeaux, a hundred years old."

The bottle line up would've impressed even the most experienced connoisseur. A row of valuable cognacs, and expensive, dusty wine bottles would've made any expert shake with jealousy. Actually, it could be why our high society liked to visit him.

Tarada carefully examined the unique bottle.

"Can you really drink it?"

"Of course!" Exclaimed Lenya. "It's for you."

"What do you mean??"

"That way you can drink it and see if its really drinkable or not!" Lenya smiled slyly.

"Well, thank you!" Anatoly Georgievich put his wide hand on his heart.

"What's new with you?"

Lenya opened a desk drawer and took out a piece of paper.

"Anatoly, take a look at this," Bodnev put the paper in front of Tarada. There, on the paper, was hand-written in a neat and even handwriting. "A car must be given out here." He

pointed with his fat finger to a last name on the paper. "And here – an apartment. Everything's already been agreed with the lower authorities. We just need a phone call from you. The guys are ready to pay in gold. Trust me, I know them."

"Alright," Tarada carefully folded the paper and put it in an inside pocket. "Call me in a week. I'll get everything sorted," he said quietly. "Oh, and there won't be any Volgas for a month."

Bodnev nodded silently and suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, Anatoly, regarding the old matter – it's all ready."

Carefully, he took an enveloped from the pocket of his velvet home blazer and put it in front of Tarada.

Tarada gratefully looked at Lenya. He then put his giant hand on Lenya's small fat hand and patted it, as if saying, "Thank you."

"Lenya, come on, invite the guest to the table, I've been ready forever!" Bodnev's wife called out.

Lenya and Tarada went into the dining room. The host reached for the crystal decanter.

"A shot, perhaps?"

"Let's leave that for another time. When we all get together," Tarada smiled amicably.

"Yes, we've started seeing each other less. Haven't seen Alex in a while..."

Anatoly Georgievich looked at Lenya with an ironic smile and continued his meal.

"Oh, Alex, Alex...our old comrade. You know, I also thought about him recently. We were always such good friends. Where's he hiding out these days?"

Bodnev looked at Tarada.

"I don't think he's hiding out. He's supposed to come by in a few days."

"That's good," Anatoly Georgievich laughed. "Alex is absolutely ours! Look at where he's set sails to – Moscow!! Who

would've thought? And Lenya, look at his sons – Slava is in Tikhoretsk, a good director.” Tarada lifted up his fork, as if making a point. “Igor – also doing great, really making a go of things in Anapa. He’s just barely been born – and already a director! And who is like a father to them here? So, they can do their jobs and Aleksey doesn’t have to worry about them, knowing that they’re in my care.”

“Anatoly, what are you talking about? They’re forever grateful to you for what you’ve done for them. They get it. By the way, how are they doing? Becoming strong?”

“I think so. You know, they call me, report back. I’m in control of the situation, but...” Tarada meaningfully looked at Lenya.

Lenya looked back in apprehension.

“It’s not enough to hear the reports.”

“I understand, I understand,” Lenya nodded in agreement.

Anatoly Georgievich, sighing heavily and demonstratively, moved on to the next dish.

Lenya looked at his friend and smiled.

“Anatoly, we haven’t seen each other in so long! Gelman never comes over, barricaded himself in his *aul*, got himself a harem and won’t share with us!”

“You have a point! You know how to pull at one’s heart’s strings, Lenya! Good thing that you brought it up. We’ve got to visit Misha, to see how things are, how he treats dear guests. I have a plenary session coming up, after that I’ll have a breather, we’ll pick a time to go see him.”

Lenya walked Anatoly Georgievich to the doors and shook hands.

“What a man!” he whispered to his spouse after their esteemed guest had left.

* * *

The streets of Krasnodar sparkled after recent rain. The air was fresh, but all windows in Lenya Bodnev’s apartment were

closed and the blinds drawn shut. Lenya, sitting in an armchair with intricate legs and the crest of some French duke on the green satin, was dialing a phone number.

Bodnev was excited.

“Alex, I’m not disturbing you?” he said, hearing his friend’s voice on the other end.

“No, not at all. Glad to hear from you,” said Aleksey Babaev.

The Central Committee was busy, but no one disturbed him. Neither meetings nor visitors.

“Alex, I think I’ve figured out what happened,” Bodnev began.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m certain.”

Aleksey became apprehensive.

“It’s about your boys. Nothing bad,” Lenya immediately calmed him down. “But there are some problems. It’d be better if you came here. It’s not a phone conversation.”

There was a brief pause at the other end of the line.

“Listen, I was going to fly out there next Monday. I’ll come earlier.”

“I’ll meet you and we’ll talk this over.”

“Prepare your liver, my friend!” thundered Aleksey.

Bodnev smiled.

“We’ll be waiting for you!”

Bodnev carefully replaced the receiver and patted the mother-of-pearl phone; he liked things old and antique, and this phone was real, pre-revolutionary, obtained through his personal Moscow channels and, in essence, for very little money.

* * *

After talking to Aleksey, Bodnev went to work.

Lenya Bodnev was in a class of his own even among my father’s most esteemed friends. In order to understand the scale

of this personality, it was necessary to understand something beyond the regular two-dimensional geometry of the world. One had to also comprehend the laws of twisted worlds, and first and foremost – the world of Lenya Bodnev.

His place of work was a regular watch-maker's booth. On the first floor of a typical Soviet department store. Some place under the stairs.

One could catch a glimpse of him there, sitting in his blue warehouse coat, looking like millions of other watch-makers, with a halo of curly gray hair, disheveled eyebrows and piercing bulging eyes.

He always spoke very slowly, as if weighing each word on a scale of good and evil. Observing him for just a couple of hours was enough to thoroughly amaze one.

His booth was often visited by very strange people, people in expensive suits, that were obviously made abroad.

On that day, Lenya was visited by a stranger. Lenya had been forewarned about him – he was a friend of a friend.

The stranger took out a watch that was carefully wrapped in paper. Bodnev unwrapped the package, picked up the watch, and, quickly opening it up, began to examine it.

"The axis here is worn out," he said. "It'd be good to replace it. And dust. A good cleaning won't hurt." He put a strong magnifying lens into his eyes.

"Look here," he put the watch right under the client's nose, as if the man could really see all those bolts and gears. "You see?"

"Yes, thank you. How much?"

"Please pay the cashier."

The visitor nodded and put a piece of paper in front of Lenya.

Lenya read it attentively and put it in his pocket.

"I think I'll be able to help you," he said quietly. "Call me in two weeks."

“So there’s hope?” the stranger said even quieter.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fixed. Like the watch.”

The stranger left the booth.

Lenya tore up the paper into tiny pieces and threw it into the garbage.

A couple of hours later, the director of the department store came to see him.

“Leonid, could I talk to you? I don’t know what to do”, the director babbled in confusion. “There’s an inspection coming. Perhaps you could help?”

“Who’s inspecting?” Lenya asked philosophically.

The director named a few names.

“I’ll try to do something about it,” Lenya said in a calming voice.

“I am begging you,” the director’s voice became almost servile.

Bodnev looked at his watch. His work day was coming to an end. It was time to go home.

“All the best!”

I once asked my father what Bodnev’s secret was. He said: “It’s sometimes very important to connect people who are not otherwise connected in everyday life. Can you imagine that a regular watch-maker would be friends with the manager of sales and production of the regional committee? I can’t, really. But Lenya – he can. He knows a lot of people, whose job titles were incomparable to his, but for some reason, many of them feel it’s an honor to be friends with Lenya.”

XVI

The plane from Moscow landed right on time.

Lenya Bodnev searched the waiting area with his eyes, looking for Aleksey's monumental figure. He came especially early to meet his friend.

The first passengers started coming out. Lenya noticed Aleksey immediately.

Handsome, stately.

"A king"," Lenya thought to himself. He ran over to his friend. It probably looked funny. Lenya was a bit shorter than Aleksey. Round like a ball. Aleksey, on the other hand, exuded power. It's as if he was like everyone else – but at the same time, he wasn't.

The friends hugged.

"Where the hell were you?" chattered Bodnev. "I've been waiting for you for almost an hour!"

"You could've found out the schedule," said Aleksey in his signature deep voice.

His face showed just how happy he was with the tone of the meeting, and the man who put all of this other affairs aside to come and meet him, and pick him up in his sparking-new Volga.

“I came right on time, but you were late! If only the plane schedule was as perfect as my intuition!” Bodnev’s tenor went into a soprano for a moment “our Aeroflot wouldn’t have a care in the world!”

Aleksey laughed.

“Don’t boast of your intuition, you’ll jinx it! You go,” he suddenly said to some man that also came up to Aleksey Naumovich.

It was the director of the local branch of *RosShveyProm*, the Soviet sewing monopoly, who came to see pick up his boss.

“I’ll call you later,” my father cut off any protests.

The man nodded and disappeared into the crowd. The two friends got into the car.

Aleksey looked out the window with great interest. They passed city dwellers, rushing about their business. The sun hid behind the clouds. A bird flew through the pale-pink sky. The houses made neat rows on the streets, and it seemed that the world was full of youthfulness and ardor.

“You just don’t succumb to age,” noted Bodnev, looking over at him.

“You’re not wasting away either!”

“So tell me, how are things?” Bodnev stared at his friend.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” chuckled Aleksey.

Everything that he saw had a gleam of prosperity and true, sincere fortune.

“You know, I always think of that phrase – “Life is a dream, but it’s better not to wake up”.

The friends burst out laughing.

“Yes, life is short and work is eternal,” Bodnev smiled.

“So tell me, what news do you have?” suddenly Aleksey’s voice sounded serious.

Bodnev changed gears and sat more comfortably.

“Alex, I don’t have to tell you how important Anatoly is for your boys, you know all about it. But he’s annoyed at something. It’s most likely that....” Lenya paused, looking for the right words. “They’re not paying him enough attention.”

Aleksey looked at his friend, but didn’t interrupt him.

“They’re living at their plants, they talk to him only when it’s work-related – and that’s it. You know? Anatoly is a sensitive man, he likes attention. You know, he’s a fan of warm, personal attention. If you could talk to your boys... I’m sure that it’s easily fixed, they just need to be pointed in the right direction in their relationship with Anatoly.”

Aleksey looked at Lenya thoughtfully for a few seconds, as if wanting to ask him something, but didn’t say a word. He frowned.

“Oh come on, Alex! Stop it. Your boys are incredible. They’re just... still green, that’s all,” Bodnev let out a laugh.

For a while Aleksey didn’t say anything. He seemed to concentrate hard on something and then smacked his hand down on his knee, as if finding the right solution and turned to Bodnev, who was masterfully driving down the winding road.

“Hey, you want to be my driver? I’ll get you transferred to Moscow,” Aleksey laughed. “You drive like a race-car driver.”

Lenya burst out laughing. He was beginning to think Aleksey had taken offence.

“I have a great surprise for you,” said Bodnev, glancing at his friend.

“What surprise?” Aleksey’s eyebrows shot up, as if saying: “I’ve had enough surprises for one day”.

“Look at this,” said Bodnev, taking out a velvet red pouch tied with a white ribbon from his jacket pocket.

He gave the pouch to Aleksey. Aleksey slowly untied the pouch and whistled: inside were two giant sparkling diamonds.

Aleksey carefully picked up one of the stones and held it up against the sun.

"Twelve carats," commented Bodnev, not taking his eyes off the road. "Purest stone."

Aleksey didn't say anything. He carefully took out the second stone, and also looked at it against the sun.

"Eight carats," said Bodnev.

Aleksey quietly looked over the stones, then nodded respectfully and looked at Lenya, as if saying, "Where do you get these things?!"

"Alex, my dear, if I had money, I'd keep them, said Bodnev. "But you should take them. You can afford to. I recommend it."

Aleksey had no doubt that what Lenya was saying was, in fact, true. He'd already bought czarist coins from him a number of times.

"Twelve carats, and the clarity is impeccable. You'd be hard-pressed to find another stone of that clarity", repeated Lenya.

Aleksey nodded.

"When do you need the money?"

Lenya chuckled.

"You figured right," he said seriously.

"I'm going to Kislovodsk soon," said Aleksey thoughtfully.

"I'll send one of my men there."

"Good, I'll give him the money there."

For a while they rode in silence.

"You don't change," said Bodnev mischievously.

"Come on, no change..." protested Aleksey. "Look around you, one feels alive here, not like in Moscow. Back there, no one knows what they want. There are no clear goals. And that makes things difficult. So I'm envious. It's so much simpler in our parts here."

They passed rows of sheds with dilapidated roofs. Aleksey remembered to when he started his new life in Kislovodsk in a shed just like it.

"You mind taking a detour?" he asked Lenya. "I like driving down Krasnaya street. You know, you remember so much, you think about what's coming."

"Why the long face all of a sudden?" Bodnev noticed the change in Aleksey's mood. "Something wrong at work?"

"Oh, no, things are fine at work. But the world under this sun is so fragile..."

"You really do need a break. You know, we'll have a good meal, some drinks, you'll feel better immediately."

"Yes, you're right! But first, let's go to the hotel, drop off my things. Although," Aleksey looked at Bodnev and his eyes lit up. "A sober man and a thin cow are only good if they're dead."

Bodnev looked at Aleksey with an expressive look of a son of Zion. And giggled.

Aleksey sighed.

"You're turning gray, brother." noted Lenya, noticing Aleksey's graying temples. "How old are you now? Twenty five?"

"Did you forget?"

"I'm curious. How old are you, really?"

"All that's mine I carry with me!"

"I'm turning fifty soon," sighed Bodnev.

"Are you serious? You don't look any older!" replied Aleksey.

He wanted it to be like the good old days, to do some shots, to smack a girl on her lovely behind.

"Lenya, tell me, when you put on your watch-maker outfit, can people guess how important you really are?"

Lenya cringed.

"What are you talking about?"

“Come on now...We know.”

Aleksey looked out the window again. Why is human happiness so fragile?

He was lost in thought when he suddenly realized that Bodnev was talking again, and he'd missed the beginning. Bodnev was glancing over at him and asking:

“Where you ever within an inch of losing your life? At least once? But you came out of it all unscathed. And I keep thinking, how long can it go on for? How much longer will our guardian angel guard us? The world is not getting more peaceful, Alex!”

“Maybe,” chuckled Aleksey. “But it's too early to mourn us. I think something had definitely changed with my move to Moscow. It's an endless rat race. And for what?”

They were driving past the city park.

“Lenya,” said Aleksey, “Tarada is right. My boys have to pay Anatoly the proper respect...”

Bodnev's face lit up.

“I didn't tell you anything you didn't already know, Alex. Right?”

Aleksey did not reply, and stared out the window. That man, sitting on a park bench, he looks like his father. He should see Nahamie. Aleksey smacked his hand on his knee.

“My God,” exclaimed Bodnev, misinterpreting Aleksey's gesture. “One just has to know how to be grateful.”

“I got you,” Aleksey nodded sulkily.

“The world does not change. Talk to Anatoly. And you'll see, everything will right itself.”

Yet again, Aleksey did not respond.

A grandmother in a green coat was playing with a little boy in the sandbox, helping him put sand into a bucket. Life was bustling everywhere! Everyone seemed preoccupied with their own affairs, but where they shown a free ruble, they'd forget their own heads!

The car stopped in front of Kavkaz Hotel.

The hotel had a different life and rhythm to it when this place was Aleksey Babaev's office, and fortress of solitude, from which he ran his affairs.

The administrators, the waitresses, the maids – they all loved Aleksey Naumovich. He gave some of them gifts, he tipped others well, he helped others buy deficit vacation tours...

This man benefited everyone, he knew how to be needed, and in return he got special attention. No one could say “no” to him.

Aleksey came into the lobby and gave a light nod to the administrator. She happily replied. He got the key to his room, the same room he always stayed at, and went upstairs. He suddenly froze mid-stairs. How simple this world is! Suddenly, everything became crystal clear to him.

Gone was the soul-burning aggravation, the anger that sometimes turned him inside out and spilled out onto his loved ones. How much simpler life would be if people would just learn to understand each other without words – there would be no wars, no murders, no insults.

For the first time that morning, Aleksey genuinely smiled and entered his room. He looked in the mirror. Friendship was easier to understand than love. Nature created women to cheat. Male friends – they always remain loyal.

He thought about Valya, who was waiting for him in Moscow. Secretary, housemaid, and a plain great companion. He never thought about who she was to him. But a man cannot live without a woman.

My father threw his briefcase onto the couch. He dialed the director of the Krasnodar branch and talked to him for a long while. He had business to attend to in the city, but business could wait...

XVII

A phone call” woke me. Slava was on the other end:
“Igor, Father is in Krasnodar. He said that he wants
to see us right away.”

How I loved such messages! It meant that I had to drop everything and rush out of Anapa to meet my father. My desire to fight back was so much stronger since this was something related to me directly.

But instead of protesting, I said:

“Got it, when?”

“Tomorrow at eleven, Hotel Kavkaz.”

How much would I have loved to remain in bed, but I had to get up and dash out to take care of business.

* * *

Slava and I got to the hotel almost at the same time. We hugged without saying anything and just as silently went up to our father’s room.

“Oooh, here you are! Hi Slava! Igor!

He hugged us, looking deep into our eyes.

“You got here just as the table’s been served. I’m waiting for my guys from *RosShveyProm*.”

The table in his spacious deluxe suite was laden with food: salmon, sterlet, trout, caviar, greens. Father was expecting guests and a nicely set table was a necessary attribute of solving any and all of life’s problems.

“Let’s have a snack.” Father pointed to the table. “How are things with you?” Aleksey asked, looking each of us over, as if we’d changed from the last time he saw us.

We sat across from each other, forming a triangle, like we did when we were kids and father would set us down to check our report cards.

“Everything is fine, dad,” Slava began briskly.

“Then tell me all about it. How’s the mood?”

He was in a peaceful and friendly mood.”

“Everything is okay, dad.”

“And more specifically?”

Slava was surprised. But since father was asking, he began telling him about work in detail. Father listened with great interest, without interrupting.

It seemed that he had some goal in mind. He acted carefully, like a surgeon, who eventually manages to find that one painful spot. We sat there, talking, drinking, eating. Slava’s story was lulling me to sleep.

I had almost relaxed.

Slava was talking about his funds, cisterns, fermentation tanks for the brew – it was all so very ordinary.

“Overall, dad, I think everything is fine,” Slava finished his story, straightening up in his seat. Only now did I notice that he was a little on edge. “It’s a process. You know how it is – not enough of this, not enough of that – and all of this and that has to be obtained somehow.”

“And how are you obtaining this and that?”

Slava made a gesture.

“Tarada helps,” he said it as something matter of course. “He calls himself, he seems interested, thank God. I tell him everything.”

“And he?”

“He helps. No refusals.”

Father sat looking at the floor. He was listening, nodding occasionally, or making remarks.

“Be careful. You have to report every single one of your actions.”

“And how are things with you, Igor?” Father turned to me.

“Just as usual. There’s really nothing to tell. If there are problems – I call Anatoly Georgievich.”

Father got silent, as if he had heard something unexpected and wasn’t sure what to do with this new information.

“There don’t seem to be any complaints,” I said.

“No complaints?” Father asked in amazement.

He grew silent again, looking at the picture on the wall where a bear and her cub were playing with peacefully grazing white sheep.

“So, you’re grateful to Tarada. But he’s not grateful.”

Slava and I exchanged a look of wonder.

“That’s the situation as it stands today. What’s that look you’re giving each other?”

This was said in a foreboding tone. I frowned. Father liked surprises.

“He even,” Father said each word with so much weight that it seemed he was knocking it into the ground. “pushed me away. And the reason is – you.”

His voice rose higher and higher, as if each word he threw at us was filled with a thousand volt charge.

“What does it have to do with us?” Slava didn’t get it.

I felt like I did when I was little, when father demanded that we show him our grades for behavior. His palm hit

the table with such force, it seemed like a mousetrap had closed.

“Shut up!” Father screamed. “You don’t understand?” he was fierce. “Tarada invested in you and now he wants to collect on his investment. Is that clearer?!”

Alcohol was making him fly off the handle, and his emotions burst out.

“Swine!!!” Father yelled, jumping up from the table. “You are ungrateful swine!!!”

His voice drilled into our heads like a dentist’s drill.

Father had already had five or six shots.

“Stop this idiocy. If you don’t get it, ask me. You have to value your relationship with Tarada.”

“It’s a normal relationship,” Slava said defensively.

“There’s nothing normal about it!” Father screamed, hitting the table with his fist. “Nothing! Is that understood?”

We swallowed our tongues.

“You have a material relationship!!!” Father kept yelling, accenting every single syllable, “And you have to understand that!”

Slava sank deeper into his chair.

Something dark awoke in Father when he got into these moods, something dark that I inherited from him, and that darkness wouldn’t let up until it found its victim.

“Stopping kidding around. You understand everything perfectly,” Father continued angrily.

There is a kind of anger that can destroy one’s soul. Father’s anger was of that nature.

The only thing we could do was keep quiet and wait until the attack was over.

Father, as if knocked out by his own voice, suddenly stopped yelling and asked almost in a whisper:

“Slava, listen to me”, “he bent over my older brother, “Today, Tarada is making a name for you. He is, not you. You

understand? Without him you're still nothing. He determines your success. Is that clear?!"

Slava nodded. He looked haunted. Father turned to me.

"And if it's clear, Igor, why are the two of you behaving they way you are?"

We kept quiet.

"Think about yourselves," Father's tone became more peaceful. "He can't support you forever. You say there aren't enough funds – Tarada helps you. This or that wasn't delivered. Who helps you? Again, Tarada. Why is he doing all of this? Because you're just so darn pretty?"

Father hit the table with his fist.

"Slava, think about it. He appropriates funds to you, he gives you money so you can buy raw materials. He does everything to ensure you have a normally functioning work environment. I see his investment. I do not, however, see your investment in your joint business. And you have to make up for the lack of your investment. And everything will be fine. So, take a look, run some figures, see what kind of sum you can reasonably spare. Something that he would be happy with."

We froze, staring at each other. Slava was the first one to break the silence.

"Dad, you're probably right. He does help a lot. I'll do what needs to be done."

Father interrupted Slava with a wave of his hand.

"Right, some changes need to be made."

He was almost friendly now, as if he was sharing a great secret, smacking his hip with his giant hand, as if that gesture helped him choose the right words.

"Igor, and what about you?"

"There's no need for his direct involvement in production. We're doing everything that needs to be done. Funds, implementation – we have all we need, we don't need to get anything through him."

“Nevertheless, Igor, he’s expecting a return. Trust me.”

He circled the table a few times.

“Listen, guys, you’re behaving like little blind kittens! It’s like you don’t understand how life works. You’re not idiots!” Father almost yelled. “Anyways, I’ll tell Tarada myself that I’d talked to you and after that you’ll meet with him, as you should.”

That “as you should” was both a request and an order.

The thing that surprised me most was that his words about our naivete and lack of understanding felt like a cover for something else, as if there was an echo of a completely different meaning to what he was saying, something he would never say openly. “Fine, you don’t respect Tarada. But you’re not even ready to pay me back with what the laws of this life require of you.”

This wasn’t said directly, but the hurricane that engulfed us clearly carried the idea at its center.

We had to spend our lives giving back to our parents, returning our debts as sons. The tradition stated: “We invested in you, now give back to us”.

Father became kind again. His warm voice was now almost musical.

“I’ll tell him that you understand everything perfectly. There was a moment of misunderstanding, yes. Between you. That’s clear. You had to get my approval before you could act. And now I set you in the right direction. Are we clear?”

He smacked the table with his hand again, but this was a different smack, a different sound, like a judge’s gavel that signified the closure of a case. The case was closed and there could be no appeal.

“Yes, I’ll meet with him,” Father repeated and moved an empty bottle of vodka away from him. He then looked at his watch, probably expecting his next meeting to start soon. “I’ll tell you later what you should do next.

He hugged each of us separately, repeating over and over: “I’ll tell Tarada that I talked to you. And then you’ll go and see him.”

We began to say our good-byes, crooked smiles on our faces. The storm had passed, but left a bad aftertaste.

I would’ve liked to say something else to him, something he didn’t know or understand. But...Neither Slava nor I could say it back then. These were lessons – the stern lessons of our quick-tempered father.

But no matter what we thought of those lessons, they made us see his world as it really was. It was a world that had no room for castles in the sky or illusions. And that’s all there was to it.

It was a truth that could not be argued with.

We left the hotel. The wind whirled about dry leaves, hitting us with soft warm waves. I wanted to fly away with the wind. To go up above the Earth and fly away, somewhere far, far away. Somewhere, where we could be ourselves. But would we be able to find such a place, or would we be frightened to see our own reflection?

XVIII

The voices of my father's friends could be heard all across the large reception hall. Almost all of them were here, our entire circle – well-groomed people, all sure of themselves.

The reception was hosted by Shvydchenko.

He was a stately and handsome man. His glasses made him seem like he could be a professor. His nickname came from the gypsy blood flowing through his veins. A charmer, he could conquer any young woman's heart in seconds. People said he supplied Tarada with girls.

He fully owed his success to Anatoly Georgievich, who made him the director of a restaurant first, and then the manager of Krasnodar's restaurant trust. Raven-headed, Shvydchenko did not look like a typical gypsy. A finely-featured, even somewhat delicate facial features, a chiseled nose and pale skin completed the look. If one didn't know him, one may have thought he was a Party worker. Having worked with many members of

the Party's upper management, he fully adopted their manner and style. He was always dressed to the nines, and in the most expensive clothes, and shopped only at the foreign-currency store *Beryozka*. As far as his professional qualities – he was an alright organizer and knew how to make money.

Nevertheless, the one person that immediately stood out in this crowd was Tarada, with his majestic profile, reminiscent of an ancient bar-relief, and the monumental folds of his perfectly ironed pants. Next to him was the round and happily glowing, like the man of the hour, Bodnev, and the director of the Krasnodar textile plant Boris Buglak, the latter politely smiling and apologizing for not having been around for a while.

Artomonov came in, red-faced like Santa Claus, his giant brief-case looking like one bit bag of gifts.

Stas Belyakov showed up just as dinner was about to start, a perfectly round man. Always content and polite, he seemed to be the living proof that nothing could ever go wrong here.

My father arrived last.

Everyone turned and looked at him as he came in.

“Look who’s here!” a turbine of low voices exclaimed.

Tarada was the first one to step towards his friends, pushing aside the rest of the court.

“Damn it, Aleksey! Himself! The devil!”

The two friends hugged, patting each other on the back.

“You don’t show your face around here anymore! You don’t call!” Tarada thundered on. “We’re all worried, asking each other – what happened to him? Where did he disappear to?”

“How are you?” others chimed in. “Too good for us now? Ashamed of your old friends?!”

Aleksey looked at these men and kept smiling.

Tarada made a gesture, inviting everyone to sit down. He sat at the head of the table.

“As you can see, fate itself took care of us getting together! What do you say to that? We’re all stuck in the same boat!”

He hugged Bodnev, who, as a loyal adjutant, hung on Tarada’s every word in admiration.

Bottles of vodka, stretching out in a long line on the table. Caviar, ham, butter, salmon, sterlet. The table really did catch one’s eye. All that Kuban had to offer and an incredible selection of imported goods were laid out on that table to illustrate the power and might of those gathered around it.

These delicacies that most other people did not even know existed were like combat service medals, given to my father and his friends by life itself – the secret observer of their might.

“The most important thing is to know your place here and now,” Tarada went on and on. “For example, what is your place?” smiling, he turned to Lenya Bodnev.

Embarrassed, Lenya shrugged.

“My place is on the bottom shelf.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“You guessed wrong! It’s not even important to know where your place is! What’s important is who your friends are.” Tarada smiled victoriously and lifted up his shot glass, filled with either rum or cognac.

Bodnev coughed.

“Let someone try to get in our way – we’ll kick him right out of the field!” said Tarada with authority, in an almost serious tone.

Everyone laughed. Only Bodnev kept coughing.

“Stop coughing!” Anatoly Georgievich said rather crossly. “I’m talking to you...”

Bodnev wheezed:

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do.”

His friends laughed in unison.

“Have you forgotten how to drink?” Buglak was laughing the loudest. Tarada’s attention immediately went to Boris.

“Would you look at Buglak?” he said very seriously. “And what are you capable of, Boris Nikolaevich?”

Buglak shrugged.

“I am incapable of sobriety on principle.”

“Oh, we know them, your principles!” he chuckled. “And now just think what those principles lead to?” he stared at Boris. “Comrades, don’t stick to your principles! Principles dry up the soul!”

Buglak doubled over with laughter and groaned “That’s enough!”

“So let us drink to lack of principles!”

The friends clinked their glasses, as in swearing to iron-clad loyalty to their own ideals.

Bodnev leaned over the table to clink glasses with my father.

“Bodnev!” Tarada thundered on. “Do you even know who you’re drinking with? It’s the very man who hides from his friends and doesn’t want to see them!”

Tarada’s eyes lit up with a mischievous fire. He resembled a chess player just starting a game he knew he was going to win.

“And you, you drink cognac with him, you have a good time, without even suspecting how far this man has gone in life! Kremlin ruby stars shine on him at night, and you get to share a table with him.”

“Sneering bastards!” Father replied, attempting to stay serious. “You think I’m going to fall for that? Some friends you are. Fate has brought us together. I knew I’d have to drink today, I knew it.”

“Anyways,” Tarada interrupted him. “I want to drink to you, Alex. To our friendship. To the years we spent side by side, shoulder to shoulder. All of our affairs are here, in my briefcase.” Tarada pointed down somewhere. “Our entire friendship. Know that we are always proud to know you.

To you, dear man. To our friend and brother – Aleksey Babaev, who's finally visiting us in person!" he finished his toast and threw back a shot. The others did likewise.

Aleksey Babaev wouldn't be Aleksey Babaev if he didn't take these words to heart. He bowed his head in gratitude, cleared his throat, and got up.

"Anatoly Georgievich, thank you for your kind words!" he looked over the table, as if taking in their thoughts and feelings. "You know how much I like being in Kuban. I have a lot of memories of this place. My children went to school here, now they work here. My friends are here. I went to school here as well, I started my career here. Believe me, I feel at home here, surrounded by relatives and close friends. For me, Anatoly Georgievich, you're a very special person. Because... he paused, as if choosing his words carefully. "You're a friend I can depend on. I want to drink to you, to your health!"

Everyone clinked their glasses and threw back their shots. Conversation became haphazard. Tarada took advantage of the situation and waved Aleksey aside to talk.

They sat together in the big armchairs by the ficus. The evening light shone through the window, lighting up their faces for an unknown artist's brush.

"So, we finally have a chance to talk," Tarada smiled, patting Aleksey on the shoulder.

"You just don't get older."

"Neither do you!" said his friend. "So, something to wet the palate?"

The friends clinked their glasses. Tarada looked at Aleksey, as if seeing him for the first time and trying to find a new and deeper meaning in his eyes.

"Tell me how you've been," he was friendliness personified.

"Anatoly, I talked to my boys yesterday." Aleksey took a pregnant pause. "They're very grateful to you."

“Whatever are you talking about, Alex?!” Anatoly Georgievich seemed artificially startled.

“They understand everything!” said Aleksey.

Tarada looked at this old friend with genuine amazement.

Aleksey smiled. He enjoyed this game.

“What are you talking about?” Tarada kept with his tune. “Your boys are golden. Wonderful sons.”

“I talked to them,” Aleksey repeated firmly. “They understood everything perfectly.”

“What are you talking about?” Anatoly wouldn’t let up. “Everyone is happy with what they’re doing. I make calls, I keep up to speed. Everyone says your guys are great. If you want – ask yourself! Igor’s meat plant is working in full swing. And there’ve been no complaints about the Tikhoretsky plant. Their product is on the shelves everywhere! Your boys have fit in well.”

Father nodded. So that’s what he’s really after.

“And for that, Anatoly, we’re incredibly grateful to you. Anyways, so what did I want to say... My sons... They’ll be calling you sometime soon. Please, if you can, see them. They have a request to make.”

“What are you talking about, Alex! They’re like my own flesh and blood!”

Aleksey gratefully put his hand on Tarada’s. This gesture was more meaningful than any words could ever be.

Tarada paused for a second.

“Listen, Alex, I needed to talk to you about something. A man is going to call you this week, I recommend him...See him, please. I’m sure you’ll be able to help him.”

“Okay, Anatoly. We’ll do everything in our power and to the best of our abilities.” Aleksey paused. “And whatever is not in our power – we’ll do that too.”

And old friends looked at each other slyly.

“Well,” Tarada broke the silence first. “Let’s go wake up Bodnev, he looks like he’s about to go to sleep!”

And the two friends returned to the table, continuing their fun evening, making fun of each other, and praising each others' accomplishments.

* * *

I called Tarada a couple of days after the talk with my father.

"Anatoly Georgievich, hello, this is Igor Babaev."

"Ooh, Igor," said the voice on the other end of the line, "Hello. Glad to hear from you."

"I wanted to ask your advice about preparing for the season. There are some issues that cannot be solved without your help."

"Come and see me at my place."

His voice was so warm, he sounded like my guardian angel. I felt like a weight had been lifted. Father was right, as usual. He foresaw everything. Damn, how deep was his knowledge of people...

The next evening I went to see Tarada. I was quite nervous as I walked to his house – like going on a first date. I didn't know how this meeting would go, what I would say and what I would hear in reply...

The sun was beginning to set.

...Sometimes I felt that I was in some sort of fairy tale. The house at the end of Krasnaya Street was drowning in greenery. A policeman stood at the iron gate. His blue cap was lit up by the rays of the setting sun. The woven grating around the garden hugged the house in its iron embrace, as if attempting to underline its exclusivity. A certain kind of power was felt here, a power held by those who lived behind the iron gate.

Tarada lived on the second floor.

I gave the policeman my last name. He found me on the list he had in front of him and gave me a silent nod.

The road was clear.

Anatoly Georgievich opened the door himself. Very tall, heavy, with rosy cheeks, he was wearing a dressing gown and looked so cozy that I felt uncomfortable.

He hugged me as if we were very close. He was so calm and kind, it seemed that he knew everything that we would discuss well in advance. I will never forget that feeling.

“Do come in, Igor.”

He gave me a slight nudge.

The hallway had an oak finish. I was too timid to go further into the depths of the apartment, as if everything in front of me was made of the thinnest glass that would break at the slightest touch.

Power was present in every inch of this place, and you could feel that power almost seeping under your skin.

I felt that something important was approaching, something vital to my life, that would happen later – a day later, a month later, a year later – it didn’t really matter when. But whatever this thing was, it called attention to itself. I felt agitated. I had to sacrifice something – to make the effort, to get over myself and start doing something I’d never done before. It was as if I had to leap off a high wall, not knowing what was on the other side.

Everything I’ve done before: money, various schemes – it was just business, entrepreneurship, but overall it was something quite routine and simple and lacking any sort of mystery. But here, it was as if the powers that be had briefly let me backstage to show me how power was won. And that would be my own choice, not one that my father would be responsible for, but my own. It was possible that I would suffer or rise up. But the result would inevitably be worth it – I would be able to talk to powerful men as an equal. This was the beginning.

I took a couple of steps in the direction of the dining room. The room that Tarada pointed me to was somewhere further along, unseen in the darkness of the hallway.

We entered the room. Tarada turned on the light. We sat at the table.

“Igor, how are things?” Anatoly Georgievich asked in that tone that doctors use with patients that are almost ready to be discharged.

“Everything is fine,” I answered, and, taking a big breath, added “If you would allow me to...”

He put his finger to his lips.

Something was happening. Something imperceptible changed in Tarada’s face. It was as if I was hearing my father’s voice, ordering us to solve the problem, was seeing his approving face, that seemed to say “Come on then, there’s nothing to it”. And so, I carefully put the envelope on the table.

Tarada made a barely noticeable gesture, as if saying “Don’t speak, be quiet”. He put his hand over the envelope, slid it across the table, and put it into a drawer.

“Thank you very much, Igor,” I heard. “You have no idea, this is so important to me...”

That was it. Nothing else was said.

The deed was done.

Tarada didn’t ask – how much, why, for what? Suddenly, he changed again. He suddenly became warmer, more sincere.

Olga came out of one of the further room. Her step was cat-like, noiseless. Her face glowed in the dim light. She was holding a tray with two cups of tea, crystal saucers, and a cake. I don’t think I’d ever before eaten from such exquisite china, have never held such fragile tiny forks, that felt as if they were made of mountain crystal.

And there I was, drinking tea with Tarada. At the same table. With this pillar, this dragon. And he seemed more and more informal and pleasant. My fear and stress were dissipating. I calmed down enough where I could look around the room and take it all in. The room where we were sitting now seemed cozy, a homely place where I was genuinely welcome.

My host kept pumping me full of warmth. He spoke about my newly acquired right – to call on him whenever I needed – any time during day or night. I would always find support. And this warmth suddenly echoed with a sense of great gratitude to my father, to the world that worked as it did, and, finally, to how right my father was to push me to take this step.

“Don’t be shy, you call on me if you need anything!” Anatoly Georgievich raised his hand, as if he was about to bless me.

The audience was over. There was nothing left to do in this cathedral of power. I have made my bloodless sacrifice.

“Well, goodbye!” he said, hugging me tenderly.

“Goodbye!” I replied.

The fairy tale ended. I woke up from the dream.

* * *

My thoughts kept going back to my visit the entire ride home. My father was right after all: Tarada is an amazing man who cared about us, supported us, when he really did not have to. He really did seem to have some sort of paternal feelings towards us.

He did have the right to expect something back, and not because he was special, no. The times we lived in demanded it. Those were the laws of the shadow economy.

The gratitude I showed him wasn’t a system defect nor was it a mistake – it was a show of strength. And my father was absolutely right about that. I didn’t understand it before. I owed a debt that I hadn’t noticed, a sacred debt – and I finally paid that debt.

I thought a lot about Tarada, tried to understand him. The important thing was – he never helped anyone rise in the ranks if he wasn’t sure of them. He picked the most talented men and bet only on them.

I remembered my father’s words – that Tarada was paving the way for us. But it wasn’t just that. He made us a part of

his life. He formed us into his own personal praetorian guard, that worked in the shadows to protect their leader, making new conquests in his name.

Who was in that guard?

Only the best. Tarada had a knack for picking the best.

He did some selfless things, just as we all did, but his system was based in something else. If he got someone an apartment, if he saved someone's child – it meant that he needed that person. He dug down to the very roots of someone he needed and found exactly what he was looking for – the hen that laid the golden eggs.

Tarada never thought that what he was doing was wrong. He adapted the style and manner of working that he witnessed at the very top of our society. If something worked up top – it would always work the same on the bottom. That was the strange law of our life back then.

He knew how to set up meetings. Even the shortest ones. Say, some inspection comes from Moscow. Even before they got to their destination – they were taken to a fancy dinner. Tarada didn't leave them alone for a second! He personally accompanied them for the entire visit. And what about his calls to the Central Committee! "We have a present for you here, and you forgot to pick up your second little gift..."

One rule was clear to him – there was only one way to surround yourself with loyal people. You had to do something significant for them. Something vital.

At first I didn't realize the scale of Tarada's importance and the number of people in his circle – the number of people grateful to be in it.

In reality, he was an incredible bee keeper, who created his own army of dependent bees that brought honey into his giant hive in appreciation of his efforts. The bees had to continuously deliver the honey. Their flights to the hive had to keep going, otherwise the beekeeper could get offended and take

away the privileges and opportunities he had given them, that gave them power in the era of deficit.

XIX

So many things still had to be done, and the phone calls just kept on coming.

“Yes!” I answered the phone energetically, reacting to yet another phone call.

“Igor Alekseevich, First Secretary of the City Committee Silenko is on the line,” the secretary was startled by how aggressive I sounded.

“Connect me.”

A new secretary of the city committee had started work during my time in Anapa – the former one became the first secretary in Novorossiysk, while we got Alexander Sergeievich Silenko, previously secretary of the Central district in Sochi. A very remarkable man. Looking at him, one always knew – this was a man who had a lot of rights and freedoms.

“Igor, hello.” I heard his dry and coarse tenor on the other end of the line.

“Good day, Alexander Sergeievich!”

“There’s a job for you. A nature trip is being organized. Very high-level guests. You have to be seriously prepared. And you have to personally stand by the barbecue grill for this one.

“Got it. Everything will be top-notch,” I said.”

There used to be regional committee dachas in Anapa. Perhaps they’re still there. He was talking about a barbecue out by them.

I was told the date and time of the arrival of my important guest, but his name remained a mystery.

This was a new and important job for me. Back then, dealing with the first secretary of the city committee meant certain responsibilities, and these guests, as far as I could tell, were going to be even above him.

Of course, I arrived in advance, and with assistants.

We were told that the guests were on their way, and started preparing the barbecue.

Soon, a line of black Volgas appeared. Stirring up clouds of dust, they stopped by our small glade.

Silenko got out first, then his deputies, some other people. I was watching the Volga that parked away from the other cars. Its driver jumped out and ran over to open the door to the backseat.

A heavy tall man got out. I stared Mother – of God! – it was Medunov himself. First secretary of the entire Krasnodar Krai Regional Committee.

He stopped, looked around, and gave a thumbs up to Silenko – the weather was great!

The latter ran over to Medunov, began explaining something, gesturing. Medunov listened without interrupting, then nodded and they began walking down a path to a small patch of woods, where everything had already been laid out for a picnic. I was there as well, managing the grill.

“It’s tiring, the long road,” Medunov noted.

He inhaled deeply and said something to Silenko.

Despite the heat, Medunov was wearing a black suit and a white hat with tiny holes.

“It’s a good place...The field is nice...It’d be a good place for winter crops...” he said thoughtfully.

Medunov looked like a giant. Authoritative face, large nose, big eyebrows. Concise lips. Massive fists. Not someone you could say “no” to.

But although he behaved as a typical Soviet party bigwig – he was down-to-earth, without rudeness or pretense.

I’d heard that he never raised his voice at anyone – I’d witnessed that later. He behaved like a father to all.

He was a Hero of Socialist Labor, but his main accomplishment was his friendship with Brezhnev, with whom they were known to be informal. And of course that gave Medunov an advantage, and possibly even a great one, in comparison to Stavropol region. The latter had always been Kuban’s competitor and closest neighbor. Back then it was managed by Gorbachev.

The guests sat down nearby.

I was standing by the grill, ready with the meat, Sergei Fedorovich and his guests sat down in the shadow of nearby trees.

I got the go-ahead, and began working on the barbecue.

Sergei Fedorovich was telling a funny story, about how he met Chekhov’s sister in Yalta, in mid-fifties.

“Can you imagine, how old she was! I had no idea,” he went on in his signature low voice.

I’m standing nearby, making grilling that meat...It’s hot... And there’s only one thought in my head – will it be good or not. I was shaking on the inside. Local Armenians had given me a quick lesson, they did all the preparations themselves, put the meat on the skewers, all I had to do was grill the meat and serve it.

Medunov was having a good time, laughing. Remembering how he went to Chekhov’s house in Yalta, and Anton Pav-

lovich's sister asked him, the communist Medunov, to dance. And he said "What do you like to dance? *Lezginka*?"

"Do you know how to dance the -?" asked Chekhov's sister." "Of course I do..." And he took a knife off the wall, a knife that had been hanging there since the times of Anton Pavlovich, held it in his teeth and began to dance, like a real *dzhigit*. Eyes popping out and everything! For someone from Sleptsovkaya cossack village, who was raised right next to Chechens and Ingush, this dance was more familiar than the Russian gopak would've been.

Everyone was listening to him and laughing.

"How old were you back then?" one of Medunov's Moscow friends asked.

"About thirty-five," he laughed. "The mountainous *lezginka* was almost a native dance for Russians where I grew up. Chekhov's sister also taught me how to eat properly with the knife and fork, yes, the way they did it in Czarist times. Here, look..."

Medunov suddenly turned to me.

"Sonny, how's it going over there? You got some meat ready for us?"

I choked on my answer, but Alexander Sergeievich Silenko stepped in:

"Sonny" or not, he's the director of our meat plant – Igor Alekseevich. Runs a very successful business."

"Really?? Well then, come here!" Medunov ordered.

And I, with barbecue meat in my hands, my legs giving out under me – walked over to the table. They invited me to eat with them. I frantically thought – is that appropriate? But if the host is asking personally... And he's not known for being pretentious. At work, of course, there's the boss and there's the underling, but at the table – everyone's equal.

So I sat down. I couldn't taste anything – I chewed, I swallowed. I was incredibly uncomfortable. Yet at the same time,

a voice kept going off in my head, “Remember who you’re sitting here with...”

I’ll be honest, that when Medunov left and I calmed down a bit, I remained very proud of the fact that at such a young age I got to sit at the same table as such a great statesman.

XX

I was in my office in Anapa going through some papers, when the phone rang, breaking the silence. There's a special kind of ring that makes one very nervous.

"Hello," I grabbed the receiver. "I'm listening!"

"Igor, hello, Igor..." the line was barely audible. Ilya Vladimirovich sounded agitated.

Thoughts rushed through my head: "What happened? Could it really be another disaster?"

Lida was seven months pregnant.

"You have a son," I heard through the crackling line.

"What?!"

My palms became sweaty. It was a premature birth earl.

"Calm down! Lida is at the hospital. Everything is under control. Don't worry," Ilya yelled.

The conversation ended. I tried to concentrate on work, but it was useless. My thoughts were far away, there, with my firstborn. My soul felt torn apart with worry.

* * *

On Friday, right after work, I rushed to Kislovodsk. The panic inside was growing.

All my relatives kept trying to calm me down – early births were not that uncommon. And there was nothing dangerous about them. The children were well taken care of.

But the uncertainty pushed down on me. The baby was only two kilos and 100 grams when he was born. So little. What was going to happen next?

I hit the gas, imagining the worst. One accident had already prevented my happiness, almost taking Lida away from me. I won't let it happen again.

A stubborn voice inside told me that this time, everything will be alright.

The car almost fell apart at every turn, as I drove down the long winding road. My thoughts were all over the place: I didn't know if I should be happy or crying.

I rushed over to Mikhailovs' place, incessantly rang the doorbell. Anna Grigorievna herself opened the door and hugged me.

"Igor, calm down. Everything is alright now."

She was nervous herself and looked less majestic than usual.

"What happened? Is this normal?" I attacked her with questions.

"Who knows? Everything started earlier than it was supposed to."

Another turn of bad luck happened during the two days before I got here.

"Serezha was overheated..."

I froze. Anna Grigorievna began explaining what that meant. It turned out, some doctor had accidentally overheated him. The baby, already weak, began losing weight, lost 400 grams, stopped breastfeeding. He was now

being fed Lida's milk through a catheter. His life hung in the balance.

The doctors made no promises. They didn't nod reassuringly and say that the worst was behind us. No, everyone was just waiting to see what fate had in store, and this uncertainty was the worst kind of punishment.

"Lida will stay at the hospital, until things get better," Anna Grigorievna finished her story. "Did you hear me?"

I stood there as if I'd been knocked senseless. So it's another tragedy after all?

"It's too early to tell, but let's hope for the best," I heard Ilya Vladimirovich's voice.

In a fog, I went to see Lida at the hospital.

They wouldn't let me inside. I just stood outside her window. Like everyone else. And suddenly I saw her profile.

Lida stood by the window. She noticed me right away, and her face lit up with a smile. I breathed a sigh of relief. So, things were not all that bad.

"Lidochka, darling! How are you feeling?" I screamed.

Lida whispered something.

"I just got here and came to see you right away!"

Lida nodded. She seemed somewhat absent, her gaze was worried, as if the difficult but important task that she had in this world was not yet completed.

"Everything is fine, Igor," her lips mouthed the words in silence.

If someone was nearby at that moment, someone who God would listen to, I would've given anything to have them pray for us. He would have found simple words that would've reached God's ears, to explain to him how happy I was.

Fear ate at my soul the entire way back.

The most important task for any man when his child is born is to drink! Drink so much they hear him party up in heaven! Let them know the happy news.

But I had no happy news to give.

Even the title of “young father” was still something I wasn’t used to. Everything was worrisome and uncertain. I had no energy for drinking or celebrating.

There was no way I could go back to the plant now. I decided to be with Lida until she got better.

And so, the weary days dragged on...

Lida was discharged from the hospital. The baby was still weak, but the doctors said they’ve done all they could.

“It’s now up to you and time” the doctor said to me as we were leaving. “We explained everything to your wife and her mother,” he paused. “What to do and how to do it,” he then looked at me very sternly. “Only your love and care will decide things now.”

I thanked him coldly.

XXI

Lida was always with Serezha. Sometimes it seemed that she fell into oblivion, but if the baby's quiet cry was heard in the room where she was, she immediately woke up and began whispering.

Her lips began whispering something I could not make out, and her incredibly beautiful but exhausted face looked tortured.

Anna Grigorievna was always with her. She bent over her grandson and daughter, and whispered something, almost silently, as if chanting away any ills.

"How is he? How is my boy?" Lida kept asking, her voice barely audible and full of fear.

Anna Grigorievna only looked away.

The baby kept screaming, as if in pain. And there was no way to ease his pain.

A shadow of despair crept across Lida's face, and she burst out crying.

“Why is this happening to him, why?” she lamented to her mother.

The baby fell silent. Lida’s eyes opened wide in horror.

“Serezha, Serezha!!” She hugged him close and began crying and shaking him. “Mom, what’s happening to him??!”

Anna Georgievna hugged her.

“The baby fell asleep. Calm down, my darling. It always happens like this, babies cry and then they sleep.”

But Lida kept repeating with pain and exhaustion in her voice.

“Why, why is this happening to him? We have to do something!”

Anna Grigorievna never took a break. She constantly called someone, asked for advice, got in touch with people, trying to find out something..

When she talked to me, she tried to pretend that everything was fine, but I could tell by looking at her anxious face that there’s nothing normal about what was happening to Serezha and that that no one but God could help him now.

But Anna Grigorievna did not despair. She kept asking questions, running to neighbors, talking to people, listening to people, complaining to people and getting their advice.

It was from one of those people, whose daughter was a doctor in Moscow, that Anna Grigorievna found out about a wonder-pediatrician who specialized in premature babies. He worked at the Mother and Child Institute.

Anna Grigorievna came to me and told me all about him.

“Trust me, the people who told me about him – they’re good people, they wouldn’t recommend someone who wasn’t worth it. We have to get him here.”

She was very convincing.

I nodded. My son will not just lie in his tiny crib while all these medical doctors philosophize about what to do next.

I packed immediately and went to Moscow, where I met the daughter of Anna Grigorievna's friends. I think her name was Zoya. I asked for her help.

She understood everything, got in touch with the wonder-pediatrician immediately, gave me his address and sent me to him. He was expecting me.

"When and how are we going?" he was very business-like.

"Right now," I said. "I have tickets to Mineralnye Vody with me."

The doctor checked his pockets, checked his medical bag and said that he was ready.

We were on the plane in a few hours.

He never once let go of his medical bag during the entire trip. The bag contained equipment, pills, a stethoscope. Looking at that bag, I was becoming hopeful, like hundreds of other young dads before me, that this was the man, this was the one who would save our baby.

Sometimes I looked at his thick horn-rimmed glasses, longing to see a shadow of hope, and kept repeating Serezha's symptoms over and over.

We rushed to Kislovodsk as soon as we landed.

They were already waiting for us.

Medical routine – take off coat, wash hands, put on the white robe.

The doctor entered Lida's bedroom. In silence, he looked over the prescribed medications, the temperature graphs, and finally, picked up the tiny baby. During his illness Serezha had lost about 400 grams, when his original birth weight was only twelve hundred grams.

The doctor looked at him for a second, and then, still not saying a word, gave the baby two of his fingers. The baby grabbed them, and suddenly the doctor just pulled him up into the air.

Anna Grigorievna gasped.

“What are you doing?” Lida screamed.

The doctor didn’t react. He was carefully watching Serezha, just hanging from his fingers, his brow wrinkling in thought.

“Well...” he finally said, and then turned to Lida, quite business-like. “This guy’s going to live!”

Lida looked at the doctor, her eyes wide open, and his confidence slowly poured into her suffering soul. Afraid of believing him, she asked:

“You’re not lying to me?”

The doctor shook his head without smiling.

“Calm down, mommy, and go get some rest.”

The doctor then turned to Anna Grigorievna and, lowering his voice, said in a somewhat apologetic tone:

“Now, you – you and I have work to do.”

He sat Anna Grigorievna at the table and began explaining something in great detail, showing her miracle pills that he took out of his bag and writing out detailed instructions on how to take them. Then he reached into the magical bag again, that same bag that I put so much hope in during our flight, took out some bottles and started explaining to Anna Grigorievna how to administer the medication.

And then he left.

Ilya Vladimirovich and I spent the evening discussing that doctor – the way he looked, the way he talked, and most importantly – his behavior, so full of hope and confidence.

The doctor came back the next day. He was concerned about the changes that Serezha was going through. He wanted to make sure that his diagnosis was correct and that the prescribed medications were working.

The same thing happened the next day and the next.

Serezha was changing before our very eyes.

The doctor carefully observed how the baby ate, how he responded to voices, checked his reflexes, and his face relaxed

more and more. He stopped repeating “If everything works out” and “We’ll see what happens next” after every visit.

On the third or fourth day, after examining Serezha, he victoriously proclaimed:

“There is positive progress. The little guy is great! You can continue without me. Keep me appraised. If anything changes – call me. As for me – it’s time I went home.”

* * *

Our happiness knew no bounds.

Lida carefully followed all of the doctor’s recommendations. Hours passed, then days. Serezha was slowly changing from a small and immobile little lump into a squeaking, and then a screaming baby.

He began to gain weight.

Lida was glowing and was completely immersed in the baby, never leaving his side and not letting anyone near him, as if his health depended on it.

Such a strenuous schedule would’ve knocked down even the strongest person.

Anna Grigorievna was also reaching the point of exhaustion, and so, Mikhailovs’ oldest daughter Larisa moved in to help with the baby.

She gasped upon seeing Lida:

“Go to bed, now! You need to get some sleep. There are circles under your eyes. I’ll take care of Serezha.”

Lida did not object.

It seemed that the worst had passed. Lida told her sister what to do in great detail – what to give when, from what bottles, and before going to sleep, whispered,

“I’m beginning you, Lara, don’t leave him, not even for a second.”

“Lida, I’m a doctor myself, stop worrying!”

Lida fell onto the bed and fell asleep.

She woke up from a squeal, not realizing how much time had passed, and jumped out of bed as if she'd been stung.

Larisa was standing over Serezha's crib. Inside the crib, a tiny volcano was erupting.

Lida flew right to the crib.

"Larisa! What happened?!"

Larisa moved over in embarrassment.

"I accidentally spilt a bottle of water into the crib, Serezha is wet. Don't worry, I've already changed him."

Lida was suddenly no longer tired or sleepy.

She picked up Serezha, held him close and began to lull him to sleep:

"My boy, my sweet boy," she whispered, "Mommy is here. Calm down. Come on now. Everything is okay. Don't worry, my sweet boy. Everything is okay now."

The tiny volcano that had been awakened by Larisa's careless move began to calm down.

Larisa felt guilty.

"Don't worry so much, silly," she tried to explain herself, "I didn't do anything, really. Just look at him. You should be happy!"

Lida nodded, still angry, tried to smile, and wouldn't let anyone near Serezha again.

Lida barely noticed me, she was completely absorbed by our baby's fight for his life.

A few days later Serezha began suckling. He was now able to eat normally.

XXII

It was the end of 1978. The preparations for the first ever USSR Olympics were in full swing in Moscow. Our family, however, was busy with quite another matter.

Our troubles first and foremost were because of Gena. Gena was almost twenty-five, and all of Kislovodsk's Jewish busybodies knew that he was a bachelor, which was enough for them to gossip about his father's riches and Gena's "dowry".

He was passionate enough to have good prospects for the future. Father got him a job at the Essentuki meat plant, as the manager of the sausage department. That was a royal gift for someone as young as Gena was. Everyone was keen to see Gena go up the career ladder, but he was in no rush to do so.

People talked about him. "His daddy is the deputy at Moscow Central Committee. What does that kid have to worry about?"

During one of his visits to Kislovodsk father said to Gena: "You need to get married. You can support a family now."

Gena wasn't against it. He could support a family, indeed. He could also get married. The only question was – why? For what?

But Father stood firm on the subject.

"Listen to me. I want you to stop moping about. You have to settle down."

"What should I do?" asked Gena.

"Look at the girl that we're going to see and let me know what you think of her."

Gena didn't object.

The choice of bride was traditional. Jews only married jews. Everything was decided behind the scenes, the parents made the choice, and no one really considered the potential bride and groom and their opinions.

Father had a friend – Misha Babaev, his army buddy. Back when they were young and just drafted, they had amazing adventures together, including selling sausage on the side. Now – they joined forces again to find Aleksey Babaev's younger son his future happiness.

Misha had a relative, a young girl of about seventeen named Lena. She wasn't a bad girl, she didn't talk much, but one wanted to keep looking at her – and that's already saying a lot.

"If that's the case," my father exclaimed, "let's try to look at her, maybe we'll like her?"

"Let's try to look," Gena echoed.

Gena was a free spirit but he could not be free from responsibilities. He was our blood, our flesh.

As a kid, he was spanked, yelled at, expelled from school. Who likes being treated that way? But he knew that there was no way to rewrite his past, especially not with a father like ours, who did not take kindly to being opposed.

Lena's parents set the table for the occasion, as rich as their wallet would allow. Lena served it herself. When she en-

tered the room, the conversation stopped, all the men looked at her in silence. Lena was wearing the simplest shoes. Gena came in patent leather shoes, dressed up, as a potential groom. His eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Lena sat down only for a second, and then got up and went to help her mother. The sun was going down and the room was getting dark, but even so, the descending darkness could not hide her pretty face.

She kept bringing tasty treats: *kurze*, *chudu*, *ruras*, tea, sweets. The table was laden with delicious food.

The girl's parents and Aleksey drank some vodka from crystal glasses and ate some *kurze* that smelled like a memory of happy childhood.

Glancing quickly at Gena, Lena asked her father:

"Dad, what would you like?"

"Your mother knows. Don't forget your guests..." he replied.

But that was enough for Lena. She stopped across from Gena and drowned him in the depths of her huge eyes. The young couple were allowed to talk by themselves for a few minutes. Nobody heard what they whispered about. Gena looked at Lena. Lena was a simple girl from Kislovodsk, from a Jewish village. She'd spent her entire life among her Jewish relatives, who had always told her that if she didn't think about the future, she wouldn't find a good husband among the procurement workers, tailors or house-painters. She couldn't even imagine meeting a sausage department manager, and as such, could simply not believe her luck.

"Eh, comrade Misha," whispered the neighbor, an old tailor, looking at Lena and Gena whispering, "I think that's a future couple."

"All in good time," said Lena's father sternly.

Time passed. It was time to leave. The guests said their good-byes and went home. On the way back Aleksey asked his son:

“And why aren’t you saying anything? What do you think, did you like the girl?”

Gena replied without thinking twice:

“Yes.”

Five days after everything was settled, Gena and his friend Oleg came by to see Lena and invite her to join them at the Mashuk restaurant in Piatigorsk. Gena wanted to show off for his bride.

At first, Lena’s parents didn’t want to let her go.

“It’s not befitting for a young girl to go out before her wedding...”

But Lena told her father:

“It’s not a sin for an engaged girl to go to a restaurant with her future husband!”

She then added:

“Every girl,” she said, “knows her freedom, like a bird does. Life with you is like life in a cage. Who’s guarding whom here?”

Her father grimaced, but let her go.

The young couple went to the best restaurant. It smelled of foreign seas and wonderful lives. The waiters moved across the floor so silently, it was as if they were skating. They knew what kind of tip they’d get just by looking at a person. Based on the attention he was getting, Gena was the right kind of customer. Possibly even a loyal one.

The waiters rushed over, started fixing up the already impeccably set white table-cloth table, gave the guests menus. The musicians played a well-known tune. Gena and Oleg sat next to each other, like brothers, and sat Lena across from them.

Black olives, finnish butter, brazilian coffee, Georgian Tsinandali wine, local Kuban greens appeared on the table. Barbecued meats, fried kidneys and other delicious foods that Lena had never tried before followed suit.

Gena was wearing a weekend suit. He was in a good mood. He ordered a half-liter of vodka and began drinking to keep up his spirits. Lena liked his jokes. A couple of hours later, Gena began to get loud and tried to tie his tie on the gypsum decorative Venus that stood in a niche at the restaurant.

His friend Oleg wasn't far behind, and tried to kiss Venus' hand, taking advantage of the fact that she couldn't turn him down.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, darling!" a waitress squeaked behind him.

She made a couple of other acid remarks. Gena looked at her, his eyes already red, and said, good-naturedly:

"Shut up, shrew."

The waitress gave him a hateful smile and went to complain to the manager. The latter soon came up to the table and asked Gena to calm down. Gena replied, rather philosophically, that it's not the hashers' business to meddle, when a guest comes in with his fiancée. The fiancée went pale and begged Gena to stop.

Gena reasoned with her, ordering her to not meddle in a man's affairs, and punched the manager in the face. The manager, his face covered in blood, began calling for help.

Two waiters who served Gena's table, attempted to separate Gena's hands from the manager's neck. But they failed. The noise from the row grew louder and louder.

The guest at nearby tables watched the fight with excitement. Lena was whimpering quietly and asking to be taken away. Mid-fight, Gena didn't even hear her pleas.

"Take that!!" Gena yelled, when another waiter ran over to the table.

The waiter fell, knocked down by Gena's fist. It was a typical restaurant show. Gena's and Oleg's voices rang out, resonating with the glasses on the surrounding tables.

Cursing profusely, Gena was promising everyone who cared to listen that they'd be buried together in one commu-

nal grave. He was screaming on top of his lungs, knocking out waiter teeth left and right. The gypsum Venus stared at Gena, silently smiling, as if supporting Gena in his plight for justice. The son of the deputy of Moscow Central Committee was punching in waiters' faces with his bare fists and yelling threats. His friend wasn't far behind. One of the other drunk customers screamed:

"That's what they deserve, the blood suckers!"

This kind of support only egged the friends on. Lena fainted. When the police arrived, three waiters were lying on the floor, unconscious. The fight ended as the police took Gena and Oleg to the police station.

Poor Lena, having come to, was in utter shock.

The first thing she said when she got home was:

"Do what you want, but I'll never marry that man!"

The parents got scared and ran over to Misha Babaev.

"Lena doesn't want to marry him!" Lena's mother indignantly screamed at Misha.

But Misha was a seasoned diplomat.

"Calm down, come on! So the guy had a bit to drink... Caused a spot of trouble. It happens. Marriage will reign him in, he'll become more serious."

To turn down his buddy, when everything had already been agreed on, would be an insult to Babaevs. Everyone pleaded with Lena to reconsider her decision. No small wonder, but they succeeded.

The wedding was celebrated in style.

There was a rabbi, and the chuppah under the bright blue sky, and the restaurant where the entire procession headed after the ceremony.

The groom held a bouquet of red flowers in one hand and his bride by the other. The bride seemed like she was ready to fly up into the sky – that's how happy she was. This was how Gena appeared before those who participated in the cer-

emony. Cars, gleaming in the sunlight, filled the town streets. Elderly jewish women lazily observed the procession. They remembered more divorced than weddings and have long since stopped believing in loyalty oaths. And only the sons of procurement agents and tailors were jealous of Gena, because he was the son of a king.

The wedding day in Kislovodsk was a lot of fun. Even old Nahamie, slightly drunk, danced to his heart's content. Vodka streamed endlessly. The celebration spilled out from the restaurant onto the streets. Houses, parks, the sky over the town – everything was singing and dancing, full of joy and giddiness. Gena seemed happy. On one hand, nothing really changed for him, but on the other – this was a new hope. He danced with Lena as if she was his guardian angel. They spun about, smiling happily, and everyone who saw them became filled with joy.

My brother brought his wife to our house on Katykhin street, just like I had. Mama Havo gave them a semi-basement small room across from the boiler room – and that is where Gena and Lena started their life together. I'm not sure it was how Lena had imagined in, having heard all about Babaev's fairy-tale riches.

Mean tongues gossiped that the room was evidence of how Havo really felt about Gena. Perhaps. Though there weren't any other free rooms at our house.

Gena probably thought that their living situation wasn't the best, too. But what was he to do? He could only keep quiet.

They were still living in that room when Lena came home from the hospital with their firstborn, Andrey. That was when my brother started thinking about possibly moving out.

From the very beginning, Havo did not treat Lena the same way she had treated Lida, and she felt no need to hide that fact. The young daughter-in-law was forbidden from going to the second floor! It may have seemed that she was treated almost like a servant in that house.

Lena and Gena lived in that house exactly for a year and three months. During that time, Gena had saved up enough money to buy himself a house on Katykhin street, in our district, two hundred meters closer to the mountains. Not the best house in the world, it needed a lot of work done, but Gena got what he craved – independence and freedom. Our parents' house did not become emptier or quieter when he moved out – it was if it was fated to be loud and crowded forever.

XXIII

As soon as Gena escaped the parental home, he was immediately replaced. By coincidence, as soon as he'd left, Alik, Havo's prodigal son, had returned. He came home from the far North – Narian-Mar. During his absence, more had changed in his personal life than in all of our lives combined. Our uncle Alik broke away from the thirty-something club, but had not yet quite signed up for the almost-forty one – and at that particular age, anything seems possible. A football player in the past, he retained his love of gambling.

Passion and gambling were in uncle Alik's blood. He saw all human qualities only as useful or useless for gambling. He looked at everyone as if he were king, even though his pockets were often emptier than those of any pauper. From his very childhood, Alik was incredibly stubborn when following his own wishes – he idled, spending whatever he could. He changed one bad company for another. Havo tolerated all of it, because she loved her son more than she loved life itself.

And what could she do? Just sigh sadly and ask her other son: “When is this going to end?” – and he always shrugged in response and then added, “To ask a gambler to give up the game is the same as trying to stifle a fountain”.

Alik told many stories about life up North, only avoiding one – how he actually ended up there. What happened was this.

At one point, Alik messed up. Messed up royally, having lost at cards. He owed some mobsters a large sum of money – something like ten thousand rubles, back then an unimaginably large sum. The guys told him to pay up, or “it won’t be pretty”, but Alik ignored their threats. So they caught him. Some thugs cornered him and started “talking”. They hit him in the face like it was a tambourine. One hit him, another one held him up, so that Alik wouldn’t fall down.

When they let him go, he fell to the ground unconscious. That’s how they brought him home, where they handed him to our father.

“If he doesn’t pay up the 10 grand, next time we’ll cut him,” Alik’s “friends” told him.

They were curt but clear.

That evening Havo and Aleksey had a family meeting.

“What’s there to think about?” Havo threw up her hands. “We have to do something! Just don’t scold him,” she asked wistfully. “We have to save him from these people.”

“I’ll give him the money,” Aleksey said. “Calm down, mother. But he has to forget about his shenanigans once and for all!”

And Father paid Alik’s debt to the mob.

It was then that Havo’s son decided to leave Kislovodsk. He went to cold Narian-Mar with a woman named Zhanna. Their relationship could only be described in one phrase: hot-blooded passion. And so, five years later, Alik came back, like the prodigal son. He had broken up with Zhanna.

The family accepted him quietly. He settled down. A man cannot be without a wife for long. A Jewish woman was found for Alik – a good girl, with whom he should have been happy. And happiness did come in the form of naïve Rosa, who bore him three children. But Alik never changed. He wasted away the rest of his life, hanging about and gambling at cards.

XXIV

One early morning during that year's particularly hot summer I came into my office. The secretary set down a cup of freshly brewed strong tea, brought in the day's newspapers.

I picked up *The Kuban Pravda*, skimmed over the headlines and began to read. A notice, printed in a rather big font, caught my eye.

The notice said that Anatoly Georgievich Tarada had been appointed secretary of the regional party committee. His biography followed further down on the page. The news was staggering. I called father immediately, but as luck would have it, he was out. I called Slava.

"Slava, hi! You got a minute? You have the paper nearby? Go look at today's *Kuban Pravda*. What, you don't have it? Never mind, don't bother looking for it!" I paused and then said quickly. "Anatoly Georgievich was appointed regional committee secretary!"

Slava was dumbfounded.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m telling you, it’s in *Kuban Pravda*. Turn on the TV. Kuban News have already announced the appointment.”

“Wow!” Slava’s voice was full of admiration.

“Anatoly Georgievich continues to go up the ladder,” I went on excitedly. “I wanted to call Father, but he’s not there.”

“You think he doesn’t know?”

“Maybe he does and maybe he doesn’t. Just think, Anatoliy Georgievich, what a wallflower... No hint, no mention, nothing to even suggest this was going to happen! And then – bam!”

“What does it have to do with us?”

“Slava, are you dumb? He’ll be capable of so much more now! It’s no joke!”

“Yeah, it’s interesting. I wonder what Father would say right now,” Slava drawled.

“The most important part of this news is that it has a lot to do with us. Just think.”

Slava didn’t say anything. Our protector was moving up in the world. We couldn’t ignore the fact that it would, in one way or another, impact us. Like a pianist, playing a melody, assumes that where one hand plays, the other will follow.

“Call him and congratulate him, Slava!”

Yes, sometimes life was flush with great surprises. I wanted to pick up the phone immediately and call Tarada. But I was enjoying biding my time with graceful deliberation, the same kind felt by a singer who comes out to sing his hit knowing that he will receive a standing ovation. But eventually impatience won.

I called Tarada’s direct line.

“Anatoly Georgievich , congratulations!”

“Oh, Igor! Thank you, thank you. You know this is a great responsibility for me, but I accepted this offer knowing that.

Tarada's voice was different. More powerful or something.
"I'm going to be in Krasnodar tomorrow for a meeting.
Would you permit me to come and see you?"
"Of course, Igor. See you then."
"Good-bye."

* * *

I thought about Serezha as I replaced the receiver.
How is my son doing?
"He looks exactly like you," Lida always said when I came
to visit them in Kislovodsk.
"Let me kiss him..."
"Just be careful, Igor. Hold him tight. And wash your
hands first."

The darling memories of my son spun through my mind.
I looked out the window. The people below me were rushing
somewhere, the day was hot, and even the nearby sea did
not bring the much needed coolness. But I did not notice any
of that.

I felt that I was full of great hope, as if Tarada's appointment gave me strength.

"It would be great if Lida and Serezha could come back soon," I thought.

After that I began thinking about his grandfather – my father. I wondered what kind of father I was. Was I like my father? Only mine allowed no tenderness in our relationship.

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

The secretary poked her head in.

"Igor Alekseevich, the car will be here tomorrow at 6 AM.
Do you need anything else?"

"Prepare the quarterly reports. And call the head engineer."

I had to prepare for tomorrow's meeting. Even though it was routine, it required some preparation.

* * *

The next morning I entered Grechany's office. Twenty-four nervous and calculating directors, all ready to bite one's head off, were waiting for the meeting to start.

This was a regularly scheduled meeting of meat plant directors for our region. Meat was a hot topic during the high season.

There was an empty seat in the middle of the table. I sat down and took out the documents I'd brought with me. Grechany was quiet. He was waiting for everyone to gather. I began to observe him.

Tall, blonde, about twenty years my senior. Aleksey Petrovich had not had an easy life. He moved up the party career ladder, got up to city committee secretary, and then something happened – and he was transferred to production manager work – a nerve-wracking, difficult position. A lot of effort was required to prove that he was not only able to do the job, but to excel at it in comparison to other men in his position.

One look at him was enough to know that he was a smart man, one who was well-versed in economics, a dependable man who thought twice before speaking. Both his bosses and his employees respected him.

This time, Grechany was on edge. I felt it immediately, as soon as my eye caught his. Even though he had greeted me warmly, I felt a sharpness to his manner.

“Good day, Igor Alekseevich.”

Some sort of nervous and muddled cloud seemed to hang in the air. It could only mean one thing – heads were about to roll.

“We have three topics on the agenda for today,” Grechany began demurely, “supplying Sochi” he glanced at the director of Sochi's meat plant. “Anapa as a children's health camp,” here, he sternly looked at me. “And the Armavir plant.”

He said the last part especially pointedly, as Armavir was the flagship for meat production in Kuban.

Grechany put on his glasses and sat down. The chair squeaked under him, but he paid no attention, only coughed a few times, as if gathering his thoughts.

Then suddenly, with no introduction, avoiding the topics of both Sochi and Anapa, came down upon us all:

“The most important thing on the agenda is the state of things at the Armavir plant.”

He said it so strictly, that everyone immediately turned to the director of that plant – Dubrovsky, who has sitting at the other end of the table.

He was a man of about seventy, and by the looks of it – a big fan of eating and feasting.

Glasses gave him a somewhat more intelligent look, but his weight was dangerously close on becoming a disability in the near future. It seemed as if he was always slightly buzzed. A wandering gaze and a smile crossed his face, like a shadow.

He barely reacted to Grechanov’s words. It was the reaction of a man who kept walking as the street dog barked at him.

“I’m talking to you, Aleksey Ivanovich,” Grechany said softly.

Dubrovsky shuddered, as if he’d been shocked.

Grechany paused, giving the rest of us a chance to turn and look at the delinquent director. He felt dozens of pairs of eyes and was unable to avoid this energy. It seemed to knock him off his feet.

I thought that Grechany’s face – strict, almost angry, lit up with the power of authority that was able to rid of anyone who stood in his way. And Dubrovsky’s face fell.

His face looked like he was about to cry, and a crooked smile pursed his lips – he looked like someone who wanted to hide how someone’s attention was hurting them.

His head started shaking. It was as if he’d gone more gray, and his face became puffy and his nose turned red.

Some of those present around the table looked away. Most people were too ashamed to look at Dubrovsky. Authority does not forgive loss of control.

At one point he was the most experienced, frightful beast, and now, he sat there like a little boy, as a man twenty years his junior scolded him.

“Let’s be serious. Do you understand where this is headed?”

Dubrovsky withered like an old tree. His gaze became even more absent, as if everything that was going on around him was an abomination.

It seemed that he was listening to something only he could hear, his inner voice. He tilted his head, and stared at the table with one eye, as if it was a Buddhist exercise in concentration, as if he saw writing on that table that he was preoccupied with.

“Aleksey Ivanovich”, Grechany spoke so slowly he was almost spelling out the name.

Dubrovsky said something so quietly that no one could make out the words.

There were times when Dubrovsky’s name was spoken with envy and awe. But now, none of that power was left in him. Grechany was having his way with him. It meant that the king was losing his throne.

Dubrovsky almost didn’t mind, he was a walking corpse. The only thing he could do now was to do a couple of shots when he got home. But for now – he had to tolerate the meeting.

Everyone was waiting for the grande finale of the performance.

“It’s a sick, sick plant,” Grechany continued, and stared at Dubrovsky. He thought that a scolding was the only way to ameliorate the situation. “Do you not understand that we’re not just talking about your plant, but about the numbers for the entire region?”

Grechany lifted up his index finger, as if wanting to pierce the ceiling.

There was another, secret meaning to his words. Any mishap suffered by a specific plant that he was responsible for reflected on his own authority, as the manager of the meat production in the whole of Kuban; Krasnodar region.

Not all the directors thought about it. But Grechany knew just how dependent he was on the success or failure of his directors.

“We don’t have enough equipment,” said the old man suddenly – and loudly.

At first, Grechany was startled. This was a worn-out excuse.

“That’s not an excuse,” Grechany’s voice got stronger. “Comrades, things can’t go on like this.” He suddenly hit the table with the palm of his hand.”

Some people nodded in approval. Dubvorsky shivered.

“Aleksey Ivanovich, do you not understand what you’re doing to us?” suddenly Grechany’s voice became almost pleading. “The production numbers of your plant, I have them, they’re falling. Here they are. Am I making this up??”

“We’ll improve them,” mumbled Dubrovsky.

“I keep hearing this from meeting to meeting, but nothing ever changes. The regional committee will not tolerate this,” said Grechany in a tired voice. He suddenly understood the uselessness of his words, as if Dubrovsky’s quota for being yelled at had been filled. “These aren’t simple complaints.” said Grechany calmly. “The condition of the plant is of great concern to the region’s government.”

Many of us exchanged looks.

“If it wasn’t for his age,” whispered someone to the left of me.

“He used to be powerful, could just eat you alive, and now...” someone on the right made a helpless gesture.

“It’s his own fault. Shouldn’t have let it get this far,” hissed someone behind me.

“Quiet, you!,” the Sochi plant director hushed everyone.

“During the last year, you’ve given loose reign to the plant,” Grechany’s voice was now indifferent and calm. “I don’t know how to help Armavir. Aleksey Ivanovich, the ministry has already sent a new head engineer to your plant. That was two months ago – and nothing had changed.”

He spoke quietly now, but with such strength that his words, it seemed, could reach all the way inside someone – but Dubrovsky sat there with a stone face, not reacting to anything he heard.

He was breathing heavily and was turning redder and redder, as if he was close to a stroke.

“I understand, Aleksey Petrovich,” he finally uttered.

And then he began saying things that seemed absolutely idiotic, as if he’d lost his mind.

As far as I remember, all the meetings always ended the same way – Dubrovsky was scolded regularly, but for some reason – never fired.

Yet the numbers remained unchanged. The end of every meeting was like Groundhog Day – Armavir, and Grechany promising to take matters into his own hands and to not lose face in the eyes of the regional government. And Dubrovsky always tolerated this torture, as if retaining his director’s chair was the only meaningful thing he had left in his life.

No one could ever imagine that he would start to defend his honor or do anything to worsen the situation.

Inevitable failure was imminent.

A heavy pause hung in the room. Then a chair moved, scraping the floor, and Dubrovsky got up heavily, like a defendant in court.

And it became immediately noticeable that this was an old man, whose love of cognac had long since replaced his love of life. One of the directors whispered, “See what they drove the man to...”

“Aleksey Ivanovich, why aren’t you saying anything?”
exclaimed Grechany.

Dubrovsky whispered something, barely audible.

And suddenly, Grechany exploded:

“That’s it! Enough! Write your letter of resignation!”

The Sochi guy leaned over to me.

“A whole meeting just for Armavir!” my colleague was
clearly happy with the performance.

Dubrovsky sat down. Grechany tapped his pencil on the
table.

“You’re all free to go. The meeting is over.”

Everyone began to get up.

“A play about one plant, yeah!” the Sochi plant director
kept whispering to someone.

“We only talk about Armavir!” chimed in the fat Novo-
rossiysk director.

“Armavir this, Armavir that...When is it finally going to
end...”

Whispering and gossiping about the meeting, the Kuban
meat plant directors scattered to their cars.

XXV

The regional party committee building was designed to ensure that every single visitor felt the might of the people who worked there and realized how important he was for being allowed inside.

The long and deserted hallway reminded one of a reserve that was closed to the public. It was practically a dead zone – the silence, especially after coming in from the loud city streets, was deafening. It was as if a man was secluded from the problems of the world, the same way a magnifying glass precludes you from clearly seeing anything outside its borders.

I've always enjoyed the process – ascending the giant marble staircase, covered in red carpets that muffled the sound of footsteps, as if you were no longer you, but your guardian angel, your higher “you” was going up the steps to mount Olympus.

The magic of authority was felt in every inch of the half-dark hallway, authority that seduced and bewitched anyone who came in close contact with it.

This building was less glamorous than the one at Old Square in Moscow, but no less majestic. It seemed that no one worked here.

I got lost in my dreams for a split seconds, imagining the impossible – my picture in the newspaper, I get elected first secretary of the regional committee, and here I am, going up to the tribune, humble and reserved, as any man who has the power over hundreds of thousands should be. I shook my head, dispelling the illusion.

What typically awaited Jews in the Soviet Union was no secret, so everyone wondered how I could have gotten to where I was at my young age.

The monumental white marble bust of Lenin, standing in a narrow niche in the giant hallway caught my eye.

I glanced at the enormous typical oil portrait of Brezhnev that hung across from Vladimir Ilyich.

“Your ID,” the strict yet polite voice of the on-duty police officer brought me out of my thoughts.

I showed him my ID and told him why I was here.

I walked down the hallway, by Tarada’s old office. I felt nothing for it anymore, just the opposite – his new office, up on the third floor, that seemed the source of all future hopes and successes. If we were to go our separate ways, it wouldn’t be on the floor I was heading to now.

The extra flight of stairs made me convinced that a man that made it up here never makes it here by himself – he’s like a mountain climber, who needs his comrades to make the climb. His ascend drags us higher up with him.

The office was very respectable. Portraits of Brezhnev and Central Committee members hung on the walls.

Overall, it was decorated in a very simple style save for the giant new table that was now allotted to Anatoly Georgievich because of his promotion.

His old office, the one I’ve visited so many times, was now occupied by Sherbak.

For some reason I thought about him, and I was very amused. But not because this dignified man was comical. It was because before, the manager of the department of production and sales seemed like a god to me, but now – now I walk by his door without feeling a single tremor inside.

The secretary opened the door and I went into Tarada's office. The office was filled with sunlight.

"Anatoly Georgievich!" I paused. He lifted his head, got up quickly and went in for a hug. "My congratulations on this important appointment!"

Tarada hugged me happily.

I reached into my pocket, took out an envelope, and put it in front of Tarada.

"Thank you," he said, moved the envelope to the side of the table and slid it into an open drawer.

"Thank you, Igor, thank you," Tarada was glowing. "This is a high position, a lot of responsibilities. I won't let them down. My spouse used to forget what I looked like before, and now..." he waved the idea aside. "and now it'll be worse. But what can we do, what can we do...These are our sacrifices."

He looked at me kindly. I could tell how much he liked being in the new office, how happy everything here made him and how much more he respected himself now.

"This goes for all of us, by the way. No man is an island. You understand?" Tarada drawled and pointed me to an armchair.

"Care and attention," his voice was almost singing the words. "We'll keep working, Igor. It's not just a high appointment. It's a big responsibility."

"We won't let you down, Anatoly Georgievich," I said.

"What else could we do? That's how life is," Tarada went on, smiling. "The state thinks of itself, and we think of ourselves. I'm glad you understand."

"A pike lives in the lake to keep all the fish awake..."

Tarada laughed. We were like two champion chess players, who were discussing a game and speaking a language only they understood.

“Supporting young people who show initiative, like you and Slava, that’s my first and foremost task,” Tarada continued. “You know what I was thinking?” he got more comfortable in his chair. “I can depend on you.”

Tarada noticed the wonder in my eyes and became even happier.

“In the sense that when you become responsible for a team, you’re responsible for everyone who depends on your. That’s why losing their trust can be so horrifying.”

“Sometimes it really doesn’t matter if you stay alive or not. The most important thing is to not lose the trust.” I nodded.

“Exactly,” Tarada nodded back. “And the Party’s trust – that’s the basis of everything. We are always protected by the Party.”

“I agree, Anatoly Georgievich,” I nodded.

“And you get it. No one is sitting around, procrastinating. Well, if there are any problems, give me a call, Igor. I’m always here to help, to advise...”

I sensed that the conversation was over.

“Thank you for your support, and all the best to you. Good-bye, Anatoly Georgievich.”

He looked at me as I left his office. I ran into Sherbak in the waiting room, almost collided with him.

Sherbak was about forty. He was going gray. A strong, stubborn chin. He was a crafty party member, who had long since learned all the mechanisms of going up and down the bureaucratic ladder, and used that knowledge to steadily, if slowly, go up.

My direct boss was not surprised at all to see me coming out of his boss’s office, without having seen him first. There was nothing odd about this, and we both knew it.

Much like I had, he sensed that we were practically equals, even though he was technically my superior. But I could come and see his boss as a friend, and as such, it wasn't really all that clear who I was – his equal or still a proper employee.

"Oh, Igor Alekseyevich," Sherbak greeted me first and extended his hand.

I greeted him. Suddenly the whole world seemed quite appealing to me.

"Good luck, Igor Alekseyevich," he shook my hand again.

"Thank you, and all the best to you too!"

* * *

As I was leaving Krasnodar that evening, I felt overwhelmingly exhausted. "How is Serezha doing?" – I wondered, and immediately felt the dire need to seem them both – Lida and Serezha. Some instinct was telling me that if I didn't see them as soon as possible, something bad would happen to me, some invisible thread that supported them, that made them smile happily when they saw me enter the house would be torn.

"To Kislovodsk," I told the driver.

Lida was always happy to see me, but I didn't always notice her feelings, didn't see how tired she was and how much she needed my affection and attention.

During those months of my life I was too preoccupied with the hustle and bustle at the plant, the reconstruction, the remodeling – it seeped the energy right out of me.

The only thing that could resurrect me was to touch Lida, to hold my son.

The driver put the pedal to the metal. Trees, houses, villages – all flew by.

The wind was playing with the fallen leaves...

* * *

Lida greeted me at the door. Hugged me.

I kissed her cheek. I was always amazed by her beauty and grandeur. But now I couldn't get enough of her face, of her milky-white skin with a slight blush on her cheeks. Only people who were born and bred in the Caucasus' fresh air could have such beautiful skin.

Her voice, as clear as a bell, rang and rang.

I picked up Serezha, kissed him.

"When did you get so big? You're so heavy!!" I threw him up in my arms.

"Igor, don't!" Lida got frightened and took him away.

Anna Grigorievna came in.

"Igor, hello."

She gave me her cheek for a kiss.

"How was your trip?"

Sometimes I thought that she couldn't utter a single word without some kind of secret meaning behind it.

She had the voice of a woman that no one could say "no" to.

"Wonderful, Anna Grigorievna. Wonderful."

"Then let's go eat."

I looked at her in gratitude. Took Lida by the hand. Now I was calm. I could handle another crazy week-long marathon at work. My marriage was a fortress, a real familial fortress, one of those that have been standing in the Caucasus for centuries.

XXVI

Sitting in the office, I looked through reports, which always affected me emotionally. My secretary said that Grechany's deputy was calling – Vladimir Georgievich Burlak.

“Igor, hello!”

“Hi, Vladimir Georgievich.”

“How are things?”

“Working hard to out-do and out-best everyone!”

“That's good. Listen, I'm going to come see you tomorrow afternoon. Maybe we could have lunch? I'm going to Krasnodar after that, from Novorossiysk. I've got some business there.”

“Of course, come on down! I'd be glad to see you.”

“See you tomorrow, then!”

I leaned back in my chair, feeling something close to exhaustion. The visit was unexpected. Then again, I was used to unexpected.

No matter which higher-up came or where – I always had to receive them – that was a part of my job, too.

The next day, my head was spinning from all the things I had to get done, when Burlak walked into my office.

We shook hands. I walked up to the window. Opened it. A smell of smoke flew into the room – the eternal companion of sausage. The winds was getting stronger.

“There will be a thunderstorm,” I said.

“Leave it open,” Burlak asked. “Let me breathe.”

The skies over the plant were cracking – somewhere far off, thunder was heard, lightning pierced the sky here and there, and the entire sky was covered in big black clouds.

Burlak looked at me with a humorous twinkle in his brown eyes. I was somewhat intrigued.

The secretary brought in two cups of tea and some snacks.

I took a big sip, as if wanting to drown by exhaustion.

“I’ll join you,” Burlak reached for the tea. “It’s better to drink something hot in the heat. Throat’s all dry,” he added.

I didn’t say anything and sat there, watching what would happen next. The whole thing seemed like a play.

I felt that Vladimir Georgievich was somewhat annoyed, but couldn’t understand the reason behind his anxiousness. I got the feeling that he wasn’t telling me something, that he was hiding something from me while suspecting that I already knew the reason he came.

Burlak wiped his face with his entire hand, and looked at me strictly.

“Sorry to drop in on you like this, without warning. So tell me, how are things?”

“Things are things, going as expected.”

I began describing the details of my crazy day as the director.

Burlak listened and nodded. And then couldn’t hold back: “My God, what a day you’re having.”

His voice had a wide range, and he used it as a musical instrument – depending on the type of conversation he was having, it could be demanding, trusting, condemning.

“Have you heard,” he dived right in, “that Grechany unexpectedly showed up at the Armavir plant, attacked them, basically?”

“No, so what?”

“So that, Dubrovsky’s been fired. The news is already spreading in the region.”

“And who’s going to replace him?”

“So far the interim director is the guy they sent to help Dubrovsky, the new head engineer. He’s from Abakan, name is Averin.”

I nodded, understandingly.

“And?” I listened, in no rush to show my true feelings.

“Grechany talked to the workers... Anyways, it turned out that Averin wasn’t sober.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“Well, it’s clear about Dubrovsky, but this guy, he’s a drinker too, then?”

“The boss himself caught him.”

“One time doesn’t prove anything,” I said.

“You want to know how it happened?” Burlak was getting carried away now. “Grechany is holding a meeting, and the Abakanian is acting weird. Well, maybe something happened with him, who knows. During the break, the secretary of the plant’s party committee comes up to Grechany, you know, “Aleksey Petrovich, could I please have a word with you”. And takes our boss for a private chat.”

“Well, and??” unwittingly, I joined in Burlak’s excitement.

“What, “well and”?? And he says, “You can’t trust the appointed interim director”. “Why not?” “He drinks. I must report this as the leader of the plant’s party organization”. And that’s that.”

Burlak's eyes were practically popping out of his head. For a manager of any level – such an accusation was one hell of a stigma.

“So, Grechany comes back to the meeting and realizes that the party man was right. But you know him, he doesn't do anything in the heat of the moment. He lets the Abakanian talk. The man starts talking, and it becomes clear, there's no doubt about it. The meeting ends, the boss gets into his car without saying a word and leave. Everyone's in shock.”

“What? He just left?”

“Without saying a word! The party committee man already told him that's this happens on a regular basis. No one has seen Averin sober. So that's that...And of course, there's also his arrogance. Maybe it's because he's got the ministry's support. I don't know. But fact remains – the man drinks, and the entire team sees it. You know, when Dubrovsky did it – no one saw him drink. He'd drink and go take a nap. This guy, he drinks, he becomes courageous...”

I whistled.

“The boss came back livid, said “Something must be done”.”

“So what's going to happen?” I asked. “Dubrovsky's been fired, and there's no one to replace him?”

“They wanted to replace him with that engineer,” noted Burlak, “but you see where things stand with him. I have a feeling the boss doesn't want him to be the new director. So, that's what I wanted to tell you. Be prepared.”

I looked at him in confusion.

“The boss may decide to gather everyone again. He needs to make a decision,” Burlak paused and went to the window. “It's nice here, where you are. Cozy.”

“Oh, stop it,” I waved him away. “The production...”

“Air, sea...Everything is so...steady. Right!” Burlak got up. “I've overstayed my welcome. Bye, or, the boss will start looking for me – and I'm not there! Later! And thanks!”

I walked him to the door.

“Come visit anytime. Call, too. I’ll help you if I can.”

* * *

A week later I was called in to see Grechany.

I was surprised. I hadn’t messed up in any way. We were right on target with production. What could be the reason?

The building of Kuban Meat Production Association was located a ten-minute walk away from the Kuban party building, in an old, pre-revolutionary house with stucco molding and high ceilings.

Grechany’s office was big enough to fit about thirty people, but otherwise quite modest.

The secretary took me see him immediately.

Grechany was playing with his glasses when I walked in and looked at me as if I had just lost my house in a fire and now it was up to him to figure out how to help me.

“You had a good thing going with the Anapa experiment,” he began without any pleasantries.

The word “had” made me break out in cold sweat.

“What do you mean?” I asked, thinking frantically. Damn it, what is he saying? I’m doing well! It can’t be that...But I didn’t get the chance to finish my thought.

“There’s been a suggestion that you should be sent to Armavir.”

I was dumbfounded.

“But I’ve got tons of things planned for Anapa, still!”

Grechany looked at me and chuckled. He was slightly cross-eyed, so when he looked at you, it was rather hard to tell if he’s looking you in the eye or not, if he’s hiding something or being upfront.

His face said “Igor, you’re not understanding what I just said.”

Out loud, he said:

“Igor, look at this situation yourself. In a little while, you’ll hit the ceiling here. The plant is working, everything is fine. And then what? What are you going to do with all that energy that you have? “He was nervous and repeating some things over and over. “What will you do with it? Whereas here, it’s a great stepping stone, where you can show yourself and do so much more than you can ever accomplish at the Anapa plant.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I am grateful to you for being able to accomplish so much in such a short time. The plant is unrecognizable. It’s functioning efficiently.”

That was nice to hear.

Grechany paused and looked at me with curiosity, trying to figure out how I would reply.

“It’s a rare case where you’ll have the chance to head the standard-bearing plant in Kuban. I’m not rushing you. Go there, take a look, see what’s what. I think that you’d be able to handle things there. The plant is sinking and something must be done as soon as possible...” he finished.

I still didn’t utter a word.

Grechany interpreted my silence in his own way.

“Igor, I understand that this is difficult. But try to see that Anapa is a closed chapter. You showed what you can do, I can barely recognize that plant. And that’s why I’m offering you the opportunity to go forward.”

He got up from the table and paced around the office.

“Keep in mind, of course, that there are colossal problems there, but the position I’m offering is so much bigger and more important than what you have in Anapa now. Anyways, go, see for yourself. And let me know what you decide. Remember – our offer is the offer of growth.”

He extended his hand, letting me know that the conversation was over.

I felt that my emotions were dying down. Nothing that happened with Grechany was what I had expected.

Damn it, fate was testing me, offering me such aces that to play them required both strength and bravery.

I called my father immediately.

"The thing is..." I hesitated, and then just blurted it all out. "I got an offer to head up the Armavir meat plant. It's an industry giant."

The other end of the line was silent.

"Yes," my father said slowly, and that "yes" had just as many questions in it as it had answers. His voice was like an electric charge that went through me. "Sonny, it's your decision. I can't advise you on this one. In any case, you understand that the opportunities in Anapa are limited, whereas in Armavir..." Father paused, looking for the right words. "It's growth, different kinds of production volumes, different opportunities. You don't want to spend your entire life in Anapa, do you? Did he say why they picked you?"

"Not directly. But it's somewhat clear, anyways. The current director had practically destroyed the plant. They couldn't put up with it anymore."

"Here's what I'll tell you," my father said enthusiastically. "Go there, take a look, and then let's meet up, in Moscow or Krasnodar. I think that that plant is a good starting point, a place where you can really show what you're made of."

I tried to anticipate all the possible negative aspects of moving to a new place. I had to look at the situation objectively and not kid myself. Thoughts were spinning in my head.

Father went on:

"Any business has its own undercurrents. You know that neither you nor Grechany, you don't exist in an empty space. It's the same as it is in the woods – there are bears, and there are smaller animals. In the end, Grechany is the one who is

getting all the short end of the stick for what Dubrovsky did, right?" Father asked me slyly.

"That's how the system works," I answered. "He's the boss of regional meat production. If Armavir is failing, it's Grechanoy's fault."

"So you see!" he exclaimed, as if he'd solved the riddle. "Armavir is a strategic location. And he needs someone he can depend on there. But you need to make sure you're not being set up as a patsy. This isn't something where you can fail."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"Igor, you're grown up, it's your decision. But I'll say it again," he said, avoiding my question. "Armavir is a great starting point, but Anapa isn't bad either. It's your decision."

* * *

I called Tarada's secretary and asked her to connect me.

"Oh, Igor, hello!" I heard Anatoly Georgievich on the other end of the line. "What's up?"

"Anatoly Georgievich, good day, I have some questions..."

He interrupted me.

"Igor, I know all about it. Go to Armavir, take a look around, and we'll talk after you see it," he sounded as if he knew well in advance why I was calling.

His words sounded like a blessing.

* * *

I was taken to Armavir by Vladimir Georgievich Burlak himself.

The entire trip there he kept saying that it's an unofficial visit – we're just going there to look around. I was sitting on the back seat of the car, in a suit and tie, it was very hot, and even the open window didn't help.

When I saw the giant factory from the car, it didn't seem quite real. Being a professional and seeing something of this

magnitude was quite impressive. The territory was fifty hectares!

“Don’t get out of the car. You can’t walk through the entire territory,” Burlak explained, noticing my desire to get out of the Volga, after we drove through security.

The factory seemed more like a small town.

The first plant I saw was the medicine plant – a three-story brick building, full of large windows. After that I was shown the canned goods and the sausage plants, separate departments. Then the freezer departments, the animal and bird slaughterhouses.

After my small plant in Anapa, the place that I’d gotten so used to, the Amravir factory seemed giant.

Months would be needed to even begin to understand how it all worked. “And to fix it?” I asked myself. “So much work to be done, endless...”

“I feel like you’ve taken me to another country,” I shared my impressions with Burlak.

“It’s an enormous base,” he laughed. “Where you, Igor Alekseyevich, can use all of your potential and talent. Almost every bit here needs fixing.”

“Honestly, my head is spinning,” I admitted.

“Consider it a challenge.” Burlak chuckled good-naturedly. “A challenge for your ability to deal with stalemate situations!”

However, all of my managerial experience was limited to the small Anapa plant. It was managed practically hands-on. Here, I’d have to deal with an industry giant. A monster.

“Well? Impressive?” I shuddered. I didn’t notice that I lost track of the conversation and got lost in my own thoughts. Burlak patted me on the shoulder.

“And frightening, all at the same time,” I added, trying to sound as optimistic as possible. I didn’t want to be taken for a happy idiot. Being on my guard couldn’t hurt.

“Well, you can handle it!” Burlak patted me again. “There’s nothing worse than taking on a job and failing at it, is there?”

We saw the entire factory.

“Let’s go see Averin. I told him that we’re just passing through,” Burlak explained curtly.

I nodded, understanding.

“They’re waiting for us at the banquet hall.”

“Did they prepare something special?”

“Not at all, they kept it simple.”

There was a table already set and waiting in the banquet hall, which seemed more like a cafeteria. We were met by Genadiy Vladimirovich Averin, we drily said our hellos and sat down. I was greatly surprised to see Dubrovsky behind him.

Burlak grabbed a plate right away. He began eating, not afraid of showing how hungry he was.

“The food is great,” exclaimed Burlak, pushing the plate away. “Igor Alekseyevich, what are you waiting for, try it! It’s good, home-cooked,” he turned to me.

A plate of perfect meatballs, with a slightly pink crust, that smelled like heaven was put in front of me. I remembered that I hadn’t yet eaten that day.

The meat was tender and well-cooked. It was as if the cooks were making a homemade meal. I turned to Burlak and nodded my head, he was right about the food! Burlak winked and started telling a joke.

The Abakanian got up – our host, the head engineer, interim director of the factory.

“Valya,” he motioned to the woman who was serving us, and she immediately poured everyone a shot.

“To the success of your factory,” toasted Burlak.

Somehow he took it upon himself to be the toast-master for this occasion.

“I’m very glad that you came to visit us!” Dubrovsky said from his corner.

The old man's prior accomplishments did play a part in the end, and he remained at the factory as the "honorary" technician in the sausage department – the recipes there required the use of cognac and he was no stranger to that particular ingredient.

"What are your plans?" the Abakanian asked, obviously intrigued by our unexpected visit.

Burlak gave a fake laugh.

"We have a long ways ahead of us. Igor Alekseevich here," Vladimir Georgievich nodded in my direction – offered to accompany me on my trip. I'm going to his home town, Kislovodsk, to rest up. We decided to stop by here on the way.

Burlak's fake story was good enough to pass for the truth. Averin, smiling widely so that his gold teeth showed, picked up his glass.

"To your health!"

"To your health!"

I noticed that he drank one shot after the other, without pause or care that we were there. We were still working on the first shot, while Valya had already filled his glass three times.

Burlak's story about Grechany's suspicions began to seem true.

We chatted. Dubrovsky kept telling jokes. Valya kept serving us with wonderful dishes, with the most exquisite smells.

Zhiguli beer, barbecued meat, chebureks, Russian blinis, Siberian pelmeni – the table was set for kings.

It was obvious that Averin knew how to play the game. He was probably hoping to get rid of the word "interim" in his title soon. He was in the best mood.

"If you're interested to learn anything about the factory, just ask," he said to Burlak in an attempt to provoke him.

But Burlak wasn't born yesterday.

"Gennady Vladimirovich, I'm basically on vacation already, so please, let's not talk shop," he stopped that line of

conversation and I saw how Gennady's face immediately relaxed.

So, he was curious about why I was here, after all. Suddenly, Dubrovsky looked at Vladimir Georgievich with an ice-cold stare.

"I know why you're here," he said. There was an immediate lull in conversation. "Coming here, like Trojans in the horse...Without warning."

"So why are we here then?" Burlak asked coldly.

"Don't you want to admit it?" Dubrovsky continued pressing.

"Honestly, I don't know what you mean," Burlak said as honestly as possible, and potentially even too pointedly. "Me personally, I'm going on vacation."

"And you're not aware that we just started using a new smoked sausage recipe?" Dubrovsky laughed mischievously. "We developed it ourselves!"

Burlak, letting out a sigh of relief, also laughed.

"What a kidder you are, Aleksey Ivanovich. I almost bad-mouthed myself!"

Burlak winked at me.

"Would you like to try it?" Dubrovsky wouldn't let up.

"Oh, how could one say no! But, you know, I am simply stuffed!" I patted myself on the stomach.

"Don't you worry about that," smiled Dubrovsky.

And, whistling an old Soviet tune about coal heavers, he softly walked away from the banquet table, somewhere to a side table, and came back victorious, carrying a plate with thinly cut sausage.

He bowed, his bald spot glistening, and set the Armavir factory's newest accomplishment on the table before us.

"Try it."

We each took a piece. I chewed it slowly.

"How does it taste?" asked Gennady.

"Excellent," I muttered, chewing on a piece.

To be fair, the sausage really was quite good.

"I'd like to note," Dubrovsky said to Burlak, "that we're doing everything we can," he pursed his lips, "to make sure that the factory's products retain the same level of quality as before." He accented the word "before" heavily. "It's not that easy with the kind of meat that we get..."

Burlak smiled ironically.

"Let's hope that the situation rights itself in the nearest future," he said, putting an abrupt end to all further hints that Dubrovsky had been treated unfairly.

And we did another shot.

We soon left the factory, but I kept picturing the giant production buildings in my mind.

"Igor, don't be stupid," Burlak told me, lowering his voice, as we walked to the car. "You have to make a decision. They think highly of you up there – he pointed upwards with his eyes – and are ready to provide any necessary help. Alright, let's go, we'll talk on the way."

We got into the car.

I felt a certain kind of positive energy from Burlak, which, along with his excitement, was eating away at my uncertainty, leaving nothing behind.

"I just want to say," he continued, "that it's time you got down to serious business. You're used to things in Anapa by now. Everything is running smoothly. The plant is small, but it's running as well as it ever will. We understand that that's your accomplishment. But the situation here is much worse than it was in Anapa when you started. However, the price of success is so much higher."

It occurred to me that he and Grechany were singing the same song. "They must have discussed me," I smiled to myself. "Gossiped about me before making their decision."

I tried to look indifferent, as any poker player holding the winning hand attempts to look.

It started raining. The light drizzle covered the road. I felt my heart beating – was I worried or was it a premonition of something? I looked at Burlak, who was staring at the road. I got lost in my own thoughts about the factory.

* * *

I snapped out of it only when the car stopped in the center of Kislovodsk.

“Here we are!” Burlak’s voice woke me up. “I need to move my suitcase.”

We opened the trunk and I saw a slew of boxes with pates, sausages, including the “country’s latest weapon” – the new kind of sausage that Dubrovsky bragged about.

“Well, look at how they’re equipped us for our trip!” Burlak exclaimed. I’ll take some sausage, you can have the rest.

“Volodya, take half!” I pleaded. “What am I going to do with all of this?”

“Oh, my friend, I’m going to be well-fed at the health resort, and you’re here to see family – take it to them.”

XXVII

Lida opened the door. She was holding Serezha.

“And who is here to welcome daddy home?”

I happily held my son, looked into his big eyes. He had Lida’s eyelashes. I kissed his tiny, like a button, nose. The child became agitated, stared at me, fidgeting.

“What, you don’t recognize your dad?” Lida laughed and carefully took Serezha back. “What’s the matter, little guy? Did you get scared? Daddy doesn’t see us that often, so now we’re scared.”

Serezha’s black eyes sparkled, it was as if he had guessed who I was and reached his hands out to me. His lips were playing an adorable march of sounds and bubbles, that was able to melt metal, not just my heart. Tenderness and something much deeper and much more exciting filled me – this was my heir, my blood. Looking at him, I felt immortal. I now had a base, something that I could base my wildest fantasies of the future on.

Lida was beautiful. In a simple house dress, without make-up, so magical and pure. She turned her face to me – young,

teasing, but already having some mysterious womanly wisdom. She touched my hand and I felt energetic again, and the exhaustion lost its hold on me.

You are beautiful – I whispered to my wife.

She smiled. I saw in her eyes how willing she was to sacrifice herself for me and the child.

Twenty minutes later, when I was already sitting at the table and eating, she looked at me suspiciously and, not able to hold back any longer, asked:

“Why are you being so mysterious? What happened?”

I pushed a plate of chudu away.

“Lida!” I looked at her with admiration. She liked compliments from me. She set out another plate, with *khinkali*. Onion rings were floating around the delicious lumps in the clear liquid. “Changes are coming.”

“What’s up? Did something happen?”

“Don’t worry, Lida, everything is fine!”

Lida looked at me, worried. She set aside the plate that she was holding.

“No, tell me.”

I paused.

“So, they offered me the position of director at Armavir.”

“Where?”

Her face and tone of voice showed that she had no idea the scale of this offer.

I began to tell her about it.

My words, my gaze had always had a hypnotic effect on her.

“You see,” I finally finished, “Armavir is twice as close to you and Serezha than Anapa! What do you think?”

I paused, waiting for her reaction.

Lida nodded without hesitation. She was ready to accept any decision that came from me without a doubt.

“One day we’ll look back on today and remember that this was a great moment that we did not miss out on.”

“Look at how great our daddy is!”

Lida was glowing. Holding Serezha, she was simply enchanting.

“How is he eating?”

“He’s eating well. Just try and skip a meal, he starts screaming immediately.”

Lida kissed Serezha.

“Tell daddy how grown-up we are. We’re not eating for us! We’re eating to make daddy happy!”

I started playing with Serezha. He smiled, showing me his first tooth, and my heart was melting from the incredible tenderness that I felt for this small wonder, flesh of my flesh.

“Of course, it’s boring here without daddy,” Lida continued, watching me play with the child.

Serezha’s hair smelled of something sweet and tender, somewhat reminiscent of the smell of milk. Serezha and I stared at each other, exultant, like two jewelers who had finally found their stones.

I turned to Lida, carefully handed Serezha over to her, and then, unable to resist, leaned over and softly kissed her.

“You kiss so sweetly,” she said.

Yes, we were like two teenagers in love.

I felt the particular mix of adoration and respect that came from Lida. The way she looked at me lifted me up to some unattainable height, one from which I could not fall, and filled me with a sense of certainty and determination.

I was suddenly overcome by a feeling that life was offering me something that it offered to very few people. I felt a sense of overwhelming delight. And that feeling pushed me to act.

“Presents!” I exclaimed. “I brought something.”

“You came in like you were carrying a giant box in every pocket.”

“Of course. I’ll show you.”

I was about to go and get the presents, when Lida stopped me.

“Igor, so we’re going to move soon?” she asked suddenly. “With you, to Armavir?”

I looked at her with admiration and tenderness. The only thing this woman, essentially still a girl, wanted, was to be with me and our son. I caressed her arm.

“Of course, darling, as soon as I’m settled in, I’ll move you there. But right now it’s just an offer.”

Lida’s mom came in.

“Hello, Igor!”

“Hello, Anna Grigorievna.”

“How’s Serezha?” she immediately switched her attention to Lida.

“I already fed him, Mom.”

“Look at what I brought you!”

I ran out into the hallway.

The boxes that I brought in were filled with fresh and incredibly flavorful sausage. There was smoked sausage, too – Anna Grigorievna just gasped, looking at me taking it all out.

There were cans of pate, and impossible hams produced by the Armavir factory – all of which had been stuffed into this box by the caring hands of Armavir management.

Of course, all of this was food that you couldn’t just buy in stores, things that never made it to the empty shelves of Soviet shops. But more important was the quality I had inherited from my father – the desire to surprise, to bring presents to those closest to me, to show them that I never forgot about them.

For Lida and Anna Grigorievna, and later on for Serezha as well, each of my visits became a ceremony of gift-giving, of receiving something so impossible and incredible that it immediately made them happy.

I felt unable to keep my eyes open. The trip was long and I was beginning to pass out.

“Maybe you should lie down?” Lida asked, seeing me yawn.

I nodded gratefully, since my brain long since started sending me signals of exhaustion.

I made it to the bed and fell into the deepest sleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I dreamt, and my dreams were worrisome. I felt myself falling, and my fall was broken by waves of tenderness that I felt from Lida. My muscles relaxed, and I was sliding, like a boat slides to shore, without any effort, and it was a wonderful moment and my soul was full of delight.

And then I heard someone in my dream repeatedly say “Armavir, Armavir, Armavir...” and I couldn’t tell if it was a part of the dream, or if someone was singing an odd song about Armavir outside my window.

The next morning I opened my eyes and felt that all the worries of yesterday had gone. I had slept through both the gleeful anticipation of the future and the understandable worry about how I will handle it.

* * *

That day, Ilya Vladimirovich got back home from another lengthy business trip. He worked in procurement and when away on business, he tended to stay away for a long time.

Smoothing out his stylish suit jacket, he quickly washed his face and went into the kitchen to see Anna Grigorievna.

She was already busy, preparing Lida and I breakfast, and the kitchen was going in full swing.

“Ilya Vladimirovich!” she ran over to her husband. “You scared me so...”

“It’s always the same with you women – you just get scared! Who’s going to come here other than me?”

“Are you hungry?” Anna Grigorievna began bustling about.

“Did you have guests yesterday?” Ilya Vladimirovich noticed the heap of dirty dishes and completely ignored her question.

“Igor is here,” Anna Grigorievna smiled.

“Why didn’t you say anything!”

My father in law hurried over to see me.

“How are you? Tell me.”

I didn’t want to tell him everything right away. But Lida beat me to it.

“Dad, Igor has a new appointment.”

“What’s that?” Ilya Vladimirovich was all ears.

I had to summarize my news for him. I also shared my doubts.

“The plant in Anapa is small, but everyone knows about it – it’s a resort, after all, the highest levels of officials come there. They’ll only visit Armavir on business.”

“And you’re afraid that you won’t get noticed there?” asked my shrewd father in law.

I laughed.

“It’ll be more difficult.”

“You know, Igor, I had so many moments like this in my life, when life was giving me the winning hand, and I didn’t understand that and said no...” he interrupted himself. “I’ll tell you this much – the scarier the beginning, the better the end. Go, don’t doubt a thing.”

I nodded.

“It’s a positive thing. And closer to home,” he said thoughtfully. Suddenly his eyes sparkled mischievously. “You know, I may call on you at some point! I do run a procurement business. Cattle delivery. It’s close enough, Stavropol region.”

He looked at me searchingly, as if asking “What do you think of my idea?”

I burst out laughing.

“Why not, Ilya Vladimirovich!” I threw open my arms.

Anna Grigorievna had already out the plates in front of us.

“Who stacked up the stars in the skies to get you Amavir?” asked Ilya Vladimirovich joyously.

“Dozens of circumstances,” I muttered, eating the most delicious *ingarpol*. “But I think it’s been decided.”

* * *

I warned them on Friday, that I would be absent at work on Monday – that I was going to meet with the regional officials in Krasnodar.

Tarada’s office at the regional committee was cool and so quiet that each word echoed from the ceiling.

“I’ve been to Armavir,” I reported after we greeted each other. I paused, waiting for a reaction, but I did not get one.

“The factory’s falling apart,” I added.

Tarada was all business.

“I’ve heard that many times, trust me. What did you see for yourself?”

“Dubrovsky is still there. He’s a technician at the sausage department. Overall, it’s just a mess. It’s like everyone’s doing something, but everything is in shambles. It can’t go on like that, of course.”

Tarada scratched his head and chuckled.

“Remember Anapa? When you accepted that job, it was the same thing. There are even more problems here. But that’s what makes it interesting.”

Anatoly Georgievich’s eyes lit up.

“Igor, my advice is – you should take the job. We’ll figure out the details, but this is a good opportunity.”

I nodded.

I was inspired by the scale of the challenge before me, by the creative process.

“You’ll succeed,” said Tarada. “I have no doubts. It’s decided – you’ll take the job. And trust me, I’ll help you in any

way that I can. You'll have support, a different kind of support. As for Anapa," he waved it aside, "it's too easy for you by now. I think you understand," he finished. "there's nothing worse than a missed opportunity."

I felt that I'd grown wings as I walked out of his office.

Tarada's words kept ringing in my ears: Armvir faculty was very important for the region. I couldn't discount something like that.

People were bustling in the street, cars were racing somewhere. I was torn apart by doubt. There was a moment when the doubt almost won. I suddenly felt that I had no capacity for tactics, for inspiration, for finding creative solutions. I simply had to submit to circumstances.

As soon as I got back to Anapa, I locked myself in my office and began thinking. It was as if I was traveling through my inner space, not able to see or hear anything other than my own intuition, which gave advice with every beat of my heart.

My ears started ringing. Where was I going? On the other hand, if I get scared away, I'd never forgive myself. Anapa resort versus the backwoods of Kuban. Impossible to compare the two! The Armavir factory was one of the ten biggest ones in the country. Its director was part of the Central Committee nomenclature, part of the Ministry of Meat and Milk Production, and, of course, the regional party committee.

* * *

I asked to see Grechany right after my meeting with Tarada. He was waiting for me, I noticed, as the secretary immediately told him I had arrived.

"Well, did you go there and see everything?" Aleksey Petrovich jumped straight to business.

"Yes..."

"And what do you think?"

“Aleksey Petrovich, I would like to accept your offer. On one condition, that you will support me. If you begin publicly scolding me right way like Dubrovsky, there are issues there that won’t be resolved overnight, and in that case – I respectfully decline. You can ask a lot of me, but also offer help. It’s a factory that really does need your help.”

“Igor, scolding or not...I will ask for results. But I will also give my support. Here, write your letter of acceptance, I’ve already drafted up the relocation order.”

A thought flashed through my head – had Anatoly Georgievich already called?

“It’s been agreed on with Moscow, as well. Only the formalities remain.”

He handed me a sheet of paper – a symbolic gesture – and I wrote the letter of acceptance on the spot.

“Igor, the Regional Committee has already approved this move. I’m appointing you by order of the committee. Go to Anapa, say goodbye to your team. You have to wrap up there this week.”

XXVIII

Three days later I flew out to Moscow.

The situation called for it. As soon as I'd given my consent, a chain of events was set in motion. And it wasn't just pure formality.

I went to see Chelokyan, slightly worried. He met me, his smile showing clearly that there was no need to worry at all.

"Let's go to the board," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "Everything will be fine."

I inhaled deeply, like a swimmer about to dive, and followed Chelokyan.

The boardroom was full of people. The minister was sitting at the table. Those invited, including myself, sat separately.

That's how I remember that day.

Chelokyan said my name. I got up from my seat and Georgy Georgievich introduced me.

The minister spoke.

“I carry the motion to approve Babaev Igor Alekseyevich as director of the Armavir Meat Production Factory. Master’s degree. Worked as director of Anapa Meat Plant, with success. Has a positive recommendation from the regional committee.”

Everyone silently turned and looked at me. I felt uncomfortable, like I was on stage. Those who didn’t know me or saw me for the first time probably wondered how someone so young could be the director of such a large factory.

The minister paused.

“Are there objections?”

Silence.

He looked over those present at the meeting.

“No objections.”

I sat down.

After that, most of us were asked to leave the room. Chelokyan whispered – “Wait for me out there”.

I went back to the waiting room and began waiting. It was a long wait. Two hours or so – they had a lot of issues to discuss. Georgy Georgievich ran out to see me during the break – smiled, patted me on the shoulder:

“Congratulations, Igor. You’ve been approved, wait for me here,” and he went back.

I began to relax for the first time in days.

No one else congratulated me, as if being appointed to this position was a matter of course for these people. The board meeting was over. Everyone went to their respective offices, Chelokyan asked me to come in and see him. Once in his office, he hugged me.

“I congratulate you again, Igor Alekseyevich. Of course, this was all pure formality, but it had to be done. Everything went great. The decision to appoint you was unanimous.”

“Yes, I was expecting something more serious, I prepared a speech...” I said excitedly to Georgiy Georgievich. “And I didn’t even have to speak.”

“It’s not necessary – all the people who need to know about you, already know about you.”

“I won’t disappoint, don’t worry!” I exclaimed.

“You realize the scale here, we’re not in Anapa anymore.”

“I understand, I do, Georgy Georgievich.”

“So, we’ll be in touch more now.”

I thanked him warmly.

As I was leaving, I suddenly said,

“Georgy Georgievich, please excuse the impertinence. But can I invite you to dinner? We can go to the hotel, eat at their banquet hall.”

“I’d be glad to, I’ll come with Arias,” said Chelokyan.

“So we’ll all see each other there then. Father will come as well.”

My father knew Chelokyan, so there was nothing odd about him coming along.

“Excellent!”

“See you tonight.”

* * *

The restaurant at the House of Composers was a special place, with a menu so vast that other restaurants could only dream of it. And the prices were reasonable. It was mostly accessible to the elite – People’s artists, composers.

Despite the name, no one sang at the House of Composers. Music, orchestras – it wasn’t customary here. At least back then. Business people came here, met up, relaxed, and enjoyed the magnificent menus and....the quiet atmosphere.

Father, having given his hat and coat to the servile cloak-room attendant, gave an order to inform the director about his arrival. The latter materialized immediately.

“What an honor!!” the restaurant director, Edward Petrosyan, yelled loudly, seeing Father from afar.

We tumbled into the restaurant all together – Chelokyan, Albin, Father and I.

“Let me introduce my son,” Father said, nodding towards me. “We’re here to drink to his new job. Armavir meat factory!” Father said proudly.

Edward threw up his hands.

“How young! Congratulations!”

We greeted each other warmly.

Father nodded good-naturedly, looking around. They treated him special here.

“They say you changed your chef?”

“Why?” asked the director, surprised.

“People stopped getting poisoned here!” Father laughed loudly.

“You’re always joking, Aleksey Naumovich,” said the director in embarrassment, “when truth be told, we’ve never had a single case of food poisoning here.

“Good, we’ll test that then,” Father patted the director on the shoulder in a friendly manner.

“Come on, come on,” the director started fussing, smiling politely, “a table for our best guests.

He personally walked us over to our table. We sat down – Father, Georgy Georgievich Chelokyan, Albin Antonovich Arias, and I.

Father was in the best mood.

“What are we drinking?” he asked and called over the waiter. The latter brought over three bottles of vodka to choose from – Lemonnaya, Posolskaya and Stolichnaya.

Father looked at the bottles.

“Stolichnaya – that’s ours!”

He poured out the shots, got up, and very seriously and sincerely, said:

“Son, you have my blessing.”

Albin Antonovich nodded and smiled. Everyone clinked their glasses. I felt embarrassed and flattered at the same time.

After all, when Father was in the driver's seat, there wasn't much room for me to talk.

Three men, each of whom I admired and respected greatly, all began to congratulate me. I attempted to stop the flattering flow of words, but Chelokyan interrupted me. He started at me with his piercing black eyes and said:

"Don't object, young man. I've already said many nice things about you, and when I get angry, I tend to say even nicer things. So pour on," he yelled to the waiter. "Can't you see, this poor man needs to drink away his appointment!"

I never suspected that Georgiy Georgievich was so sociable and so masterful and witty at table talk.

"To your appointment," said Chelokyan. "You'll require some sturdy health to deal with the headache that's coming your way. So, drink up and listen."

"We were all sitting around recently....I was talking to Mikhail Kuzmich Silchenko," my father said, somewhat nonchalantly.

Chelokyan immediately caught on:

"I've also discussed Igor's appointment with Mikhail Kuzmich. He was very understanding. He thinks it was the right move," Georgiy Georgievich turned to me, and his eyes lit up with the fire of a gold-seeker finally finding his gold mine.

"It's a good tradition you have, Aleksey Naumovich, to meet with good people," chimed in Arias. "I mean, Mikhail Kuzmich. He's a very good man. Sympathetic," he shook his head.

Arias turned to me.

"Congratulations on your appointment, Igor. I hope you understand how serious things are this time around?"

"Georgiy Georgievich, Albin Antonovich, thank you for the vote of confidence. I will try my best."

"We don't doubt that," Chelokyan swooped in. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here. I just wanted to, so to speak, com-

pare our notes. Let you know that we both realize the level of responsibility you've undertaken. It won't be easy, but you won't be left without our support either. Everything else is in your hands now."

I unwittingly succumbed to the authoritative charm exuded by these two giants.

We got somewhat buzzed.

My father's friends were looking at me with a slight squint, as if trying to see how accepting of their words I was.

Arias was munching on juicy roast beef with great pleasure.

"Have you gotten a grasp of the situation already, Igor? What do you think?"

I felt like I couldn't breathe for a second. I was drunk not because of the alcohol I'd consumed but because I truly have reached the coveted "palace" of power. In a fit of decisiveness, I smiled and said:

"I'm getting the hang of things...And I understand what I'm up against, but I see nothing that couldn't be solved."

They nodded, approvingly. My father kept pouring out shots without pausing.

The lights from countless chandeliers were reflected in the clear liquid in the glasses, reminding me of airport landing strip lights.

"You've got the right attitude, Igor," Chelokyan chuckled and his eyes sparkled again, the kind of sparkle a carnivore gets when he senses his prey.

"How much time do you think you'll need to get things running properly?"

"It's dangerous to rush things in this case," my father interjected.

"I agree. And I'm not asking to rush anything. Slow and steady wins the race. But you'll have to keep your eyes on the prize, so that nothing there gets by you."

I nodded.

Chelokyan's gaze said "We always believed in you".

"And only three years ago...right, Igor?" he turned to me.
"When was it?"

"Two and a half," I corrected him.

"Exactly. Remember the first time you came to see me?
I saw a boy! But now!"

He put his hand on my shoulder in a fatherly manner. Then he turned to my father.

"You have a good son, Aleksey Naumovich! A right one. And "you" – the almost patted me with his gaze, "you understood me. If you feel like you need advice – call me, don't be shy, we'll help you."

Father started telling jokes. The guests didn't even notice how much they've managed to drink.

When it was time to say goodbye, Chelokyan, holding my hand, said:

"Igor! You have to move forward, you have to keep moving. Everything's alright."

We went outside. The Earth was shaky beneath our feet. Chelokyan and my father were swearing their eternal friendship to each other. The ruby lights on Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower twinkled nearby. Moscow at night was unfathomably beautiful.

XXIX

There was just one thing left to do – be introduced to the first secretary of Armavir city party committee – Slusarev Nikolai Andreevich.

All of this was a tried and tested, concise but at the same time nerve-wracking procedure. The one thing that was unusual was that Anatoly Georgievich Tarada himself came in person to introduce me. The formal reason for his visit was completely different – he had to give a speech at the city committee plenary session, but what Anatoly Georgievich really wanted was to introduce me himself, to show that I was one of his people.

Cars were pulling up to the city committee building. The police had already warned that the regional committee cars entered the city, and as the result – all of the city's elite was already gathered at the top of the stairs.

“Anatoly Georgievich!” the host greeted Tarada solemnly, as he stepped out of the car.

He was noticeably nervous at meeting such a high-ranking guest.

Tarada towered above him.

"Hello, hello, Nikolai Andreyevich," Tarada hugged him and patted him on the back. "How are you holding up?" he laughed. "I see you're a strong one! They haven't broken you down yet, have they?"

"We'll see who breaks whom first..." the city committee secretary laughed. Well, welcome!"

Slusarev and Tarada slowly went up the staircase.

"How is the city?" Tarada asked with curiosity.

"We've accomplished a lot."

We followed them, like a king's entourage. The entire scene reminded me of a king's visit to a duke, his vassal. Tarada and Slusarev were engaged in conversation.

"Any problems?" asked Tarada.

"Well, we started a new bus route recently," Slusarev replied briskly. "All based on the residents' requests."

"Yes! Caring about the residents – that should be first and foremost. It's important for people to remember that we care about them."

They continued to quietly discuss city issues the entire walk to the office.

The entered the office together.

Grechany and I stayed at reception.

Slusarev offered Tarada a chair.

"Can I offer you anything?"

But Tarada waved him aside – not right now.

"I came to introduce you to my new factory director. He's already shown what he can do in the region. He's already been to hell and back! Saved the Anapa plant from ruin, so to speak."

Slusarev looked at Tarada with great interest.

"Well, thank you! It's all about the people. As for me, I thank you personally for sending me the best of the best."

"I think the rest can wait until later," Tarada noted authoritatively, putting an end to all other question.

"Shall we invite our comrades in?" asked Slusarev.

"Of course," Tarada nodded.

Slusarev pushed the intercom button. His well-trained aide immediately asked us to go into the office.

We entered. Grechany shook Slusarev's hand. Tarada pointed to me and said to Slusarev:

"Here is the young man. Don't mind how young he looks."

I shyly introduced myself. Tarada was lavish with praise.

"So, Igor Alekseyevich. Very successful in business. Please give him a warm welcome."

"Hello, very glad to meet you," the first secretary extended his hand, looking at me with curiosity.

Tarada kept talking and saying all the things that one is supposed to say in this situation – like a conductor, guiding his orchestra to an impressive finale:

"You see, Nikolai Andreyevich," Tarada looked him straight in the eye. "There's just one problem. Igor Alekseyevich here has a family. A young wife, a baby... I wouldn't want to put them in a difficult situation. The question of an apartment, it's an important one."

"Of course! That's not a question. We'll see to it as soon as possible," Slusarev said amiably.

Tarada nodded.

"Please try to solve the apartment issue as quickly as possible," he repeated.

"Anatoly Georgievich, don't worry."

He immediately called someone and a couple of minutes later a man entered his office- a man with very lively, black eyes that sparkled like two coals. He moved at extraordinary speed.

"Anatoly Georgievich, good day! Glad to see you!" he greeted Tarada.

Tarada replied in kind.

“Listen, Georgy Konstantinovich,” Slusarev said to the man, “we’ve got to help our comrade here. This is our new director of the meat factory – Babaev Igor Alekseevich.”

I shook the stranger’s hand.

He introduced himself:

“Troitsky.”

“Solve his apartment problem as soon as possible,” Slusarev summarized.

* * *

Immediately after the meeting with Slusarev, Grechany took me to the factory.

The leading specialists had already gathered in the assembly hall.

I saw Dubrovsky in one of the first rows. Head engineer Gennady Averin, interim director, was sitting next to him.

Grechany got up on stage. He looked over the audience. Adjusted his glasses.

“Comrades,” he began in a low hollow voice, “we feel that at this important time...”

Grechany stumbled. The audience was dead quiet. Everyone looked at him and then at me.

“You all understand the importance of the changes that are happening at this factory. I would like to introduce you to Igor Alekseyevich Babaev.”

I got up.

“He’s a worthy man, who will lead this factory, the flagship of regional meat production, into the future. We know Igor Alekseyevich as a bold leader who showed what he’s capable of in Anapa. He will do all that is necessary to improve things at the factory. Please give him your warmest welcome, despite his very young age.”

Grechany smiled.

Everyone in the audience was my father's age or older. Next to them, I was a baby.

There was some reserved applause.

After the introduction, Grechany and I were taken to the dining hall, where the table had already been set, and after lunch, he left. And I entered my new office.

First of all, I called a meeting of middle management and the head engineer and his deputies.

"Comrades, continue doing what you've been doing. The factory has to keep working as it was. Give me time to get a grasp of the situation. I need a few days."

They listened without saying a word.

"The scale of change at the factory will be enormous. I can promise you that. I agree that the problems we face are difficult, the question is – will we be able to solve them? It's either us or them! Is that understood?"

I looked over them all, as if trying to make them my allies.

XXX

I sat in my office, without taking a single break, meeting people, going over papers. My secretary knocked on the door mid-day and said,

“Excuse me, Igor Alekseyevich! There’s a call for you. It’s for the city executive committee. The chairman, personally. Georgy Konstantinovich Troitsky.”

I picked up the receiver.

“I’m listening, Georgy Konstantinovich.”

“Igor Alekseyevich, pick a time and come and see me. We’ll go see a house.”

I smacked myself on the forehead.

“Listen, Georgy Konstantinovich, you won’t believe me, but I’ve been so busy, I completely forgot all about it!”

And that was the truth.

Half an hour later I was in front of the city committee building.

We got into his car.

“How do you like your new job?”

“All’s well. I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Well, that’s good,” Troitsky looked at me excitedly.

“Stop here,” he told the driver.

We stopped not far from the city center, in front of a modern, recently built nine-story brick building.

Georgy came out of the car. He pointed to the building.

“Trust me, it’s the best thing we have right now. There won’t be anything better.”

I looked around.

It was a regular building. Tall. Modern. But the location was great. I could see a blue pond not too far off, surrounded by greenery.

Noticing where I was looking, Troitsky noted:

“I live close to here too. I go to the pond, when I have the time. It’s beautiful...”

Birds could be heard singing in the park, pale blue clouds floated up above. I shrugged.

“Well, alright.”

Troitsky chuckled.

“Don’t like the apartment? It’s three rooms, trust me – we won’t be able to get you anything bigger, you only have one child. The building is a specialist residence, with hot water, an elevator, all this beauty around – it even has moldings! People dream of places like this, and you’re not even enthusiastic. Are you being capricious, comrade Babaev?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I’ll mostly be at the factory, trust me.”

“You won’t get any rest there.”

“If things are running smoothly, there will be rest there, trust me. Although, if everything is as great as you described – give me the keys.”

I went upstairs.

The apartment was on the third floor. A small corridor after the entrance. Two bedrooms and kitchen to the left, and then the corridor went into the living room. Compared to Anapa, this was a palace.

I was glad that the problem had been resolved.

The apartment was basically an empty box. I had to fix it up, to buy furniture.

* * *

I woke up every morning and took the same road from the hotel to the factory.

Both sides of the road were lined with a red brick wall. There was a bus stop next to the security entrance, with a small kiosk. Right next to the gate – an ancient two-story administrative building, where my office was.

I got to the factory first. People were just coming in to work. My office was on the second floor of the ancient building, along with the accounting office and some other departments. I had to either start a war with them, or figure out a way to work anew.

I called the head engineer in.

“Good morning, Igor Alekseyevich,” he greeted me. “How are you?”

He had a strong, metallic voice. It seemed that, considering my age, he wasn’t about to let go of his position here.

“Thank you. I want to get the grasp of things as quickly as possible.”

I recalled Burlak telling me about the hopes Grechany had placed on the head engineer – this Abakanian Averin. I had only one goal – to figure out what kind of specialist he was and if I could leave him as head engineer. He headed the factory for only three months before I got here, but the opinions on him varied greatly.

I began my walk through the factory’s departments. I sunk my teeth into it, tried to figure out the undercurrents of this place.

The situation was fairly pitiful.

* * *

The room where all the planning meetings took place was a typical one: the ragged yellow tables formed the letter T, as per usual. Right in front of me were a telephone and an intercom to connect with Krasnodar.

I noticed two people.

A lean sturdy man was sitting to my left – Zhukov Vyacheslav Mikhailovich – the deputy head engineer. He half-rose when I walked in, and looked me in the eye with curiosity. The look of this person commanded respect.

The slightly breathless Victor Yefimovich Timofeev, head of the technical department, was sitting right in front of him. This was a fairly tall man of about forty in a worn out jacket that hung loosely on him, impulsive by nature, but used to restraining himself, or so it seemed.

“Good afternoon!” he greeted me kindly.

The only woman on the board of directors also caught my attention. She had enormous diamond earrings dangling from her ears. She waited pronouncedly until I sat down first, and sat down on her chair so heavily that it creaked.

“Let’s begin, Gennady Petrovich, please conduct the meeting,” I addressed the Abakanian.

The former “acting” director moved his chair aside with a rumble. His face was glowing red. When looking at him for the first time one could assume that he was masterful and strong. He had a hard, concise walk. He spoke quickly and sharply, in a commanding manner, always verbose, often saying mutually exclusive things. The department managers began to report one by one:

“Good. Sit down,” roughly and imperiously, the Abakanian interrupted each reporting man. “Next. Please report.”

“Just a minute,” I interrupted Averin, while getting up, “I am listening to you and I don’t get something. If you don’t

like the truth, just say so, only don't lie to yourself. I am not jumping down your throat, but I am starting to not understand. What you are saying reminds me of a formal report. I do not see the real state of affairs, the way I did when walking around the departments."

My voice rang with steel.

"I did not come here for someone to like me," I said distinctly. "Maybe I should start getting used to the version that everything is alright here and it only looks bad on the outside, while failure to implement the plan is the Regional Committee's fault, the District Committee's fault, anybody's fault but ours?!"

My sarcastic tone, designed to carry me through all future hardships, was by no means inherent to me. There were a dozen other voices (from quiet and approving to screaming) I preferred to use to get people to work.

Silence was the answer. Some fell silent, eyes downcast, some started to look out the window, as though good-looking girls loomed there. And some started to dislike my voice.

"I promise you," I finished. "I will delve into the existing management system and break it."

Head Engineer went red as a lobster.

"Well, it's not all bad. Even Comrade Grechany admits it."

His speech signaled the rest: "What are you afraid of, let's confront this youngster."

"And thank God that he admits it," I snapped in a tone that startled everyone.

The meeting continued.

* * *

One of the important parts of the plant is the sausage and kielbasa factory.

On the inside it was a conglomerate of huge, airfield size, departments, completely cluttered with automated devices, be-

hind which people worked. They made sausages and kielbasa here – the inner sanctum of the deficit era. Our plant's smoked sausage was the real currency, more scarce than caviar.

I went around the facility, a group of managers followed me – Timofeev, Zhukov, Averin and the director of the sausage factory by the name of Baida, a middle-aged woman with bright make-up, huge thick red lips, in a fancy dress that would go well at an evening event. Tired people in greasy suits who looked dull worked in the departments. The contrast between her and her employees was striking.

Soot on the walls, the fat... I almost slipped on the floor.

I stopped. Then turned to the director.

"What condition are your departments in?" I asked, puzzled.

"In a working one."

She drilled me with her look as if to say "I am not so easy to break."

This worked as a red rag would on a bull.

"Clean this place up," I commanded, grimacing, "Dirty doors, everything's covered in soot, fat on the floor. Put this place in order!" I said furiously. I suppose, you don't have this on the walls at home? What is this?!"

The director listened with an air of injured innocence. I looked from her to her employees. Then I could not help it.

"Anna Fedorovna, may I ask, are you planning to go to the theater or a philharmonic society tonight?"

"What..." Baida was confused, "Igor Alekseevich, what theater? I came to work."

"And yet you are dressed for the theater."

Her face took on a strange expression, as if divided into two parts – one of a mature, powerful woman, the other – of an uncertain little girl who was caught doing something forbidden. "Leave me alone!" her eyes said, but out loud she said, trying to flirt:

“What’s so obscene in how I look?”

I looked around. People stood close by silently watching us. Looking at her, I suddenly felt rage take me over.

“Something’s obscene with your conscience.”

She gave me a predatory look that said that she was able to stand up for herself. I looked right up to her, without blinking, extinguishing the last centers of any resistance in her. She shook her head and said quizzically:

“With what?”

“With your conscience.”

“Is this meant to be a joke?” Baida’s voice sounded as if woven from a dozen stabbing pins. This conversation in the presence of her subordinates was unpleasant to her. The sensual mouth twisted suddenly, as if ready to beg for forgiveness, and not just with words. I looked away, not wanting to answer with anything, but her eyes flashed something provocative... And I could not resist it.

“Baida, how much do you make?”

She began nervously biting her lips.

“According to the regulations.”

“Yes, I know all about the regulations... Looking at you, I keep thinking: what kind of salary you must have to wear that many “cobblestones”?”

The lady’s face flared, her cheeks grew red calico in color.

“This does not concern you, Igor Alekseevich. Their value is the love of my husband.”

“You’re not married.”

“I have a loved one. I do not take a penny. Are you implying that I ...” the director did not finish, and burst into tears.

But her pupils remained dry and greedy. Hunger peeped through them, the hunger of a lonely woman, and something else unlawful that she was willing to share with me, had she been able to just get my confidence. Her eyes became round like two circles of raw sausage – the basis of her power. They

were filled with tears. She opened her mouth and could not come up with an answer.

“Well then, tomorrow everything has to be clean here. I’ll come and check it. That’s all! Go now and calm yourself.”

She barely nodded and went to her room, clutching her chest, as if ready to faint.

I turned to Timofeev and said:

“Look, what a scarecrow! There are people looking at her.”

Timofeev laughed obligingly.

* * *

In the evening I was listening to what has become a traditional report on the parade ground. Some unrealistic deadlines, plans, a million instructions from Averin on how to rectify certain shortcomings.

A year would not be enough to accomplish even a half of that. I understood that something was wrong.

I correct Averin once, then again.

He does not listen to me, interrupts, goes his own way.

“You can communicate specifically with your subordinates, and set doable tasks before them,” suddenly I loudly interrupted Gennady.

“What is it, Igor Alekseevich?” He was taken aback.

“Nobody needs this parade in the reports,” I snapped harshly.

Averin frowned.

“Wait, Igor Alekseevich. I’m not finished.”

Then I could not resist.

“Gennady, let’s finish this nonsense. You cease to conduct the planning meetings. I’m tired of this nonsense. I am expecting everyone tomorrow at the same time, the planning meetings will be lead by me.”

The meeting participants’ faces grew long.

I let everyone, except for Averin, go.

“Gena, you’ll excuse me, I have just one remark,” I began gently, but cold steel could be felt underneath this softness. “Once again I feel the smell of booze breath – you will not be here anymore.”

The face of the head engineer flushed and his fingers curled into fists.

“That’s all, you are free to go.”

The next day I went to the morning sausage factory.

Baida met us.

She was wearing some kind of gray tights and a dress in the same nondescript color. Neither in her ears nor on her neck did she have any decorations – modesty itself.

I was taken aback.

“Baida... What happened to you? Fire? Everything burned down?”

“No, Igor Alekseevich” she said quietly. “You said yourself that I am somehow not dressed properly, so I ...” She did not finish, leaving everyone to decide what she could mean. Her transformation struck like a clown suit at a funeral. I felt the desire to approach her and shake the nonsense out of her.

“I understand everything,” I replied, “but you need not go to the extreme.”

Honestly, I have ceased to understand her. She even wiped off all the make up and immediately began looking older by ten years than her yesterday self. I could not hold it in.

“Tidy yourself up. We have a production site here, not the House of the Unions. You need neither evening dresses nor rags... You are a manager. You should look decent.”

Hatred flashed in Baida’s eyes.

We looked at each other like two blades. Mine was more dangerous. But there was something else between us, which I needed. I waited for her to reply to me. But she said nothing. And then I felt that she was frightened again.

“I understood everything,” she said quietly.

It seemed to me that at that moment I understood the essence of human relations.

“I ask you to properly understand one thing: big changes are happening in the life of the plant,” I accentuated, “very big changes. Today the process of change has only just started. If someone thinks that he will be able to pull the brakes on this process, that he can run things the old way, or as they say, it will be possible to come to terms with me, he is seriously mistaken. Everyone has the right to make themselves useful. Those who can not cope are free to go. Who’s with me – they are welcome.”

I finished.

There was a silence.

“We have heard you, Igor Alekseevich,” responded Timofeev and looked into my eyes obsequiously.

I had already noticed that he often assents to me.

“You’re doing the right thing, when putting the question tough,” – he continued. “The harder you put the questions, the better will our brains spin!”

We went further.

In the departments of the sausage factory workers were busy washing, scrubbing – putting things in order.

* * *

I soon realized what was one of the main troubles of the plant – each of the managers was an independent master of the house. Everyone did whatever they wanted. It was time to put an end to this.

XXXI

The office phone rang... I heard Slava's voice on the other end:

"Hello, Igor! How are you?"

"You know – we're plowing," I grinned.

"I have questions for you, I wanted to come over, and it would also be interesting to see your giant."

"Go on, Slava, let me know when you are here."

We met warmly, and I immediately took him to inspect the plant.

It was interesting to see his reaction.

I took Slava to the cannery, then – to the sausage factory... The number of people who worked, the departments, the glittering, humming machines lined up in a row, with people bustling around...

I could see from Slava's eyes – he had not expected that he would see such a scale of things.

Immediately after the inspection we settled quietly in the banquet hall. The level of service, the decoration of the hall – Slava looked around and could not believe his eyes.

“Cool that you got over here,” I said, when we were alone.

He nodded, looking around the banquet room. He clicked his tongue.

“This has been out of my reach until now,” I nodded at the walls. “It will be even better.”

“You’re kind of really adjusted here?”

He looked at me with curiosity.

“You know,” I said, “in general, you are not far from the truth. Things are going well. But let’s talk business later,” I asked, noticing how Slava glances at the plates.

“They’re feeding you decently.”

I laughed. I was pleased to feel the attention of my brother and his latent respect.

At times we would not call each other for several days or even weeks. But never did we lose our sense of brotherly concern for one another.

“Put something on your bread,” I laughed, spreading pate on a piece of bread.

“Well, Igor, congratulations. If we give ourselves, then, of course, only to an enterprise like this one. Your Armavir is the scale of the Big League. Definitely not Anapa.”

“Yeah, not Anapa,” I echoed.

“Yes, I think I got hungry while I was travelling to you!” He laughed.

“To your coming then,” I raised my glass. “You’re such a good sport, you managed to break loose and visit me.”

“Well, it’s you who made it up here. You think I don’t understand?”

He had peace at heart, at least it seemed so to me, he was absolutely satisfied with everything now, and each of his gestures emanated a sort of confidence.

“How are you doing at the plant, say it as it is! I’m heavily interested in knowing what is really going on!”

I shrugged my shoulders, like nothing serious, but it is worth to think about it.

“There’s a certain staff rumble. The heritage,” I smiled. “Someone thinks of themselves as potentates, thinks he can do as before. That’s necessary to break. You know, who’d like it, if they’re used to freedom? There is a struggle. But it’s normal.”

Slava looked at me carefully as if he had never seen me like this. His gaze was respectful.

“If you have ways to influence people, the victory will be yours,” he added.

He had a manner of gazing hard into your face, as if he had finally found his soul mate in this world.

And the voice. Sometimes his voice was like our father’s, who could twist your soul with his.

“You know, they do things on the side quietly. This must stop. And there’s no lack of devastation. Tomorrow everything can collapse here just because the equipment is old.”

“That’s clear, but you keep something else in mind – the dangers that may arise in front of you,” said Slava in a deep voice, clicking his tongue.

“What kind?”

“For God’s sake, first of all, be careful. Remember Father. I know it from my plant. Right now you are a beginner, you come to a well-coordinated team, and there are certain relationships there. Don’t rush it. Figure it out neatly. Yes, there is a desire to wave your sword. But first put everyone in their places. For the administration to become powerful on your side. Do not hurry, delve into it. And only then you will deal with everyone who’s interfering with your work.”

I looked at him slyly:

“You know, I want to drag Tsymbal over here. He’s about to be done with the institute.”

Slava laughed.

"I'd thought it will not go without Papa Misha. Have you called Serega?"

"No, just Misha. Nothing can be done without a team of your own. It is necessary to awaken motivation in people so that they begin to deliver. Otherwise – replace them."

"They can revolt," said Slava. "I know from my own self."

"I know that as well," I jumped up from the table and began to pace in front of Slava. "This is not Anapa, but a huge giant. Imagine, how much has been neglected for many years. "It is not to patch, but rather redo everything, and fundamentally so. Yes, yes! With such "heritage", I'm certain that something will come out on the side sooner or later," I added. "I wish I knew where, so I could prepare."

Perhaps, at this moment my face really wore an expression of the whole universal longing and the pain of the Jewish resettlement.

Slava understood my doubts. There is nothing worse than being in a situation where you have not coped with the task, even though you had every chance to win.

"So have you defined the first steps?" Slava asked with interest.

"Roughly. I need my own people. I can not fully trust the elders, who started with Dubrovsky! You know yourself, they will not change. You can change thirty-year-olds, and I've got elders. They all fifty to sixty."

"Correct," Slava nodded. Then he smiled. "You know who you look like right now? Father."

I laughed. Of course, Slava meant something deeper than just a desire to stand on your own feet in a moment of danger, something more subtle that did not even need a verbal expression. Perhaps it was something like the basis that my own experience had crystallized. My nose for danger.

"I will punish and encourage," I said suddenly and metal sounded in my voice "I will demand, demand and demand..."

"Just don't lose your head, Slava knocked back his glass.

"No, I will allow only those who will agree with me to remain."

Slava made a wry face.

"Like-minded ones are very few, sycophants are many. Do not confuse them. One is very difficult to distinguish from the other."

This time I winced. I waved my hand.

"Those who can work professionally you can count on one hand."

"So understand that they have to begin to fight you."

"How?"

"There are many ways!" Slava said seriously, looking me straight in the eye. "I think you will soon experience it all the hard way. If, as you say, everyone works for himself, then it is necessary to deal with each one separately. Even with your diamond lady."

I told him about the first meetings and about my differences with head engineer Gennadiy Averin.

"What is he going to prove to whom?" Slava was surprised.

"Well, everything is clear. He is in his forties, and I am twenty-eight. And the age difference is like a needle in one's special place. What could he not accept? That I am commanding him?"

"No, Igor. Complete nonsense. Everything is decided by the energy and brains, not age," said Slava.

"That's what matters," I shouted. "But you know, I do not want to dismiss anyone. I just tell them to stop pulling wool over my eyes and start working."

"Just like Father!" Slava looked admiringly at me again. "Do you remember his rule?" Slava looked up at me. "Give a

man an opportunity, allot him some responsibility, and he'll grow up."

"I give it to all of them!" I shouted.

"Not everyone wants to grow," said Slava philosophically. "And as for your former "acting director" guy... Maybe he's just an idiot?"

"Hell no. I hit him once, then again... He swallowed. I thought that he came to and would start working. I need no workaholic *Stakhanovets*, but a competent head engineer. I can not understand him. Sometimes he seems quite sensible. I do not know for how long."

"That's why you are the director," said Slava. "You hold the cards."

"Yes, I know that I am the director. It is only necessary that when I start speaking, everyone else would just nod along."

Slava laughed...

"Hey, Igor, I had this guy at the plant, Pavlenko. Very intelligent worker. He divorced his wife. There are family problems. He wants to move to another city. Good worker, believe me. Not once have I solved problems with his help."

"What are you suggesting? I need a sales manager."

"You will not find a better candidate, believe me. You need staff, take him, have a look. And then decide."

"Oh well. Have him call me."

Slava nodded gratefully.

"Well, we're all about me and about me. Enough. Tell me, how are you?" I moved to another topic. "What's on the personal front. Are you still with Zoya?"

Slava frowned.

"Let me eat. I do not want to spoil the appetite."

It is with pleasure, like a true gourmet, he paid tribute to the culinary talents of my cook, as if caressing the processes that occurred inside his body with his eyes. Then he looked at me slyly.

“Not everyone, as they say, gets according to his needs yet. That’s that. Healing the wounds...”

“You mean, Zoya?” I asked, straining and preparing myself for what I am about to hear.

“You see,” Slava thought, searching for the right words, “Zoya is in the past. She’s a good girl, but... I will not tell you, you do not need to know all of it, just keep in mind – one can either be with Zoya for one hour or for a lifetime. She reacts poorly to the intermediate variants. Like, for instance, with me... So – I am without her. And Father keeps pressing: get married, get married... I’m thinking myself, something needs to be done,” Slava sighed. “Get married! All in all, good bye, Zoya. But where is the one... like your Lida? Not here, but...” Slava waved sadly... “How are things at home? How’s Sergei?”

“Oh, he’s growing! Commands everyone about the house: starting with my mother, ending with Ilya Vladimirovich, when he comes.”

“Just like you,” laughed Slava... “And Lida?”

“Making plans... Bringing up the son. Thank God, everything is fine.”

“It’s meat and drink to me – reminisce about how Father raised us,” chuckled Slava.

“Well, you got flogged less often than Gena,” I said.

We sat for a long time, talking, laughing, remembering the past, until Slava started hurrying “to the house, to the hut,” as he put it.

I walked him to the car, gave him a warm hug goodbye, and when the car was out of sight, thought with incredible warmth about how happy I am, having a brother.

He left satisfied. I ordered that they load some of our products to go: raw sausage, pates, other delicacies that have my plant produced – I would like to convey to Slava a particle of the warmth that I had always had for him. While his support was very important to me.

* * *

Soon I was invited over by our city committee first secretary Slyusarev:

“Igor, there’s a suggestion to elect you as a deputy in the City Council. There was somehow no time for that before, but the position of the director of the plant means that you have to be a deputy of the city executive committee.”

Frankly, I was expecting something like that, but no as quickly.

“If you think that I deserve...”

“What are you saying, Igor Alekseevich,” Slyusarev waved his hand. “The previous director was a deputy – it means, you will too. We need intelligent, caring people, and you, judging by what I know, are not an indifferent man.”

“This would difficult to reproach me with,” I laughed.

“Then – deal,” he shook my hand, and we hurried on each to his own business.

I was nominated and chosen deputy.

The first deputy meeting came. One of the secretaries of the deputy corps reported on the composition of the quorum before the opening session:

“Comrades, at the session meeting there are one hundred and twenty people from the deputies.” He paused, looking around the room with a strict eye. Among them: fifty-seven Russians.” There was a murmur of approval through the hall. “Ukrainians – twenty-five, Belarusians – fifteen, Kazakhs – three of them, one Jew.”

I was listening half an ear, but shrugged on the word “Jew”. A small rumble flew across the hall, and dozens of heads began looking around, searching where he was intuitively.

The speaker continued:

“The quorum is confirmed, let us open the meeting.”

“Here it is – the flip side of success,” I thought. “Everyone is curious – but who is he – the only Jew”!

As if something derogatory, inappropriate slipped in from the word “Jew” when it was uttered from the rostrum of the Congress of Deputies.

XXXII

The clock was not yet showing eight, when the director of the cannery called me, reporting on the situation. Then the director of the sausage factory called. I listened to the reports, gave “valuable guidance”, encouraging or, on the contrary, urging the interlocutor.

My secretary’s voice sounded from the intercom.

“Pavlenko from Tikhoretsk...”

“Let him in.”

A young man came into the office. A good face, an attractive smile.

“Come on, sit down.”

I looked at him with interest. The guy was a little bit embarrassed. Really sensible – may it be? Such people you don’t find on the road. A blond, unruly strand of hair kept constantly falling on his forehead, and he threw it back vigorously, with an embarrassed smile. A warm energy emanated from him.

I slowly sat down in front of him. It would be desirable that he opened up, showed his true self.

“Can you tell me a little about yourself?”

He cleared his throat severely, as if to say: “There are no secrets.”

“Yes, what do I say? Nothing special, really. At work, I had no complaints. But... in my personal life...” He smiled sheepishly. “I divorced my wife. You know...” He hesitated. “Women – they are vindictive.”

“What, have you meet someone?”

“Yes. Me and her, we’re both from Tikhoretsk. My ex-wife would not let it be. We decided that we’d better get out of town. If we get to settle down with you – this is the best option.”

“Well I understand, I understand...” I interrupted. “In general, look what I can offer you. I need to put everything in order here. We have the produce, while we are reconstructing things, there’s a deficit in raw material, but we need everything right now, the mechanism is not set up yet. Can you help me lift this whole thing? How is the challenge for you?”

He hesitated.

“I’m willing to try. And then you decide.”

“Well, then, it’s a deal. Start with supply. Then we’ll see.”

He nodded.

“I have good connections in Rostov.”

Rostov was then the central storage base for North Caucasus, which supplied everything needed for the plants.

“I’m ready to close these issues,” he continued calmly, “furthermore, I was involved with the reconstruction at the plant with your brother, Vyacheslav Alekseevich, as well. Got to know everyone, with all that entails.”

He looked at me. Like, don’t doubt it. I looked at him quizzically:

“Well, agreed then. You may begin.”

All that was needed – brick, wood, tile – he produced like a wizard just in time, and I finally blessed him with the post of Chief of Procurement Department.

* * *

Unmanaged processes in such a large enterprise were acting in favor of many. People were used to feeling at ease, seeing themselves as independent leaders. This kind of management devoured itself.

Probably it was interesting to see from the outside, how I deliberately kept knocking down the wall of mistrust between myself and the heart of the old administration, thus establishing total control over everyone and everything.

I needed this control to cease depending on someone else's unwanted advice and recommendations, impregnated with the smell of tobacco smoke, Valocordin and cognac, to avoid hear the heart-rending cries of head engineer Averin, insisting that he and only he knows everything here, recognizing his and his only point of view. So as not to feel the strange sensation of the unacceptability of the old relationship system prevailing here.

Gradually, the wall that involuntarily arose between me as a newcomer and the old team, began to melt. In its place there was something new, something for which I could not find a clear definition.

When I told my father a couple of weeks ago that it's all difficult at the plant, I was not fully aware of what these words meant. Now, being in the director's chair, I was finally able to bring together the facts that disturbed me.

The simplest way would be to say that the whole problem was with my head engineer. He really had changed a lot since my arrival – became more nervous and sharp; hysterical, nervous, commanding notes slipped in his voice every now and then. He coallowed himself to interrupt me during meetings

and yell at my subordinates in my presence, not listening to any, even the most sensible, objections and excuses. If it later turned out that he was wrong, Gennady could apologize in a cunning confused patter, snapping the offended by the arm, not looking him in the eye. Still, all this, in view of the enormous burden of responsibility, crushing me, and my leadership certainly being recognized, was not enough for me to feel in the same boat with him and or make me rely on him.

...Once there was a briefing, once again some rush jobs were being discussed, I would often scold the careless.

Suddenly head engineer interrupted me.

"Igor Alekseevich, enough. We must do it in a different way..."

He jumped up from his chair and began to say something passionately, distorting the meaning of my orders.

"Come on, sit down," I said in a surprisingly quiet voice.

Averin was dumbfounded.

"I'm asking you, who gave you the right to interrupt me?"

Everyone froze. A bad silence was hanging in the office. Zhukov frowned, and Timofeev began to fidget nervously in his place, as if it caught fire under him.

"Well, then, if I see one more time that you come to work drunk – we part with you," I slapped my hand down on the table.

"Me?! What are you talking about?" The face of head engineer became crimson as if someone had smeared it with beet juice.

I calmly continued:

"I said that you've been drinking, and allowed yourself to come to the meeting in this state."

Gennady Petrovich's fingers clenched into fists. I thought for a second that the Abakanian was about to kill me.

"Can you prove that I've been drinking?"

"I will!"

A shadow of confusion flashed across the face of the head engineer.

“Get out of here!” I yelled, jumping up. “Out. And do not come until you sober up.”

He opened his mouth to say something, then waved his hand, and jumped out of the office, slamming the door with a bang, leaving behind an almost visible trace of anger, pain, and rage, running over the edge.

I looked at the faces of my subordinates attentively. They bore a strange expression, as if something incredible had happened, contrary to the laws of nature: before their eyes David had defeated Goliath.

“I bring to your attention: Averin is not on our team effective today,” I slapped my hand down on the table.

Everyone sat with petrified faces, just like after a fire. Only Zhukov was squeezing his face with his hand.

“Those who want to work,” I said in a hoarse voice, “please go on. Those who don’t – no one is stopping you. To those who put sticks in the wheel, we’ll say goodbye. I want everyone to realize this, understood?” My voice soared. “The meeting is over.”

Everyone silently got up and left, without looking at each other.

The fight with Averin injected a boost of adrenaline into my blood. I felt a strange state as if victory over the head engineer gave me pleasure.

I pushed the intercom button, and ordered to immediately bring him to me.

The secretary squeaked in a scared voice:

“Very well, Igor Alekseevich!”

Averin came almost immediately, as if he was waiting for the conversation to continue, and sat down in front of me with military precision.

Our eyes met. His gaze was harsh and cruel and stung my eyes, like salt.

"You called me?" he asked.

He still looked confused, although clenched fists, and the look from beneath his forehead supposed that he was resolute.

"Gennady Petrovich, in case you don't write a letter of resignation today," I said very quietly, "I will fire you by the paragraph, filling it all out legally."

He said nothing. But I did not like his look. It was the gaze of a madman.

"I'm giving you a chance to resign," I repeated as calmly as possible.

His eyes blazed fire.

"I will not leave it at that," he growled, jumping up from his chair. "You did not appoint me, thus you cannot dismiss me."

I said with a smile:

"Yes, yes, yes. Accept what I just said. And now leave the office," the fierce energy of my father doused me with anger and rage as a whirlwind. "You have a short period to inform me of your decision."

The Abakanian jumped out of the cabinet.

It kept buzzing in my head. I stood up from the table, walked from corner to corner.

In less than a minute the phone rang.

"Grechany," mouthed the secretary.

I picked up the phone.

"Good day, Aleksey Petrovich!"

"What are you boiling about there?" he ran at me straight away.

I paused. So, Averin had complained already.

"I have raised the question of the conformity of our head engineer to his position."

"Why?" Grechany's voice was cold and taut like steel strings.

“I did not want to wash dirty linen in public, but, in my opinion, the man has lost it.”

“In what sense?”

“Allowed himself to come to work drunk. And this is systematic. Simply put, the man is drinking heavily, closes his office and starts with the booze. My desire to resolve the matter peacefully has lead to nothing. The man has become uncontrollable.”

“He gave me some other information, Igor Alekseevich.” Grechany replied with some Jesuit tranquility.

“I got it,” I said quietly.

“I think you are rushing it, Igor Alekseevich.” Grechany went even colder. “Without consulting us, I would not shoot from the hip just like that.”

“Aleksey Petrovich, I’ll be honest, when instead of a head engineer you have a drunken nobleman – that’s devil knows what. He can not work himself and would not let the others, I burst out laughing, and strangely, it had an effect on Grechany.

“Go on, Igor Alekseevich,” he said, already warmer.

“This is not my whim. And especially not something I fancy. This is, if you want, the whole team’s opinion. I’m asking you, please advise him to write a letter of resignation at his own will, and we’ll part on good terms.”

Grechany took a pause on the other end. I took a deep breath and said in a more assertive way.

“I am the director. I must have my right.”

“Okay, I understand you.” Steel sounded in Grechany’s voice again.

I heard him knocking a pencil on the table top. Finally, he sighed.

“Igor, you do not need to dismiss an employee from the company by the paragraph, believe my experience.”

I almost felt like he’s trying to make the right decision.

"I know that he is drinking. Maybe you're right. But show some wisdom. Try to solve the problem peacefully."

Grechany hung up.

For a few seconds I sat in silence, wondering what to do, then stood up resolutely and went to the head engineer's office.

"I know you talked to Grechany, Gennady Petrovich," I said, having barely crossed the threshold of his office. "I assure you, there will be no reaction on his part."

He looked at me as if he was cornered.

"But I do not want to spoil your work record. Therefore, here's my good advice to you. Immediately," I banged my fist on the table, "you write a letter of resignation. And then I promise it will all end peacefully."

He was sobering up right before my eyes.

I stared at him as if suppressing him.

Suddenly he quietly took a piece of paper and picked up a pen without saying anything. I got up and walked to the door.

"Goodbye," I heard behind me.

I said nothing.

I returned to my office and dictated a letter to my secretary appointing Timofeev as acting head engineer of the plant.

* * *

The news that Averin unexpectedly resigned at his own request, spread around the plant with lightning speed. People whispered. I felt with my back as they began to see me in a different way.

New broom sweeps clean – but the people liked it.

I began the next meeting with presenting Timofeev.

"Please love and respect. Comrade Timofeev has been appointed acting head engineer."

They all looked at him in silence. He just smiled sheepishly.

“And now let us continue our meeting,” I went on, and we moved on to current affairs.

* * *

Oddly enough, the tough measure found an understanding within the team.

They began to respect and fear me. The main thing was the result.

I squeezed them with my capacity for work, and rewarded victories. Many could not withstand such a working schedule and left themselves, knowing that they did not have the desire and energy to work in a new way.

I did not forgive failures and dismissed people. And it wasn't that I had a strong support, no.

Many plant workers did not even know that. They just saw how I work and what I demand. It was possible to negotiate with me only if the person worked hard.

There was no mercy, if there was no result – and this is what people were afraid of.

XXXIII

Every time I drove to the plant in the morning, looking at the ugly bus stop, a wasteland littered with rubbish, I thought with annoyance that the plant should have an appropriate appearance.

I ordered to put up the correct text – a quotation from Brezhnev: “Lenin’s ideas live on and win.”

1.5 meter tall letters cut out of metal, galvanized and dyed, attracted attention. The plaque of honor hung nearby.

The plant’s facade now somehow corresponded to the spirit of the era.

The bus stop remained, however. The dirt, some thrown away bottles, bits of garbage, two benches buried into the ground left and right of the newsstand – it all caught one’s eye.

Late in the evening I would see shadows lying on the ground, that bawled songs with drunken voices, like pagans bringing their bloodless sacrifice to Bacchus in the darkness.

The smell that came from them, left no doubt what these fighters with their own liver perished from.

In the rearview mirror I could see the ridiculous figures of people stretched out on the benches, their arms hanging down in different directions.

"Devil knows what that is," I said to Lida that evening. "The face of the plant, and this is what goes on there."

Lida did not understand what I meant, and I would not go into details.

"We have repaired the kindergarten, the hostel," I threw it before Timofeev after the meeting the next day, "it is necessary to do something about the bus stop."

He spread his hands hopelessly.

"How can I forbid? The saleswoman collects most of the cash during lunchtime there," he said anxiously. "She sells the special beer."

"What kind of beer?" I asked with exasperation.

"The ruff", Igor Alekseevich." chuckled Timofeev. "The brand "beer". She adds vodka at double price to the beer. And the men are happy. It seems like you can have a drink any time."

"And then – to work?"

"Well, where else," Timofeev made a helpless gesture.

"So what, nothing can be done?"

"How? They are allowed to sell beer. And then vodka – quietly."

"Next to the administrative building?" Metal sounded in my voice. "Timofeev, what's up with you?"

"What can we do?"

"Demolish the kiosk to hell! Immediately!" I exploded.

The next day I called the trade department of the executive committee. The scared instructor listened to my angry tirade.

I demanded to remove the kiosk.

"Igor Alekseevich, what's wrong with the kiosk?" the official asked fearfully. "It's liked by the working class. They buy the newspaper, drink beer, wait for the bus."

“Oh, please understand,” I broke out, “under the cover of these stalls they get drunk as hell at midday. I do not want drunks at the production site! Close the kiosk,” I demanded harshly. “It’s moral decay.”

It was a serious accusation.

The moral code of the builder of socialism. One could not ignore that. Our company was one of the largest. The city’s indicators, the statistics – all sorts of things were tied to the meat-packing plant. Especially when it came to the fight against alcoholism.

“I agree with you, Igor Alekseevich,” said the department head sadly. “We’ll do everything right, Igor Alekseevich...”

Just two days later they pulled machinery to the kiosk, then under the guise of repair, the booth itself was broken down and removed, and the stop was demolished.

On the second day, as I’m leaving the plant, I see a picture: two bonfires lit on the former site of the stop, and a small group of drunks is sitting in the middle of the resulting wasteland going singsong of famous World War 2 song – “The enemies burnt down our native hut”.

Willy-nilly, I laughed heartily.

“Anatoly, our people never cease to amaze,” I said, talking to the driver.

A new stop was soon constructed. A beautiful one. No kiosk with on-the-side vodka though.

Every time I got home to our rented apartment after the last meeting on a Saturday, I would imagine Lida’s face, the smile of our son – it was like a healing drink.

Home has always been the harbor I hurried to hide in from the storms and bad weather outside.

“Oh, Igor!” Lida met me at the entrance, as if some sixth sense told her that I had arrived.

I went into the hallway. Leant against the doorjamb.

She rushed to take off my coat.

I kissed her, and hurried to the nursery – to Sergei.

The whole apartment was covered with nappies. I walked as if making my way through white walls, removing the nappies with my hands.

“What a neat girl she is,” it flashed through my head. “The way she takes care of our son.”

The kid was fast asleep. I admired the baby, and then gently kissed him on the ear.

“How is he?” I asked in a whisper,

Lida kept looking from my face to Sergei’s.

“He is growing up looking just like Daddy,” she looked at the baby with happy eyes. “Let’s get out of here, you haven’t even washed your hands from the road,” she tugged at my sleeve and, tiptoeing cautiously, brought me out of the bedroom, closing the door behind us.

We went into the kitchen.

“Oh, you smell like the plant!” Lida exclaimed, her eyes shining with joy, looking at my haggard face. She hugged me... “Really, Igor, there’s a very special smell coming from you...”

I stood on the threshold of the kitchen and looked at Lida, and something like tenderness woke up in my soul, which I could not find a suitable name for, but which immediately erected an iron barrier between me and the plant’s problems.

That was it, I could not think about work anymore.

Lida began to arrange plates.

“Go, wash up. I have everything ready. I made *ingarpol*.”

She solemnly pointed to a large tureen.

I sat down at the table.

Lida was busy serving plates, laying out spoons and forks.

“You know, how I missed you?!” She paused. “I have been waiting for you, I’ve been waiting so eagerly for you, Igor!”

“You must have gotten used to it by now,” I spoke with my mouth full.

“You could show up earlier at least on Saturdays. And once again you only showed up in the second half of the day.”

I spread my arms resignedly.

“What could I do?!”

“Oh, Igor, Igor, sometimes I’m so lonely without you... Even here...” said Lida sadly.

I felt frustrated and tired after all the excitement that struck me in such a short period of time. Moreover, the six exhausting working days.

“Tired of it all... No one wants to work... I have to compel everyone, force them...”

Lida smiled sweetly.

“Why are you so harsh? Be kinder to people. Do not try to solve all the things in the world,” she said softly. “It’s time to finally understand that there is a normal life, normal,” she repeated with force, “and not just the one that you’re leading: not seeing a the light of day.” She smiled, then, seeing that I almost did not react, sat down across the table from me. “Igor, listen!” She said, looking me in the eye (I was completely absorbed in her cooking, which was always top notch), “let’s take a vacation somewhere, Zheleznovodsk at the least. I want to be with you. I am your wife. Do what you want, but I want to be with you. Not one day per week.”

I was still staying in the magic circle of the working concerns that carried me on and on as a fighting chariot. And I could not jump out of this chariot.

“Of course we will go, I only need to settle the business,” I echoed.

I thought about the Fourth Department sanatorium in Zheleznovodsk, which was famous for its service.

The *tchudu* was so delicious, and the aroma coming from the plate, it seemed, to restore my strength immediately. Sometimes the mysterious culinary talent flashed in Lida with incredible force.

"You are not listening to me. I want to relax with you," said Lida, carefully giving me a saucepan with sour cream. "We did not even have a honeymoon. Well, we are sitting here together with Sergei without you? Thankfully, that's at least in the same city. But I want to be with you more."

I nodded my head. Some lingering fragrance came from the tchudu that makes a man soft and pliable. I pushed the plate back, puffing heavily. I gasped. And spread my arms.

"Lida, if you want it, I do not mind. You always get whatever you want. Soon the repairs in our apartment are over, we'll have a different life."

"Yeah, we will. You live with the plant, and not with me."

"Lida, you knew whom you were marrying."

"Then let's go on vacation at least."

"Is that an order?" I asked jokingly.

"Igor, hear me, please."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Sergei got stronger already, things are good. You can leave him to my mother. And we can go somewhere. Like all normal families. You have spent three years without a vacation. You told me yourself."

The arguments were so severe that I had no choice, but to spread my arms and accept.

* * *

That same evening, as soon as we were alone, Lida took my hand, and I pulled her towards me involuntarily. We froze in the middle of the room, as if caught red-handed, and started kissing. I held her with such ardor, as though I had not seen her for ages, and could not believe I finally met her.

Warmth emanating from Lida in waves scorched me, forcing an even sharper feeling of how I yearned for her. In the dark Lida's face seemed even more mysterious and thrilling, magic rays of light flashing in her eyes.

The night was moonless. Outside, the stars twinkled. Involuntarily I froze, enchanted with some secret which, it seemed, my love was trying to pass on to me.

A thin strip of the Milky Way highlighted a part of the sky. My eyes wandered around the stars. They kept flashing and fading as beacons knowing no rest. Mysterious constellations were sending us their secret signals that awakened a longing, as if light years separating us were the abyss that we had to cross at all costs. Stars languished and pined with their cosmic longing for something very simple, as though trying to touch one other, the way we do with Lida. Sensible mystery was maturing in their weak glow, exactly the same as the one the bound us together, being one incredible word – “love”.

She guessed my desire... It was like we were locked in the same cage of passion. Eyes that we could not take apart, were devouring each other.

The desire reached its climax, incredibly strong, and we became like water and fire, and then turned into a light, that was released from us, to lighten the darkness into which we both rushed.

I felt something I had never felt before, and screamed, and my scream was answered with a moan, reaching the final depth of myself:

“Of course, yes, I want to live with you, I want love.” Lida had an estranged look.

“What if it’s bad for you there?” I asked.

“Don’t ask,” she whispered.

And a whole continent of fire and passion soared like a prehistoric bird in me. And in a fit of passion, I closed my eyes; and in that darkness I saw her face, at the bottom of her dark pupils a warm golden light lapped, like a promise of peace.

“Oh, honey, I love you to infinity,” she whispered, and I felt a hitherto unknown feeling burst into me, penetrating me like a huge fairy bird Phoenix, blessing my rebirth.

I rushed out of my body, destroying all obstacles and barriers, becoming soft and pliable, and bliss and sweetness spilled out of me, bestowing and blessing all her magical nature.

* * *

Sometimes, languishing in insomnia, I loved to watch Lida sleep. She looked differently. In the first minutes of deep calm her skin almost became transparent, showing the emotions that the day brought. The faces of seductive young femininity and already forgotten childishness succeeded each other, showing through on her face, then becoming more prominent, and then disappearing completely crushed by a load of dreams and worries unknown to me, and then again a face of a little girl, that Lida once was, resurfaced from under those.

I kept replaying the film in my brain, repeating all the moments of our lives within one minute.

In the dream, the lovely eighteen-year-old girl with luminous skin as in the paintings of the old masters, was smiling at me. I touched the tip of her curly locks. So gentle and soft, seductive and playful.

I looked at her closed eyelids and felt energy filling me, giving me the strength to withstand all the destructive moments of the week.

* * *

Lida looked detached at breakfast.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Never mind."

"But I can see that something has happened. C'mon, speak."

"Igor, let's eat. Later."

In her eyes I could read anxiety, but since she had decided to postpone the conversation...

After breakfast, we went for a walk with Lida and Sergei.

"You were kind of upset at breakfast..."

“Nothing special, really. You see, my mother called, crying, something’s wrong with Volodya.”

“And what could be wrong with him?”

I hadn’t heard anything about Volodya for a long time – ever since I moved to Armavir, and he left work in Anapa and went back to Kislovodsk.

“Mom said it’s some strange company. Unless, of course, she’s not mistaken. Bad company – it is the worst thing, you know...”

“He must have a head of his own on his shoulders,” I said.

“Since I moved here, to Armavir, he is not engaged in anything around the house... Arrived from Anapa and does nothing... Can you influence him?”

“And what about Ilya Vladimirovich?”

“What about Dad? Dad is never at home. It’s all on Mother’s shoulders. Can you not see this. Maybe Volodya always lacked his father’s presence. I can see how my mother worries. I would not like to see him wasting their time now, at such an age. Who knows whom he meets.”

“Does he drink?”

“What sort of drunkard would he be!? He smokes all day long. Smokes like Dad! He’s melancholy. But he was smart. Wanted to become a journalist.”

“Why the hell did he go to the Institute of Meat and Dairy then?” I muttered.

“Let’s not ask such questions, what it would be, if... There’s no answer. I’m talking about “now”.

“No, Lida! We must talk. They just stuck him in where they could. God forbid the guy make any effort! And this is not his job. He was not made for this.”

Lida sighed mournfully.

“Well, what do we do now? Should a man be left without work, then melancholy attacks him. He’s intelligent...” she added. “It is a pity he’s wasting his time. Also, I hate seeing mother upset.”

“So why don’t you say anything to me? I’ll see what I can do.”

“Do you think that’s nice for the parents, to see their son spend his time this way. And what can they do? Time to discipline him is over.”

“Alright, alright... I promise I’ll think of something.”

“Will you talk to him?”

I stammered.

“I’ll think of something,” I said, irritated. “But... what I remember from Anapa, you know, it does not adorn him.”

“But he’s my brother.”

“I’ll do something, Lida.”

She sighed. She looked at me kindly. My good mood came back to me again.

“Thank you. What’s the situation at your plant? I suppose, as usual? Rushing from morning till evening around the production?”

“You can not imagine, the “old guard” – they’re something else.”

We were silent for a bit.

Lida smiled, kissed me and gave me a radiant smile. Something gentle stirred in me.

“Lida, what are you...”

“Soon we’ll go on vacation together.”

Her face lit up... It seemed to me that tenderness and trust in her look were becoming a part of my soul.

“You’re driving me crazy” I whispered. “I promise you, we will go somewhere soon. And everything will be fine.”

XXXIV

After I replaced the head engineer, the atmosphere at the briefings became more relaxed. No one interrupted me or tried to argue with me anymore. The Abakanian outsmarted himself. Had he not tried to fight me, nor suffered from his wounded pride (a guy two times younger than him took the post of the director), we could work together quite alright.

I knew that Grechany may not be entirely happy with my actions: I still took a radical decision independently, without consulting him.

I just finished a meeting when the secretary reported that Aleksey Petrovich was calling.

“I’m calling about Timofeev!” Grechany went straight to the point after the greetings.

Timofeev was already acting as head engineer. The situation was not easy.

When I told Slava that I had appointed a new “acting as”, he immediately said:

“Why did you your choice fall on him?”

“This guy is good, sincere, and most importantly, docile, Zhukov is tougher,” I answered honestly and did not specify to Slava that Zhukov, at times, reminded me of the Abakanian I had dismissed. In this situation, Timofeev suited me. But not Grechany. His attitude towards Timofeev was certain.

“Timofeev will not perform well,” continued Grechany. “Zhukov is a more correct candidate.”

Grechany paused.

I knew Zhukov’s background.

Vyacheslav Mikhailovich had worked as the plant’s head engineer as far back as Dubrovsky, but then he received a lucrative offer to go to work in Africa. For five years. The City Committee told him: “You must make a choice – either you remain head engineer, or don’t even dream about this position again. Even if you do come back. “

As a result, Zhukov went to Africa. He brought back a brand new Volga and made a good deal of money.

When he returned he realized that he could not live without the plant. There were other offers, but he grew up here, he knew everything inside out. And he went to pay homage to Dubrovsky. He hired him, of course, but only as deputy head engineer.

I had learned Zhukov was a pretty hard, strong-willed and competent expert.

I watched as he enters the plant, greeting people; his facial expression, his speech – it all gave him out as a confident person. He was a strong administrator.

His face looked as if carved out of stone by a venerable sculptor – sharp cheekbone lines, a massive chin. The plant gave many nicknames to him, but I had only one – the Tsar. And I tried to treat him accordingly.

Zhukov was in part a riddle for me. A sunny morning doesn't always portend a clear day, and his judgment and intellect were not a guarantee that he was ready to compromise and make concessions. By comparison, Timofeev was simply tame.

Grechany's voice gritted, as if someone scratched a fingernail on glass on the other end.

"Igor, you're making a mistake. Zhukov is a man with great experience. Timofeev is much weaker as a specialist compared to him."

"Aleksey Petrovich," I begged. "Am I to resurrect the plant?! Allow me to form a team then, I see it necessary."

Negative fluids in Grechany's voice were approaching the critical level.

"Igor, I told you. That is all."

Underneath the warmth of his paternal intonations, I felt the icy cold of a manager impossible to argue with.

"I will not approve this nomination," he said and hung up.

I meditated on it. Twilight was insinuating its way through the window. Some places, the stars had already lit up in the sky. Which one of them guided me?

I drummed a march with my fingers on the tabletop mechanically. In a strange way passion grew up in me, as though I was playing some game, where everything was decided not by force, but by savvy and thoughtful consideration.

I dialed Tarada's direct number.

"Hello, Anatoly Georgievich . Babaev bothering you."

"Ah, Igor, how are you?"

"All fine! There's a small matter with raw material. I would like to consult."

It was a necessary part of the game with Tarada. I could not just call him about a problem that worried me. I had to comply with the rules.

After a series of standard phrases I paused and realized a convenient moment had come.

“Anatoly Georgievich, you remember that guy who was supposed to become the director of the plant here? They kept him as head engineer for me...”

“Why, of course, of course,” said Tarada.

“The man drank,” I continued. “I had to fire him. I now propose another for his job. But here’s the situation,” I paused, letting him understand the difficulty of the moment.

“Igor, but what exactly is the situation?”

“I have my own vision of candidate for head engineer. I would like to be sure that the Meat Association supports me. I’m in charge of restoring the plant after all.”

“Igor, I understand you,” Tarada’s voice became even warmer. “Do not even worry. I’ll close this issue with Aleksey Petrovich. Call him later on. Do not worry. But do not push. Soften your position. And we will solve the issue. Anything else?”

“Everything else is in order.”

Tarada laughed heartily, as if I had told him the best news he could possibly hear from me. He paused, and then said slyly:

“I’ve heard them say you are tough as nails. I’m getting convinced of this myself.”

“Thank you for the kind words.”

“Call me, be sure to call if there are any more questions.”

We said goodbye warmly.

The next day I called Grechany. They connected me almost immediately. His voice was rather dry, but calm.

“I’m listening.”

“Hello, Aleksey Petrovich. I’m calling about the approval of the new head engineer. I’ve submitted my proposition to the union.

I spoke as if there had not been any prior nervous conversation.

Grechany immediately interrupted me.

“You know, Igor, I’ve thought about it, weighed all the “pros” and “cons”, I think you’re right.”

I could not believe my ears, sat silently, did not interrupt.

“Timofeev is a...” Grechany paused, as though choosing his words, “a good choice. I think that we’ll approve.”

“Thank you”, I uttered. But in fact I mentally gave thanks with all my soul to Tarada. And then added loudly, “Aleksey Petrovich, thank you for your support.”

“What are you talking about, Igor. You are to lift the plant. Probably you are right. The team should be yours inside and out. I agree with this candidate.”

We said goodbye.

I wanted to do a victory dance.

A few days later the administrative order for the approval of Timofeev Viktor Yefimovich as head engineer at the plant arrived.

* * *

Forming the new team required a good deal of nerves and time from me. Nothing could be done overnight, and there was no need for that. The main thing was not to throw the baby out with the water. The old Dubrovsky staff could also be useful.

I saw that my lessons did not remain undigested. After the admonition I gave to Baida changed the sausage factory radically. Everything sparkled and glittered there now. The sausage would not go ‘to-the-side’. The tonnage and delivery addresses corresponded to the papers exactly. And I had full control over the whole process in my hands.

As it turned out, the old guard was good for something.

I was pleased.

One only had to find a common ground with them.

* * *

The steam coming up from the hot broth was fogging the sparkling porcelain of the expensive table set we got as a wedding gift from Lida’s parents.

Matte pieces of meat were floating in the tureen in a golden glow of onion rings and small dots of fatty circles oozing from the beef.

I was sitting at home, tired, hungry. But happy...

The nappies were hanging all over. Perfect cleanliness.

The way Lida was able to cook and wash, how she took care of the child gave me a sense of gratitude and tenderness.

“You’ll see – soon the renovation of our house will be over,” I said in a conspiratorial manner, “I came up with something there, we’ll live like gods.”

XXXV

In the final stages of the renovation, I stopped by the apartment almost every day, personally overseeing the progress of the work.

When the finishing works had been completed, I decided it was time to bring Lida to the house.

On a cool cloudy June morning, when the fog still covered the ground like an enemy crawling up to a strategic object, and the sky was overcast with gray clouds as if trying to blend in color with wet Armavir streets, we arrived to the brand new nine-story house at the park in a company car.

Lida got out of the car and threw back her head.

“Our windows are over there,” I showed her.

She looked at me admiringly. I opened the entrance door for her.

Up the stairs, with bulbs in austere white shades lit on each floor, no dust on them yet – I made sure specifically that they were lit on every floor – we went up to the third.

I felt like a soldier crossing conquered territory. I did what my love had dreamed about for so long.

Vysotsky was playing behind someone's wall, a baby was screaming behind a door, while I felt happy.

I took the keys and opened the door.

The castle opened with a slight clatter, surprisingly quiet, and I physically felt the triumph of the victor. I glanced back at Lida.

"Third floor – not too high, right?" I said.

Lida looked through the wide open door. I noticed that she was trying to contain her admiration. Restraint never left her, even in the most exciting moments.

She walked through the door I solemnly opened for her and flew down the corridor, looking into all the rooms. Her eyes focused on a luxurious carpet lying on the floor, she then touched the wall covered with waterproof Finnish wallpaper... and stroked it.

I could read a well-concealed delight in her eyes. She was silent. But her eyes spoke eloquently to me:

"How good have you cleaned it up here!"

She took off her coat and went into the kitchen.

I went after her, lit a cigarette, threw the cigarette away, lit the gas stove – showing her this latest miracle of technology. There was a Czech kitchen set – the top of designer ideas, as we thought back then.

In the hall – the "Belgrade" furniture set, one you could not get anywhere. In the bedroom – Hungarian furniture with unprecedented decor, as though even giving away the smell of resin. Bathroom had been finished with high quality tiles. The doors were polished. I felt like a victor, showing the captured trophies to his queen.

Lida faced it all with ease, as though this was what she had awaited, but I knew – she was satisfied.

"We'll start having guests... You'll cook here..." I turned the handle of the new nickel-plated Finnish tap – water struck the bottom of the sparkling chrome sink resoundingly.

“So? What do you think?” I could not resist asking.

Her eyes were not enough for me. Lida heard my thoughts exactly.

“Just like in the movies,” she said frostily. She got her restraint from her mother.

I ran to her. Grabbed her and lifted her in my arms. Spinned her around.

Pavlenko did not let me down. He brought, as promised, the very scarce of it all. I did not say all of that to Lidochka. I just enjoyed her look that read a lot more than she said out loud.

She went to the kitchen set, opened it. Directly in front of her was a row of white plates from some incredibly expensive dish set.

But her attention was immediately shifted to what looked like a huge refrigerator back then, standing right at the sink. Lida opened it and gasped in admiration. It had a huge freezer, filled with ice trays.

I prepared a surprise for hers and Serezha’s move. The fridge was full.

There was fresh food, cream, milk, just from the cow... All sorts of delicacies that my friends sent me from other cities. I was the son of my father in that regard and would not allow us to eat haphazardly. We were regularly supplied live crayfish from Don, and from Dagestan – the freshest black caviar, the meat delicacies were brought from the plant, the fresh herbs and vegetables – from the markets.

It was like a sign of God’s blessing, testifying: “Lida, while you are with Igor, you’ll both be all right.”

“You want to be happy here,” said Lida and looked at me closely as if to say: “I am pleased with you.”

“You’re so good!” She added quietly.

I kissed her on the cheek.

“This is for you and Sergei!” I said, pulling her closer.

Lida rubbed her head against my cheek. A soft warmth came from her.

“How I love you, Igor! I told you that with us it would be different! Didn’t I!? You did not believe me... Oh, Igor, how happy I am that we finally have it all.” She looked at me childishly defenseless and said, “And do not laugh, I’m really happy right now.”

“Now it’s your house, our house,” I said, running my hand around the space.

Three of our rooms seemed a royal mansion to me back then.

“Look,” I began showing it to Lida again, as if we were in a museum – the quality of the finishing, the polished doors of real red wood with gleaming nickel-plated handles, which one could not find anywhere.

Lida looked around admiringly at what we thought was the top of luxury.

“If you only knew what it cost me!”

I saw Lida’s face bloom with each passing second. But she was keeping a low profile.

I led her into the bedroom. I pointed to the Hungarian bedroom suite with a luxuriously inlaid headboard.

“And this is our wedding gift,” I said with a laugh, “from Ilya Vladimirovich...”

Lida understood my hint.

“Igor, stop! Dad is having difficult days now.”

I held up a hand.

“Lida, I’m not saying anything.”

Several paintings without frames hung on the wall, while the windows offered a magnificent view of the park and the pond hiding behind the trees.

“We are so lucky, Igor!” Said Lida.

Smiling, I looked at her delicate face, searching for her eyes. She always missed the most important thing a little, or

understood only half of what was to be understood only in its entirety, otherwise it was better to understand nothing at all! Could it be that what had fallen to our lot, seemed only a sum of some luck to her?

However, what was the difference today?

She's here, she had made it, and came here with my son, to this not exactly resort type of town, to me, for me...

"Sit down," I said, "you must be uncomfortable from all the standing and walking."

"No, I'm very comfortable, everything is amazing," she said, pressing her hot cheek to my hand again. "Amazingly convenient. And does it matter – convenient or not? I'm with you! In our house. After all, it's our house?" She asked, somehow childish, just as if she still could not believe this reality I created for her.

"Yes, yes," I repeated, nodding my head.

"What's in the bathroom?"

Lida ran to look at the bathroom.

And suddenly I felt some signs of fatigue, as if the adrenaline in the blood had dried out. I wearily raised my head. Lida's voice was a blur.

Our move had taken place.

Now I had my home front, where I could take refuge like in a fortress.

* * *

A knock at the door took me away from my thoughts. I automatically looked at my watch.

It was half past eight in the evening. The working day was coming to an end at the plant.

"May I, Igor Alekseevich?"

In the doorway Baida's face loomed as a ghost – my diamond lady.

"Do come in."

I glanced at the table mechanically. Any unnecessary papers there?

Baida greeted me. Her eyes ran restlessly from side to side, as if she felt at fault.

“Has something happened?” I asked.

Seeing my questioning look, she put out her hands like a springboard diver as if to say: “Do not worry, do not worry.”

“There is no emergency, Igor Alekseevich.” Her full face betrayed some confusion, eyes sparkled feverishly.

“No, I can see something has happened. Some kind of trouble?” I put the papers aside.

“No, it’s a personal question, Igor Alekseevich. May I sit down?”

I nodded.

Baida hesitated, not knowing where to start.

“Well, speak,” I pushed her.

“I’ve had time to know you, Igor Alekseevich. And understand your management style.”

I silently listened to her without reacting.

“For the most part, I agree with all that you have brought to production. In general, it’s probably the way it should be. But there is one “but.” You know, Igor Alekseevich, I have reached the retirement age... And such a change in the production. It takes all my strength. And of that I do not have much”.

“Maria Grigorievna,” I allowed myself to smile, “you’re still a tiptop lady...”

“Thank you, Igor Alekseevich. I know, I know. No compliments, please. Your intentions are obvious.”

She paused.

I did not react to the attack. Baida sighed.

“These innovations are not for me anymore. I know what you think about me. And I’m not angry. I heard everything you told me, and made a decision: I’m going. Sign my resignation.”

And she put a letter of resignation on the table.

Honestly, I did not expect such an outcome, and was at a loss at first. Could this be a trick? I looked at her attentively. This was a very tired woman.

“Why does she need this hard labor?” It suddenly flashed through my head. “Toiling from morning till dusk. I blocked her oxygen. She is not used to working for just the salary. Moreover, with her savings...”

She suddenly became very clear to me. Her decision could not but command respect. She would not scheme against me. Would not run to the City Committee, where she was well known, and where, the people she had long lured during the years probably worked – to ask for their help.

“That’s dignified,” I said.

She raised her lashes in surprise, as if not expecting a sincere praise on my part.

“I respect your decision, Maria Grigorievna,” I said, signing the resignation.

This is how our peaceful parting took place. Now I had a free hand.

“How weak human nature is!” I was thinking. “You just need to put it before the facts of the truth.”

* * *

The secretary reported that Pavlenko was waiting for me in the waiting room.

Two months had passed since he started his work, and I was happy with him.

“Call him in.”

Zhenya entered in a business-like, confident gait. In his hand he had a folder with papers, out of which he would always take out orders like a magician – where and what had been sent, where, from whom and what had been received. He joined the team surprisingly quickly, winning my trust.

We greeted each other warmly.

I had virtually no complaints about him.

“How are you?”

“Working little by little, Igor Alekseevich. Just my head keeps spinning for some reason.”

I smiled. But then I went on to the business tone.

“I can tell you that you’re doing everything right. In general, I am pleased with you. But do not relax.

“Igor Alekseevich, if you are satisfied with me, that is, with my job – I had a proposition for you, let me take over the sales department as well, don’t worry, I can handle it.”

Basically it was what I had expected from him. The main opportunities of earning were concentrated in the sales area. But , I could only entrust a proven man with such a responsible position.

Our conversation was completely open.

“Reason, please,” I said.

He smiled.

“I can tell you confidently, you have a mess in sales. I was able to get a little insight. You need your own man there. You can count on me.”

I looked at him closely. I recalled the characteristics that Slava gave him. Zhenya saw my silence as doubt.

“I can take it under my wing, and close all the supplier positions at the same time. Because in fact, sales and supply are the links of one chain.”

It was a truism. The sausage opened the door to any deficit in construction procurement.

“In principle, I agree with you, and if you can manage it, then you have already received my consent. Act, please.”

We shook hands.

Still, I didn’t think the formation of the team was complete.

* * *

It was a warm Armavir evening. The plant commotion outside became quieter. After the nervous bustle of the day I could relax a little.

I reached into my notebook and dialed Misha Tsymbal.

"Misha, good evening!" My father's friend, he remembered me as a student.

"Ah, Igor! Long time no see," there was a bit cracked voice on the phone.

I could not resist and quipped. Some friendly jokes followed. Suddenly I said seriously:

"Misha, there's a situation. The place of the sausage production director is vacant. How about Sergei?"

Misha stopped laughing.

"Call him yourself. And talk. There is no problem."

Misha was a titan – he communicated directly with the Party Central Committee apparatus, and his opinion was very important to me.

"I know," his very familiar voice was ringing on the line, "that you have had a preliminary conversation. Sergei is counting on you. I am grateful to you for that. The fact that you will be together is far from indifferent to me. Come on, I wish you success. Call my son."

I immediately dialed Sergei's number.

"Serega, hello."

"Aaah!" I heard a cry of joy on the other end of the line. "I have not heard your voice for a long time. Igor, hello!"

"You'll deafen me! What have you got going on there?"

"I am on vacation."

"I know that already. How is Olga? How is family life?"

I sat on the edge of the table, listening to my friend excitedly tell me about the details of his joyful life. Involuntarily I saw my reflection in the window and it seemed to me that I was seeing Tsymbal next to me – same as before, during the institute years, when we lived in the same room and would spent the evening, talking, chatting, meeting with the girls for hours on end...

Study, partying, work – all this whirlwind flashed before my eyes.

“What questions do you have?” Sergei asked aggressively.

“Are you ready to work?” I replied with a question. Sergei laughed and said nothing. “I have a failure of the HR – I said goodbye to my director of the sausage department. When can you start?”

“Are you trying to be funny?”

I even thought that I saw his cheerful smile like before; he always knew how to please people...

“I’m being serious with you.”

There was a pause on the other end.

“Igor, give me a month of rest, and then I’m all yours.”

“Good. Take care of all your affairs,” I continued, “have a good time, dance with your wife, and then – come to me at once.”

Sergei laughed again.

“Not before you seduce me with a good salary...”

He always said it in the way he saw and understood the situation. Such a man was the uttermost need right now.

“You know, my friend,” I said grinning, “first I will make you work hard.”

We both laughed at deafening volume.

Two weeks later, a new director of the sausage production was working for me – my close friend Sergei Tsymbal.

XXXVI

Since the day I moved from Anapa I'd been working like a horse. I needed some rest.

Serezha was already more than a year old. And we could leave him to Anna Grigorievna.

I called Lida and told her that we were going on vacation to Zheleznovodsk – the elite Fourth Department sanatorium of Ministry of Health.

The long-awaited moment when I thought that nothing would go wrong, there would be no reason that can pull me away from vacation, finally came. The machine was up and running as it should.

This was a Council of Ministers resort, able to give their guests the best of everything there was at that time in the Soviet Union. They only served the top party and government bodies.

With its level it stood out even against the background of all the others, far from ordinary, sanatoriums. Two sanatorium employees were assigned to each resting man. Everything

about it was just aimed at the best of rest and comfort of the visitors.

The thick red carpets would muffle one's steps, peace and quiet set the pace throughout the whole thing. A slow, measured life. Amazing food, friendly service. The intention was for the guests to be fully able to feel their uniqueness.

I was able to free my mind, relax and rest... Still kept holding my hand on the pulse of the plant. When you can not escape from the bearing down circle of fears that they will not cope without you, the burden of responsibility becomes especially noticeable, and often sends warning danger signals even when they are none.

* * *

I called Timofeev.

"Victor, what's the situation?"

His voice was calm.

"All tolerable, Igor Alekseevich. We're working."

I smiled graciously.

"Come on, come on, do not relax there. Got any questions for me?"

There was no reply, a pause came up. Communication lost or something?

"Victor, where are you?" I asked in surprise.

I heard Victor shouting something on the other end. Listened closely. He wasn't shouting to me.

"Explosion!" I heard, and could not believe my ears.

"Victor!" I yelled into the phone. "What's going on there?"

The connection was lost. I did not understand what was happening. What explosion? I dialed other numbers – no reply. I felt uneasy.

Half an hour later the phone rang. Timofeev called back.

"Igor Alekseevich!" His voice trembled, "the compressor department exploded."

Noise and crackle were heard on the phone.

“What are you talking about?” I could not believe my ears.

“The roof flew off in the compressor department. There are casualties.”

It was like a punch in the stomach.

“What is the situation now?”

I clearly imagined a fire, the demolished roof...

“Can you hear me? Why are you silent? I’m on my way!”

Swearing, I slammed down the phone.

Imagination had drawn God knows what pictures. A Satanic abyss opened wide in front of me at the thought of what happened there without me.

I rushed to collect my things.

At the same time I was trying to contact Timofeev over and over again. For a long time no one replied.

Finally Timofeev answered.

“Report clearly – what happened?” I shouted.

“The compressor department exploded. Two of ours are in the hospital. Burned. Severe burns.”

“How’d they burn?”

“Chemical protection suits on them caught fire.”

“More casualties?”

“No one else. The roof was blown off. Completely.”

“The building is intact? Who’s working on the site?”

“Everyone came in large numbers. Firefighters. The ambulance, Chief of Staff of the Civil Defense immediately showed up, they say an explosion was heard through the whole city...”

It was hard to imagine anything worse than this.

“If they ask, tell them I’m on my way.”

I rushed to Armavir at breakneck speed.

The burnt tree branches on the road seemed harbingers of terrible disaster that happened without me at the plant.

A question slipped in involuntarily – is it the fault of my subordinates who can not cope with the situation without me, or just a tragic coincidence?

As luck would have it, drizzling rain started, the sky was a curtain of lead-like clouds like a grim backdrop for the tragic incidents.

I panicked. “Do not lose your head” – my quiet inner voice calmed me.

The lack of information allowed my imagination to paint devil knows what catastrophic pictures... I held back so as not to drive like mad...

I wanted to go back two days, to shuffle the deck of events. And to make sure that I was in Armavir already, and all that was happening now, would just be a nightmare that I had. It was like passing through some kind of curse, which gained real shape.

Upon arrival, I immediately rushed to the accident site. What I saw was shocking. It was as if the plant had never had a roof. A sweet poisonous smell was in the air.

The compressor department was crowded with people, the mud, the foam after fighting the fire were everywhere, and, as a grim reminder of the disaster, a red fire truck was standing up against the wall of the department...

I told everyone to gather in my office.

Everyone was depressed. People seemed afraid to look me in the eye. Even in the office there seemed to smell of burning.

“Let’s set aside this mournful mood now,” I began in the business manner in order to cheer up the team. “Please report. What is the situation at the plant? Fire extinguished everywhere?”

“Everywhere. The firefighters are cleaning it up,” Timofeev responded, sitting.

“Has ammonia been tested? No new leaks will come up?

“It seems so.”

“I do not need it to “seem,” I burst out. “Respond specifically. Who was responsible for what? Why was there a leak?”

Timofeev rose slowly. Eyes red. Hands are shaking, Vali-
lidol smell coming from the man.

“Igor Alekseevich., ammonia leak occurred in the compressor department. Workers had been sent to fix the problem. They went in chemical protection suits. Everything the way it should be.”

“Which chemical protection?”

“Everything is as it should be,” he repeated. “Plus gas-masks. Rubberized. And then, out of nowhere a spark slipped, and – a blast! Rubber lit up on them immediately.”

“Did they comply with the safety regulations? Has the safety engineer checked?” I cried.

“I checked and it seemed fine”

“There is that “seemed” again! Was it fine or not?”

Timofeev’s eyes started running from side to side.

“We have made an document saying that he checked.”

“When did you make it?”

He was silent again.

“I see. So you did it post-factum! Did you find out why there was a fire?”

“Short-circuit in something! We do not really understand the reason. It all caught fire on them. The guys are now in the hospital. Seventy percent burns.”

“Is the situation under control now?”

“Yes.”

“You did everything right,” I said.

There was no one to execute, and no reason to! I had to cheer the people up. However, this will yet be dealt with in the City Committee. But I did not give a damn. At the moment I had to support the people. I gave the orders. Now the most difficult part was ahead.

I got into the car and drove to the hospital to see the injured. They led me into the room.

On the bed, walled with oilcloth, lay a young man with a bandaged face and body. Only slots have been left around the eyes and mouth, from which tubes stretched. The hand, limply

overhanging the bed... His appearance was depressing. I felt physical pain just looking at him.

Seeing him was like standing on the edge of a high cliff: goose bumps, and the bottom of the gorge attracts powerfully and inevitably.

Strict nurses in starched coats were swirling around. Young doctors were whispering some reports to some big-nosed Armenian, thrusting some tests and shots under his nose.

The guy felt my appearance. He opened his eyes. They sparkled like two small pieces of coal. The pupils were dilated with pain. He opened his cracked lips with difficulty.

"Igor Alekseevich," he said, his tongue slurred.

I stretched out my hand reassuringly.

"Hush, hush, hush."

"Igor Alekseevich, you can do anything, please save me," he whispered.

I stood there, not knowing what to do. So much hope and pray sounded in his voice, and it was all directed at me.

"Listen... I'll talk to the doctors. They will help you, I promise."

The guy's face showed mute despair.

I left the room. I found a doctor who was sitting in the staff room. He had a concerned look. He smoked one cigarette after another non-stop.

I walked over to his desk. He did not seem to notice my arrival.

"Excuse me..." I said to him.

He stared at me, surprised.

"What's with the guy they brought from the plant? I am the director."

The doctor stopped smoking. And thought hard.

"It is a matter of time."

"What is 'a matter of time'?" I did not understand.

"The guy has a few hours left to live," he said dryly.

It was like a hit on the head with a hammer to me.

It was one of the worst days of my life, when the “Aesculapius” passed his non-appealable judgment. He did not want to console me in vain with false phrases and was quite familiar with the misfortunes of others, so as not to obscure the true picture of the whole incident.

“Is it very bad?” I asked.

“I have nothing to tell you and I am not going to reassure you in vain,” looking at me with cold eyes, said the on-duty doctor. “He has seventy percent burns. But even that is not so bad. The overalls, he had on him, simply soldered to the skin and provoked a chemical poisoning of the whole organism. We can do nothing. Just remove all the skin. It’s impossible.”

I felt infinitely sorry for the guy that was dying now, lying alone in the room, as if the tentacles of death, which entangled him, could reach all of us.

“I can involve the Regional Committee,” I said grimly, hoping the doctor would then say “go on”. But he looked at me with surprise. “And nothing can be done?”

The surgeon shook his head. It was obvious how hard it is was for him to admit.

I stood there, not knowing what to say.

As if realizing my condition, he looked at me wearily.

“You did everything you could. We, too. Go now. We will report.”

It was the worst.

I went back to the guy. I looked into his eyes. He seemed to be already unconscious. I leaned closer to him.

“Can you hear me? Have courage. We will do everything we can. The doctors will do. You are young. You have to survive.”

In my soul there was only pain.

I turned around and walked out... Just avoid standing there helplessly in the face of death, begging it not to approach –

it still won't listen. The only salvation would now be to distract myself with the workload, give no chance for any extra thoughts to climb into my head. Put the department in order, eliminate the breakdown.

I walked out of the hospital.

I pulled my tie on the threshold outside, took a deep breath of fresh air with my mouth to stop feeling the smell of the room, where my worker was dying.

Anatoly, the driver, quietly opened the door for me with a sympathetic look.

"Well, how is it?" he asked.

"It's bad, Anatoly. To the plant.

The car drove off. I stared out the window. Thoughts kept spinning in my head persistently: "How could this happen? Why did this accident occur?"

The problem was not even that I had to report to the City Committee about the deaths of people. The question was different: to what degree was this giant worn out? How much more do we have to adapt, so that we no longer have these terrible absurd deaths? This is not defense production. This is a meat-packing plant, a symbol of quiet peaceful life.

And then some sarcastic voice sounded in my head it: "Not only has the plant already spent most of its tangible assets, this explosion will now add a lot of trouble."

I shook my head. For a long time would I remember the face of that guy they couldn't save...

* * *

The ride to work was about ten minutes. Whenever Anatoly drove me somewhere, anxiety started to itch quietly deep in the cerebellum: "What kind of surprise is waiting for me today?"

That morning Grechany's call came first. They were urgently summoning me to a meeting.

I rushed there. I wondered, what had happened.

"Good morning, Igor Alekseevich," Aleksey Petrovich greeted me.

His voice was somehow colorless. So that it's difficult to understand what he really had in mind when he said the word "good".

"I heard they praised you at the City Committee," he paused, waiting for a response, but none came. "Not bad, not bad." I waited for him to say something. "Igor Alekseevich, our Association has bought a batch of geese in Hungary. Here's your combat mission. It is necessary to make a special Kuban product from goose liver. Soviet *foie gra*, if you will. Can you do it?"

"If you have the technology, we'll definitely make it work."

"We'll send all the manuals. Experts will come and explain."

"Got it, Aleksey Petrovich. Getting started."

"If you need help – call me immediately. We'll render anything. I repeat – our task is to create a special Kuban product." He emphasized the word "special".

"Bear in mind, there is a specific deadline. The matter is under special control of the regional government."

* * *

Months of absurdity had begun.

The poultry farm was to fatten the foreign geese, and then only, and only then, send them to us to slaughter.

I would inquire when they were bringing the fowl, but each time they answered that there are no results.

"What is the problem?" I asked.

"They have a problem feeding them," said Timofeev.

"What kind of problem?"

"The geese livers aren't growing. Maybe they are feeding them wrong. Maybe they're not used to Russian wheat."

“All kinds of things happen!”

Timofeev went on talking enthusiastically.

“The geese were placed in cages to limit their mobility as much as possible. Imagine, Igor Alekseevich, in this state the goose liver should grow up to seven hundred grams because of immobility and gluttony. These ones aren’t being affected though.”

Each meeting with Grechany started with him inquiring about the progress of the pate works. When will Babaev get the fowl? And every time the director of the poultry processing would just spread his arms.

“What is the reason?” When Grechany was nervous, he would repeat his question several times.

“The livers are not growing,” we heard time and again.

“Why the hell not?!” Grechany got angry. “Have you violated the fattening technology?”

“No.”

“Have you checked recently?”

“We have, Anatoly Petrovich. Not growing, damn it.”

“How many grams?”

“Three hundred. We must hold on to at least four hundred.”

“Maybe you should cut their feet off, so that they don’t move?” Grechany suddenly proposed.

“Well, we can’t break the legs,” perplexed the director of poultry processing. “They almost don’t move already. They just gobble.”

“Keep in mind,” Grechany warned. “You have to send them all to Babaev on time! You will answer with your head.”

* * *

“Igor Alekseevich,” my secretary’s face sprung up in front of me. “The artists have brought sketches of labels for lithography on the can.”

“Well, show them to me.”

I would scrutinize the artworks they had brought to me, then ask to explain, change something. Then the image would be sent to the association and approved.

And I'd still wonder when they'd bring the geese.

* * *

Days passed. The completion date was getting close. I was holding a meeting with the artists when the secretary stuck her head into the office like a mouse.

"Igor Alekseevich, Grechany on the line."

"Put him through."

Grechany's voice was dry.

"Igor, time is running out. I ordered to slaughter the geese without waiting for the increase in the liver weight. It's a risk, the technology is broken, but nothing can be done. Tomorrow they'll bring you the fowl."

"Got it, Aleksey Petrovich. We'll make it right."

"I'm counting on you, Igor Alekseevich."

This meant that the whole responsibility would fall on me again. Clear as day.

The fowl was brought the next day.

I had always felt very clearly, which matters require my constant control, and which don't.

I kept this process under close control.

We were pioneers. What will this end with? Slaughter first. Then production. I had to control every single key point of production.

And finally, the first experimental batch of goose pate was ready.

We gathered in the department. Head of technology, head engineer, department heads. The moment was really nerve wrecking and exciting. There was an air of solemnity. The Kuban Special, the Soviet *foie gras*, product was ready.

They put a tiny plate of pate before each of us.

A faint spicy scent was coming from the pate, in which a sophisticated nose could smell notes of cumin and something even hotter, like chill sauce. I took a spoon, scooped up a small part of the mass of dark sand color. The aroma and taste my receptors felt was tantalizing, seductive, as if the delicacy commanded: come eat me as quickly as possible.

A true royal appetite had awakened in me.

This small performance we all participated in reminded one of a solemn ritual.

“How does it taste?” I asked.

“In my opinion, delicious,” mumbled the chief technologist.

I kept silent.

My palatine receptors cried for the taste of more and more portions of the gastronomic delicacy.

“I get hungry at the sight of pate can alone,” continued Timofeev.

Everyone smiled.

“Well, comrades, let me congratulate you,” I said, thus ending the degustation.

The first batch was packed ceremonially.

That same day I got a call from Grechany.

“Is it ready?”

“Yes,” I blurted out.

“Igor, we received an order from the Regional Committee: two boxes of the pate should be immediately sent to them – for tasting.”

Grechany’s voice was vibrating with anticipation of victory. He coped with the task entrusted to him – the pate released in time.

“We’re ready, Aleksey Petrovich.”

The experimental batch of pate was packed up. It looked nice and solid. The produce went to the Regional Committee.

XXXVII

The People's Control Committee had an enormous influence at the plant. Its chairwoman was a stout woman of about fifty, with crooked teeth emanating something like "just let me catch you and I'll bite you through".

Her look involuntarily brought back Nekrasov's lines of those Russian women, who were not only capable of stopping a galloping horse, but could also destroy a huge farmhouse by just their inhuman concern for the safety of the socialist property.

Her last name was Prokopenko.

She was a divorcee, angry and childless.

She liked her public position. In this business, she felt like a fish in water.

She loved to organize demonstrative councils, venting all of her anger caused by unsuccessful personal life on the guilty people.

Once she came to my office:

“Igor Alekseevich, I’m sorry to bother you. We have scheduled a meeting of the committee, the material we collected is very indicative, we invite you to attend.”

“If I have time, I will come,” I promised her, looking at the calendar.

* * *

As soon as summer started, the migrating birds, namely, the students from all the universities of the Soviet Union specializing in the field, would flock at our plant for internship.

Of every one hundred students they sent us ninety were girls, as a rule.

Watching them had always been nice, like the first flowers of spring. In their natural gait, there was something subtly aching, and they had a somewhat special laugh. The spring freshness of their faces would be in sharp contrast to most of the plant workers’ sullen faces.

Even when they made mistakes and errors – these were mistakes made by creatures so fascinating that most of them, if not all, could be forgiven.

They would mix up the technology of sausage manufacturing, contradict older women workers telling them off for their carelessness, but understood their tasks and performed well.

As a rule, the department professor, whom I had known since college times, was responsible for them.

* * *

I told Zhora Troitsky on the phone that trainees had come to our plant.

Zhora instantly brightened.

“We’ll definitely be there. We need to instruct them.”

It did not take long. He came to my office all red from the hot noon, as though after a bath, looking like a Russian nobleman, wearing an imported summer suit.

A whirlwind of events swirled round him. He spoke loudly, gesticulating frantically, dancing a mysterious dance, as it seemed from a distance.

We went to the departments with him... I wanted the chairman of the Executive Committee to see how we carried out the modernization.

Flocks of young intern girls in long robes, from under which short skirts and slender legs would show, were running around the department. The summer...The heat... The wind would lift the robes immodestly and it seemed at times there was nothing underneath.

Fantasies started to live their lives in you...

The naughty roll of female heels would sometimes give a sweet echo somewhere in the lower abdomen, knocking you out of the working track.

"What a cute intern," suddenly Zhora poked me in the ribs.

"Where?"

"That one, walking over there."

I followed the direction of his gaze. It was a very young, brown-haired student with a forever surprised look. Her nose was strewn with freckles, which made her look like a rural naïve girl. It was hard to imagine anything more charming than this young face. Her eyes were quite blue as if someone had poured bright celestial color into them.

Zhora looked at the girl, who turned her back on us. Her figure was emphasized by a tight-fitting robe. I could feel that Zhora had taken trail like a hound scenting prey. This girl was painfully good-looking.

"It is necessary to involve the young people in the production process," said Zhora meditatively, "in order to prepare someone to change us."

"Or else all the experts will die out soon," I followed his tone. "Who will work in the sausage department then?"

“Yes, as the classic has it, the staff is key to everything,” mused Troitsky. “Okay, let’s go.”

Zhora took the podium, spoke about the Institute, about education, about the great plant the interns had picked... There had always been only one point with these performances, making a better impression with the girls.

“Look, what a sweet one!” He pushed me, sitting down next to me at the table after his fiery speech.

I laughed and said nothing.

Immediately after the parting words, we started to distribute the interns, as in who was going to work where.

I sent for the girl that caught the attention of Zhora Troitsky. She came in, shy, intelligent eyes shooting sparkles.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Maria!”

“Well, then, Masha, you are so outstanding that you have caught our attention.”

She was confused.

“But you know,” I went straight to first names, “we’ve got too many people here, a whole cohort of students is still supposed to arrive. At the same time the city Executive Committee was interested in your recommendations. They invite you to work with them. I can not refrain from recommending you – it’s the Executive Committee!”

The girl started stroking her skirt, pretending not to understand anything.

“And what about my main field assessment?”

“Don’t worry – we will take care of everything... We just need your consent. If you are ready – my driver will take you there right now.”

The girl agreed.

When I met Georgy later on, so I asked how his intern was. He raised his eyes to the ceiling instead of the response.

“She turned out to be a very sensible girl.”

I laughed knowingly.

Zhora had been grateful to me ever since.

* * *

Everything went perfectly that day. As the saying goes, it was set right in the morning. The walk round the departments went without incident. The people were working, and the plan was being carried out.

When I paused for a moment, suddenly the business-like voice of the secretary crept in, reporting that an interlocutor from the Central Committee of the Party was on the line. I could not believe my ears.

At first I even thought someone was joking – they had never directly contacted me from the CC.

“Igor Alekseevich?” I heard a very clear voice, quiet but commanding.

“Yes!” I replied.

“Will you please come to the Department of Food Industry of the Central Committee of the Party. You have to be there on the day after tomorrow. There will be a pass waiting for you at entrance six. Bye.”

There was a release click.

I was at a loss.

I called the Regional Committee.

They knew nothing of the reason for the call there.

“Go,” Grechany said seriously.

I had no choice. I got on the plane. I flew to Moscow.

All sorts of thoughts were, of course, swirling in my head. What happened there? Why did they call me in? There are no simple miracles. But when they don’t even know on the Regional Committee...

There were more questions than answers.

Here’s the familiar building on the Old Square.

The red carpet runners. The power, majesty oozing from the closed doors, behind which the country’s destiny is being decided.

I pay no attention to all this. I'm looking for the office I need. I come in. I introduce myself.

A certain official, a big wheel, starts asking questions politely without even offering me a seat.

"We have a question to you in relation to the plant's product."

"I'm listening."

"How did the pate get to the Regional Committee of the Party?"

"By order of the Association."

"Good, please tell me how you made goose pate?"

I'm confused.

"According to the technology..."

"Did you conduct the final product testing?" The voice of my interlocutor changes from wood to metal.

"Can you explain to me what happened?"

"Did you conduct a bacteriological analysis?"

"Well... We had tried ourselves. After that, there was no time – I was asked to send directly to the Regional Committee..."

I immediately knew where the wind was blowing from.

"You think it's legal that the plant's product reached the Regional Committee, having passed all the standards?"

A chill ran down my spine.

"Who gave you the right to produce a product that had not passed a bacterial analysis. You understand that you could have poisoned people?!"

I'm neither dead nor alive. I hardly find words:

"We are all subjects to subordination, there are times when things need to be done at breakneck speed. I'm sure that the product was of the highest quality. We made everything under sterile conditions."

"Sterile or not, but your behavior will be reported to the Minister. We will forward all the materials about the abuse to the Ministry. You are free to go."

I conveyed full and unanimous acceptance of the verdict of the official as good as I could, and left quietly.

* * *

When I told my father about it, he laughed heartily.

“So this was the guy who got diarrhea from your pate?!” Father’s powerful chin began to shake with laughter.

“But the funny thing is, Dad,” I continued, “they are selling this gold pate for a penny. You count up the cost price, taking into account all that we spend, is tenfold higher than the selling price. Well, what do you say?!”

“This is the strength of our socialist economy,” said my father with a grin.

We burst in laughter.

“And how did it get to you after all?”

“Well, only later did I learn that Medunov had traveled to Hungary and tried the proverbial pate there. And he liked it so much, he decided to make our own special, Kuban product. Specifically for the Party Congress. A special gift. And it was a special event, of which they told nothing to me, of course. And what we had sent to the Regional Committee, they just forwarded to Moscow.”

* * *

At breakfast Lida casually remarked:

“Larissa called, did you invite her and Ilya to Sochi? It would be nice if they came and had a good time. Can I tell them that we are expecting them?”

“Of course. What happened?”

“Well, I see endless quarrels she and Ilya have been having. It got a little better, and then again. I thought, it would do them good to leave it all behind and go on vacation!

“Of course,” I replied. “They do have someone to leave Masha and Luda with, right?”

“At their grandmother’s.”

“All the more so. Ilya is a good lad. I do not know many fathers, who love their girls so much.”

“Are you any worse?” smiled Lida.

“No, he’s really mad about them. Larisa said he even washes them himself.”

“Are you telling this to me?”

I laughed.

“He is, of course, a nice guy... The correct, kids-crazed Jewish father. And what of the quarrels, I did not quite get it.”

Lida looked at me skeptically.

“I told you.

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you forgotten? Larissa did not want to have Luda. She was going to have an abortion. To leave Ilya...”

I remembered now. Lida had told me this – but this information went past my heart, absorbed with work. But this time I was amazed.

“It’s good the parents intervened,” Lida finished the story.” They made her leave the baby... Thank God, such a beauty was born.”

“And why did she not want to?”

“Igor!” Lida clearly did not like to talk about it. “Did you know that at times... The rumors about Ilya, when he is away... What will the wrong tongues convey to her?! Larissa was not sure Ilya was responsible for her and Masha.”

“So bad?” my eyebrows went up.

“Well, bad or not bad, but I’d rather no one experienced that.”

“Understood.” I raised my hands up peacefully. “How are they now?”

“It seems everything is calm! But Ilya still comes home on a case by case basis. And what is he doing?”

“He’s earning a living – that by itself is good.”

"Yes." Lida took a clean plate from the cupboard and put it in front of me. "Larissa's girls look like dolls," Lida gave me a plate bursting with ardor.

"Masha takes after her father."

"Yeah, but Lyudochka is more like you. Have you noticed?" I asked.

"Oh yes?" Lida was surprised. "I haven't noticed."

I put the plate aside.

"Look closely – she's your living image. Well? I'm full. Thank you. If you talk to them, tell them to come and relax."

I kissed Lidochka and stood up from the table.

* * *

The morning began with a briefing where we listened to Timofeev's report. The report was about the shipment of the produce. I listened in silence, not interrupting the excited speaker. I had long had the habit of being feared by everyone.

My face seemed to express concentration and involvement, but in fact I felt a headache growing every minute that was not going to let me go. And the bitter struggle with the migraine reflected in the pulsating vein on my temple. The pain was pressing me, slowing down the time and it annoyed me more than anything else.

The voice of my secretary brought me back to the reality.

"Igor Alekseevich!"

I raised my head. "What now?" – said my disgruntled look.

"Igor Alekseevich, they asked me to tell you that the People's Control is about to start. Will you go there or not?"

"Yes, yes, yes," I said hurriedly. (The thought: "I promised!" flashed in my head).

"Well," I turned to Timofeev. "Everything clear now?!"

Timofeev nodded for everyone.

"Thank you all, then. I have to go now."

I went to the meeting of the People's Control Committee. It was already in full swing.

Prokopenko stood up humbly when I entered, but I made a sign with my hand not to interrupt anything and continue, and sat on an empty chair standing alone at the edge of the table.

Prokopenko was on a roll.

"Comrades, let us continue our meeting," she angrily tapped a pen on a decanter, calling for silence. She glared at the wizened old woman who was standing in front of her like a schoolgirl.

I began to examine our worker involuntarily. It was an emaciated woman with completely white hair.

"How dare you steal social property," the chairwoman suddenly shouted at her. "Why did you do it? Please answer to the Committee!"

The elderly woman seemed to shrink in size even more, she cringed and spoke at a barely audible volume:

"I'm working my thirty-sixth year here at this plant," she began timidly. "I live in the hostel. I'm all alone. No children. The Lord has not given me any."

The chairwoman threw a furious glare at her.

"No religious propaganda here," she demanded. "There is no god."

The frightened old woman began defending herself.

I looked at Prokopenko with interest. I thought that she was insane for a second. What a true pleasure this execution of the unfortunate woman gave her!

"You may omit the talk about the hostel, citizen! We have a full plant of people like you here. We are more interested in something else... How dare you disgrace our entire team?"

The elderly worker froze. She was gasping for air and could not find any words for the fear and embarrassment. A couple of times she glanced into the hall, where her coworkers were probably sitting, but did not receive any support from

there. Then she froze lonely, and her eyes became as bleak as faded hospital pajamas.

My eyebrow started twitching involuntarily.

“Theft of socialist property,” Prokopenko raised her voice. Is strictly punishable by law. And what you did was theft. That’s what it’s called.”

How long had this woman been working hard at our plant, and why may some witch scold her so?

The worker stared at the screaming functionary with her sighted eyes, and cringed right before our eyes. She became smaller, and smaller, and on her temple – we could see that – this thin blue vein kept beating, weak, like the rest of her life.

“How many years have you worked in the production?” I asked the granny.

“Forty years,” she said humbly.

“So you’ve been doing this for forty years?” Prokopenko suddenly screamed out.

The old woman looked at her fearfully.

“Child, I worked all my life – never took a penny! I never allowed myself any of this, but these cans, I confess, I took one. I was tempted. So much had been said about them. I wanted to try the goose pate so much.”

I loudly pushed back the chair on which I’d been sitting on. The nasty rattle drowned out all other sounds. The presiding lady shuddered.

“Wait,” I loudly addressed the audience.

The chairwoman took a look at me with her sparkling eyes, annoyed that I interrupted the execution.

“We heard you,” I said to the old worker, “you shall never do any more of this. And now – go.”

The members of the committee went numb for a moment. The chairwoman woke up first. Her face suddenly went red with spots, and she blurted out:

“Igor Alekseevich!”

“Well! Svetlana Ivanovna” I looked at her sternly, “let’s omit this issue.” I glared harshly at her. She could not stand it and averted her gaze. “Move on to the next matter.”

This was unexpected. Prokopenko was speechless, apparently trying to digest her own humiliation, and then nodded dutifully.

I felt that I no longer wanted to be here. I silently waved at Prokopenko and left the room.

The old woman was standing in the hallway, as though not knowing what to do next. In her eyes lapped a sea of melancholy. The emaciated, aged woman who had been working at this plant most of her life, stole the pate they had talked so much about, out of curiosity. Now she stood in the hallway disgraced and crushed.

I shook my head.

XXXVIII

Every morning my driver Anatoly, impeccable as always, would wait for me at the entrance, smoking his eternal cigarette.

I sat in the car.

“Hit it, Tolya!”

“As you wish, Igor Alekseevich!”

The car darted off.

Before I even entered the office, the phone rang.

“Igorek!”

Tarada was on the other end.

“I’m going to Zheleznovodsk in four days. I’m taking the whole family. I’m passing you on the way. I do not want to tell anyone about my route. I’m asking you, please, prepare me a place to catch a break from the road, just have a snack, unwind... And do not tell anyone that I’m going. I’m on vacation.”

“Anatoly Georgievich,” I replied, “don’t worry.”

There was one lonely place that I'd found long ago, where it was possible to relax quietly.

A meadow by the river. With a lake nearby.

I immediately dialed my assistant.

"Valera, we are having a guest on Saturday. We need to have a picnic."

"Igor Alekseevich, no problem. We'll do everything the usual way: wine, barbecue, greens and vegetables."

"Uh no, the usual will not do. This is a very important guest. Do not forget the caviar, champagne, crayfish, cognac. In general, bring all you got."

"So, maybe we need to consider an orchestra?"

"Don't joke, better prepare everything. Guests like this don't visit every day."

I immediately dialed my old friend Zhenya, who oversaw the trainees at the Institute.

"Zhenya, we're organizing a picnic outdoors. Get us some girls, the attested ones. Who would pour the drinks, serve at the table. Well, you know."

"Of course, Igor Alekseevich. No problem."

"I beg you, the very best. We have a special guest."

As soon as I hung up, the intercom came alive.

"Igor Alekseevich," said the secretary in a stern voice, "Ilya Yushvaev asking for you here."

"Put him through." I grabbed the phone.

"You won't believe me, we were just talking about you!" I blurted out.

"Hello, Igor. You're not going to believe either. I am in Armavir now. Can I drop by?"

"Why are you asking? I am waiting for you."

He showed up within an hour. The secretary led him into the office.

"Igorek!" He opened his arms happily.

"Ilya, hello!"

We firmly patted each other on the back.

“Sorry, I am literally on the go! So I came without the invitation,” Ilya began to make excuses.

“What invitations? Let’s go somewhere? We’ll sit... Come on, let’s at least...” I wondered where to drag him.

But Ilya raised his hands in protest.

“No, no, Igor! Sorry! Next time. For now, I just wanted to see you. I must quickly move on. Coming from Krasnodar,” he explained. “Constant business trips.”

I nodded knowingly.

Ilya had not changed at all. The same young, strong man... With the naughty stubborn bangs that fell over his eyes. He stared at me admiringly, looking over the walls with portraits of our leaders, a table piled high with papers. Perhaps, in his eyes I looked like some celestial being.

“Why are you looking at me like this?!” I asked.

“Well, you’re an outright... hero...” he said, a little embarrassed.

Then muttered something else, but in his eyes I read everything: the pride, the joy for me, for the place that I took under the sun.

“Where are you going?”

“Home, home. I had some business. Drafts. Here I thought, why don’t I come to you.”

“You did right. How are you?”

“You know, sometimes things are tight. The specifics of their own... Animal skins, condition, no condition, but I’m working it. So far everything is going well. I certainly don’t have the scale of Ilya Vladimirovich,” Ilya whistled respectfully, “but... of course, support is very important. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, ask.”

“Maybe you know someone I can turn to? I need animal skins. I thought, you have the slaughter-house.”

He looked expectantly at me.

The secretary knocked and put a tray with two cups of tea on the table.

Ilya looked at me questioningly.

"I'm sorry that I'm loading you with this."

"What are you talking about! Let's do it this way. You go down to Zhenya now, he is my deputy in sales. Talk to him. I'll give him a heads-up."

I immediately contacted Prokopenko.

"You don't have to worry. He will help."

Ilya was ready to throw himself in my arms.

"And how are you? How's Serezha?"

"Ah, he's growing, growing. Such a little man growing up. Hercules!" I laughed. "How is Larisa?"

"Well, how could she be? Masha is almost grown now. Lyudochka is catching up. Both are wonderful."

"Dolls, I guess?"

"Oh... I'm afraid for them... When they grow up, they will break the hearts of all the young men!"

He looked at his watch.

"I can imagine what you have to do to keep this edifice afloat.

In his view I could read the delight and joy.

"I'll show you the departments now."

"Igor, I'm sorry, I'm in a hurry. I'm on my way, just wanted to see you."

Ilya suddenly became sad.

"What's up with you? Anything else?"

"Nothing to do with you. I quarreled with Larisa again," said Ilya, embarrassed.

"It's like a..." he shook his hand, depicting a boat.

"Storm?"

"Yes, it is somewhat easier now. After the birth of Lyudochka. And before it was..." he winced in pain.

“Well, have you improved the situation?”

“If only I knew how. I just called Larissa, and she did not want to speak with me, hung up. She said I’m God knows where again.”

“O Lord, and you pay attention to it? That’s a usual thing. She got up on the wrong foot,” I said.

“No. It’s something else here. I’ve been willing to talk to you about it. Larisa gets offended when I’m always on the road. But that’s my job. Your wife understood well, even when you lived in another city. And mine won’t understand. She says that I don’t think about home. Do I not think? Like, now she said that for two weeks I had not called her. As if Ilya Vladimirovich used to call often when he was out travelling. Do I have a phone there? I said to her, I have no connection. And she does not believe. Suspects something. No, Igor. You tell me, may it be that Lariska thinks I have a woman there? But this is not the case. By God...”

I chuckled.

Everyone of us in the family knew how true Ilya was. I remembered what Lida said about Larissa.

“And Larissa says that Masha’s having measles,” continued Ilya. “Well, what can I do, judge for yourself?”

Ilya took a sip of tea from the cup. His face grew red, but he didn’t get any calmer.

Then the intercom buzzed.

“Igor Alekseevich,” the voice of the secretary rustled gently, “they have been waiting fifteen minutes for you at the meeting that you had assigned.”

I looked at Ilya.

“Old chap, I’m sorry, it’s been a good talk. But I have business.

“I understand.”

“Listen, we should meet more often. Lets find time to actually talk. Have a serious conversation, with no one having to run anywhere.”

I slapped my hand down on the table.

“What about Sochi then? We’d like to invite you and Larisa! What do you say? I promise, we’ll have a great time.”

Ilya blossomed.

“Igor, I’d love to.”

“Well, then, good. Lida and I are expecting you.”

With this we parted.

“It’s amazing! How much warmth does this person give,” I thought, hurrying to the meeting. “It’s like, nothing happens really, we sat, socialized, but what a pleasant feeling remains after his visit.”

* * *

Early next morning I went to the meadow, where we were to meet Tarada.

I had to control all the preparations personally. Others might forget take something into account, even something small, but it will ruin the impression. I clearly learned from my father – one must be able to organize everything.

After making sure that everything was ready, I went up to meet Tarada. He showed up just before lunch. Traffic police escorting his car.

The Volga stopped gently. Anatoly Georgievich got out of the car.

“Hello, Igor!”

“Anatoly Georgievich!”

We hugged. He patted me on the shoulder. He turned to the policeman who approached quickly:

“Guys, I’ll go on myself.”

The officer saluted him and disappeared.

Tarada turned to me.

“Hey, Igor, I’m so tired... I can not believe that I can relax a little. And the road is long,” he said, stretching. Inhaled the fresh air, gave me a thumbs up, looked around the pristine

surroundings. There was something in this forgotten corner, almost untouched by civilization, that made one feel calm and tranquil.

Wearing a white linen suit and a hat with a high crown, Tarada seemed as if he walked right out of a Hollywood movie.

"And the air!" he sighed, squinting slyly. "I'd live and live here. No worse than Zheleznovodsk! How are you coping here?"

"Little by little."

"We, too," he nodded at his wife, who came out of the car, "The doctors have advised Olga Sergeevna, to visit the mineral waters springs. We are going to follow their orders."

"Welcome, Olechka."

"Hello, Igor!" she smiled.

Their children immediately began to run along the road. Olga stretched.

"Well, it's very close," I said to Tarada. "The last spurt. Follow me, please."

We got into our cars and drove ten kilometers along a country road straight to the foot of the mountain, where the Kuban River flowed into the lake.

I led them down a short path to a small meadow. The long awaited kebabs were there. The men were turning the skewers. A short distance away were two tents where everything was prepared.

Tarada's wife gladly kicked off her shoes and walked in the soft grass.

"Its wonderful here!"

She was an impressively beautiful woman. Wearing a broad white hat and a dress narrowed at the waist, she seemed all happy and nice. Her face, as if carved from marble, had never known any emotion other than a slight smile.

Their daughter and son rushed to catch butterflies. Olga watched her children play, and an enigmatic smile wandered on her lips.

There was a small lake right in front of us.

“Honey,” Tarada turned to his wife, “have some rest.”

“While we are talking, your wife and kids can ride the boat, it is quite cool over the water.”

“Olya,” Tarada spoke softly, “you want to take a boat ride?”

The children happily responded:

“We want to, we want to!!!”

“We have prepared the fishing rods, too,” my driver joined the conversation and, pointing to the rods, immediately grabbed a rope, pulling the boat closer to shore. Olga smiled graciously. She looked at me from under her hand and, without saying anything, went into the boat.

The motor started with a bang, and the skiff sped away the Tarada family into the middle of the lake, where my assistants started to work the fishing rods. Tarada stood looking at his family, and waved.

Cicadas began to chirp their eternal praise to sunlight, and we moved along the path to a small tent that attracted us with its shadow, talking.

“Too hot here in the sun,” I explained.

Anatoly Georgievich nodded, smiling benevolently, and followed me.

We hid in a small forest. The sun tempered its enthusiasm. It seemed that the entire meadow was covered with bliss and peace.

“Yes,” agreed Tarada, as if continuing a monologue to himself. “Man and nature, it’s a special state of mind. No hustle and bustle of the city, no rush... Why don’t people always live out in the open, Igor?”

I stopped and paused, as if implying that any response would be wrong. Anatoly Georgievich seemed immersed in thought. We walked up to the tent. I stopped in front of the tent, and made a gesture inviting him inside. He stared at me. Pushed back the curtains.

Two good-looking girl were standing inside. One with bright painted lips, the other – with a small snub nose, in a red dress with polka dots. Flames were dancing in their eyes.

Anatoly Georgievich looked favorably at the girls. They smiled.

“Masha,” the first one introduced herself.

“Katya,” added the second.

The curtain closed behind Anatoly Georgievich. I went to check the preparations for the feast.

The cicadas were still chirping. The air was motionless. Somewhere along the lake Tarada wife and kids were floating on a boat. Sweet smoke was coming from the kebabs. The birds were singing.

Anatoly Georgievich exited the tent in about twenty minutes... He was walking an easy pace. The color of his face, his wandering smile and even the march he was whistling, gave him away as an extremely satisfied man.

He came to me.

“They’re good,” he drawled. “Well, you can do kebabs as well,” he said.

We began to wave to Olga, making signs for them to join us.

Olga shouted something in response.

I was silent, looking off into the distance over the field, which began just outside the small forest.

“You look as if it’s not a field in front of you,” smiled Tarada, “but your plant.”

“Yes, Anatoly Georgievich, I am thinking of building a sports complex at the plant. It is important for the people to have a place to rest.”

I imagined how I can implement the idea; it was just an inspiration, as if in fact I saw not the even hectares of plowed land before me, but tennis courts and a gymnasium. My eyes lit up. I paused, giving Tarada time to grasp the scale of my aspiration.

Tarada silently put a glass of champagne to his lips and sipped, smiling about something.

“Why? It’s a good idea. You take after your father,” said Tarada, looking at me, and laughed. “Continuing to build something in your thoughts? Why didn’t you go into construction?”

He sat close to me, towering up like a fairy-tale hero. For a while we were silent, enjoying the majesty of nature, that opened before us. Then Tarada turned back to me.

“Igor, I have a favor to ask,” he lowered his voice. “Can you come with us to Zheleznovodsk, I have to do something. I’ll explain everything later.”

“Anatoly Georgievich, what ever you want!”

I went to Zheleznovodsk and did what Tarada asked me to. On the way, I kept remembering our time spent at the lake. “That’s what a man who loves life looks like!” I muttered to myself, leaving the cashier’s office.

I was in an excellent mood.

Tarada and his family were happy, and I got his support in respect of my new plans.

“Where are we going? Home?” The driver asked.

“Anatoly, we can only dream about home. To the plant.”

* * *

The meeting was set for the evening.

“Comrades, we will build a sports complex.

Timofeev was dumbfounded.

“What?”

“A sports complex,” I repeated.

“What for?” Zhukov asked.

“To do sports,” I snapped. “The project also involves the construction of a tennis court and a sauna.”

“For the guests?” someone asked.

“For all of us,” I said. “And a football field.”

Apparently, the mysterious gene, inherited from my father forced me to do everything thoroughly, to build for the centuries to come, and even if it was for everyone – do it as if for myself.

“How will we pay for it?” Zhukov wouldn’t let go, “With what do we build everything?”

“We will use the internal reserves. Believe me, there are enough,” I said with conviction. “In addition, we have money allocated for repairs. We’ll use cash and the allocated money – from the repairs fund.”

Blueprints of a football field with artificial turf and tennis courts were laid out on the huge table.

Everyone was staring open-mouthed at what I suggested.

“Igor Alekseevich, can we afford this?” someone asked again.

“We can,” I replied. “There are reserves.”

“And what kind of sauna?” Timofeev asked unexpectedly.

“The real Finnish one. And Russian one too,” I shot back.

“Luxury unheard of,” Zhukov muttered. His face made a very serious expression.

“This, comrades, is a matter of socialist development! People need to relax. People should be able to recover from their hard work.”

Timofeev looked at me admiringly.

“Igor Alekseevich,” he took in a deep breath, as if he was preparing to dive, “you know me. I follow you even into the fire, or in the water. If you need a gym – let’s build a gym. If we have the project, we’ll start working.”

“Very well, comrades. And now you are all free to go. Tomorrow we start to work.”

XXXIX

I was not lying when I said that we were going to build at the expense of inner reserves.

The cashflow I had allowed us to pay for the construction in cash. At the same time, I did not have to violate the Criminal Code. It was a paradox of the system. You could make money out of thin air.

* * *

With my first summer in Armavir, I had already become a recognizable person in the city. Fired all the idlers and hired the people who could be trusted. This changed the life of the plant radically.

Once at dinner Pavlenko told me, leaning close to my ear.

“Igor, today people came up to me, absolutely reliable guys, believe me, they are set, they asked to slaughter some cattle. And put the meat into storage. They are ready to pay. We need your go-ahead.”

I paused.

At the plant we would often have all sorts of confident impudent people come in – dzhigits dressed from the Berezka store, driving luxury Volgas, seeking a meeting with the leadership.

“Zhenya, be careful. Of course, it is in our mandate. We have the right to do it. It’s perfectly legal. But be careful. The system is not simple. Be sure to register each transaction through the accountants.”

“Igor, I’ll take care of it. Do not worry.”

“Everything must be documented,” I repeated strictly. “Don’t get greedy – figure out the right amount, so that everyone is happy.”

“Igor, you will not even communicate with them. And Consumer Cooperation contacted us. The purveyors. They have a lot of meat. They don’t know what to do with it. They want to store their meat at your facility. You can take half to make your sausage from. They will pay all the plant’s expenses for storage, and an equal amount on top of that. Believe me, these people can be trusted.”

“Just bear in mind – do not bring them to me! I mustn’t see them.”

Pavlenko turned out to be an experienced psychologist who was well versed in people and could clearly figure out with whom we can work, and whom to pass by.

Meetings were usually held in restaurants or more secluded areas. In case Pavlenko said “yes” – the faces of the brave horsemen brightened, and the conversation would end with a bottle of vintage Armenian cognac.

All this was, so to speak, the background against which invisible dramas and tragedies unfolded. And the point was that they had more meat than they could use. They couldn’t sell the entire amount at once, so it was necessary to put it in storage in the refrigerator, or process into sausage. Or they would

purchase cattle, and didn't know where to slaughter it – it was impossible to resolve these issues without the plant.

As we had agreed with Ilya Yushvaev, our families met in Sochi two weeks later. I had many friends there, and they met me there as a king. The Secretary of the Sochi City Committee and Rymaruk, the head of the local branch of Mosmyaso, welcomed us personally. Our plant was the main supplier of meat products in the Sochi region.

Lida and I arrived by train, and Ilya and Larissa went by car.

I insisted that all four of us live in the same place – in the huge outbuilding of the sanatorium. I wanted to talk heart to heart with Ilya, give him some advice, reassure him.

"Igor, there's a call for you," Lida interrupted my thoughts.

"Igor, welcome," I heard a dear voice.

"Misha, hello!"

"Anatoly Georgievich is visiting me in a couple of days." Gelman said. "You understand, you should definitely come by, he'll appreciate it. I'd like to invite you."

"Thank you, Misha!"

Restaurants were aplenty in Sochi back then – it was all singing and dancing. But only one stood out from the competition – the Caucasian Village, with Misha Gelman its director.

Getting into this restaurant "from the street", as they say, would never work. It was one of the most luxurious establishments of its kind in the Soviet Union. High-quality cuisine, excellent service, the invisible atmosphere of luxury and vanity made this restaurant one of the most sought-after holiday destinations of the elite of the Kuban region.

"You realize where I am taking you?" I joked, telling Ilya, that we would be dining in the Caucasian Village.

He looked at me in surprise.

"The Village is the most inaccessible place in the world. Less accessible than the Everest."

Ilya laughed.

“Come on, have I not been to restaurants, or what?”

“Not like this one. I’ll bet one ruble to a hundred.”

Ilya entered the restaurant and was little bedazzled. Not that he had never seen such luxury. It was not the luxury, but rather the European chic, that Gelman managed to create in his restaurant. The best cabaret show in the Soviet Union performed there. The girls, tall and slender as birch-trees, would float across the stage, causing a storm of emotions among visitors with their cancan.

Tarada entered like a king. Everyone immediately rose noisily – the Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Party did not frequent the restaurant. In here, he was God.

Tarada was relaxed and cheerful.

“Ah, Igor,” he was delighted. “How are you?”

“I’m great!”

Tarada turned to Lida.

“Lida! My beauty! How glad I am to see you! How are the kids?”

Lida smiled sheepishly...

“All good, they are growing, thank you, Anatoly Georgievich.”

Tarada smiled happily. He turned to me.

“Now you tell me. What’s new? How is your father?”

“Everything is fine.”

“The best news is when everything just fine.”

Tarada patted me on the shoulder and turned to the next person.

There weren’t many people at the table, just about twenty. Everyone was in plain sight. Ilya felt a little out of place. He had certainly seen Tarada at my wedding, but the latter was not the Secretary of the Regional Committee then and was not surrounded by so many party bigwigs. The level of the guests belonging to the regional administration, and the sub-

servience of the staff serving the table probably put pressure on him.

Excellent wine, the delicious *Kindzmarauli* was already standing on the table. They brought us cold snacks, meat, kebabs, salmon, greens of such emerald color, as if stolen from precious stones. The baked meat was giving off intoxicating aroma.

That evening Misha Gelman went above and beyond. It was Sochi, which the majority of the Soviet people associated with the dreams of the wonders of socialism.

We would tell jokes, that became more and more daring as the night worn on. Time passed quickly. And noone wanted to leave.

Ilya was still telling something, but fatigue prevailed.

At three o'clock in the morning we started leaving. Everyone was pretty boozed up and tired. Gelman said a warm farewell to the whole company, and we all went to our hotels. We scattered to our rooms and lay down to sleep. I slept like a log, and dreamed of something good.

In the morning I meet Larisa, who had circles under her eyes, and was seemingly on the edge.

"Larisa, what's up with you?" I asked in surprise.

"We could not sleep all night."

"Why?"

"Ilya vomited all night . Only in the morning did he start feeling better. I'd call an ambulance, but he told me not to."

I was genuinely worried and hurried to Ilya's room. He was lying on the bed, with circles under his eyes.

"Ilya, how are you doing? Hung-over?" I rushed to him.

"I'm alright," he said in a weak voice. "I ate something."

"It can not be that you are poisoned! Misha could not have anything rotten."

Ilya shook his head sadly. When he got better, he came to me.

"Igor, let me invite you and Lida to a restaurant."

In the evening the four of us went to the same restaurant at Gelman's, and he gave us the same cordial welcome, but we were alone this time. We had a good time, remembering our past, Kislovodsk, we joked and laughed, and talked for a long time, unable to stop.

"Ilya," I looked at Larisa's husband, who had visible gray hair at the temples, "are you much older than me?"

"Just a couple of years, why?"

"You have gray hair!" I laughed mischievously. "You have sucked all the juice out of him, Larka!"

Ilya made a serious face and stood up with a glass in his hand.

"Igor, I want to drink to you. I look at how much you have done. We have to take care of you, you are special!"

Lida sat flattered.

"Come on, enough..." I waved, but the sincerity with which Ilya said it, could not but flatter me. I felt a warmth for the man.

"No, no... I am surprised by the scale of the enterprise that you are managing," continued Ilya. "I was with you at the plant, remember, I did not see the departments, but saw your employees. They were all running around like they are scalded. You know how to make them work. Here, it would seem, I too run a production, but my magnitude is not even close. And why? We are close friends," Ilya drunkenly poked me in the shoulder, "that's why I say what I think. And you don't shut my mouth. We have our moments of joy, fun like now. Believe me, I will never forget – here's to you!"

We raised our glasses together.

Ilya began to tell amazing stories about his work travels and other adventures, and I outlined the everyday life of my plant in his response.

And most importantly, I repeat, it felt damn good, spiritually too. We were alone with Ilya for a minute, and I asked how he and Larissa were getting along.

Ilya shook his head, saying it was complicated.

“Come on, man, cut it out,” I reasoned with him. “It’ll all be fine. What’s important is not thinking about it. Lida has a lot to worry about around the house, too. Well, that’s the job they have, you know. They need to let their emotions out sometimes. And we are the punching bags in those cases. They see nothing else but the children and the four walls. Do you understand?”

“Maybe you’re right,” Ilya said, calming down.

“And in general, I’d already tried to explain it to you: for men to avoid serious problems with their wives, you should kiss them on time, okay? And give gifts. Otherwise they get lonely. This is the psychology of women. You must either sit at their skirts or take a long voyage away. But no one likes intermediate solutions. Got it?”

Ilya got the bill, and although a lot had been eaten and drunk, could be as much as the day before, Ilya’s stomach took it all in a very well.

“You see,” Ilya joked when we were saying goodbye. “I can’t use a freebie, but when I have fun at my own expense, everything goes clockwork fine.”

“Ilya,” I put a hand on his shoulder, “you’re a good guy! Next time you’ll pay for all of us to make sure the dinner’s special for you. I promise!”

Ilya laughed.

We went on with our holiday.

The next day, Lida suddenly suggested:

“Igor, why do we all keep sitting in Sochi?! Let’s go somewhere.”

I raised an eyebrow, surprised at my love’s whim:

“Where to?”

“I don’t know. Think of something...”

Rymaruk, also known as “hundred per ton”, worked as the head of the Moscow Meat refrigerator department back then.

He received this nickname because of his fees: he took a hundred rubles per each ton of the products he would hold in his refrigerators. He suggested a great idea:

“Igor! Here’s ferry going from Sochi to Yalta, you can go there to unwind.”

“What a good idea!”

I hurried to tell Lida:

“Lida, let’s go to Yalta!”

“Yalta is in the Crimea! That’s a long ride.”

“And we are on the seaside. There’s a ferry sailing at night, and we come back the next day. Spend the day in Yalta...”

“Really?” She smiled surprised, “let’s go!”

The trip in the beautiful cabins was wonderful. The captain had been told that we are special guests, so he inquired personally about our wellbeing. The trip was extraordinary. By the way, that was the first time I traveled on a cruise ship. And there, in Yalta we were in for exeptional treatment. I never even had to pay a single penny – Rymaruk accompanied us everywhere and would “lay the groundworks”.

Together with Ilya and Larissa we had a great time in Yalta.

I returned to Armavir with Lida a week later.

XL

Things at work went on as usual. I was obsessed with the construction of the sports complex. Tennis courts were almost completed, the finishing touches were made to the football field.

But the main thing – my pride – was the Finnish sauna.

We got some very hard-to-get wood and a special finishing material especially for it, put in a pool table – everything in there was ready to delight the eye and welcome our dear guests.

I felt like a pioneer who introduced the care for the common worker, something so obvious but so rare, to the socialist system.

* * *

It was a warm March day outside, the mountains were still covered with snow, and in the valleys spring was already in full swing. I had just ended the conversation with the tech-

nologist and wondered – whether they would have time to apply the zinc coating before the weather turned bad again. My reflections were interrupted by a phone call.

“Igor, hello! Troitsky here.”

“Hello, Zhora.”

“Igor, I have a favor to ask – Leonid Tyagachev will visit you today. Please see him – he has a request. He is a good man, the senior USSR alpine ski team coach. A great guy! Does team training in our mountains. Catching the last snow. And in the evening let’s all catch up.”

“Sure, I’ll see him.”

I was immersed in my own problems, so I hung up and almost immediately forgot about the visit.

In the middle of the day my secretary said over the intercom:

“Leonid Tyagachev asking for you.”

I went out to meet the visitor in the waiting room:

“Hello!” I smiled and held out my hand to the stranger.
“Igor.”

“Leonid,” the man replied.

He was a twenty nine year old, athletic, blooming, cheerful man. His palm was warm, and the handshake strong. “Sure looks like an athlete” – flashed through my mind.

“Zhora told me a lot of good things about you,” he said in a friendly voice.

“He lied, I guess. Georgy is a guy with imagination. Come on,” I invited him into my office and said to the secretary: “Make two cups of tea for us.”

Leonid looked at the interior design of the room with interest. Then he could not resist:

“Well, you have a mansion – a royal one! Igor, for what services do they give out such gorgeous offices?”

“We have our uses – not cheap either.”

“Yeah... You settled well. Igor, allow me to give you our present.”

And he handed me a pair of mountain skis.

I was surprised – it was the first time I had to handle such equipment. They were imported, light, almost weightless.

“Yes, I have never stood on such a pair,” I said timidly.

“So I’ll have you stand on them no problem. Believe me – this is good rest. Relieves stress wonderfully. No luxury rooms will replace this crazy feeling of freedom one experiences up there in the mountains. Going downhill is a unique pleasure. So, I promise, we will go for a ride.”

“Yes, I’ll say,” I drawled, looking at the unusual skis. Then I put them into a corner and turned to my guest. “Georgy told me that you had a request!”

He smiled.

“Igor, my whole team dreams about your sausage day and night.”

I laughed.

“Can it be the national team is underfed?”

“It’s not that, but... throwing something in would do well... the guys on the team are young, blood and milk, they can eat a bull alive, and yet they give them semolina only,” and he smiled again, simply and naturally, inviting me to share the good mood with him. “If you could, Igor Alekseevich, toss us some meat, sausage, canned food, it would be great. We are striving to set new records. Soviet sport will be eternally grateful.”

“Leonid, this won’t be a problem. I’ll think of something. Just let me know, what you expect in terms of quantity.”

Leonid seemed simple, smiling, without a crown. Very sociable and open.

* * *

Same evening, I was teaching Lenya the traditions of a real Russian bathhouse in the steam room. Zhora sat next to me, sharing his “broad experience” in this respect.

We visited this bathhouse almost every Saturday. The head of Armavir flight school, the brave lieutenant-general who had a sense in the sauna business, had built the place. He did it all in good sense – we used to steam with milk, honey, plus a variety of herbs that would be infused in the steam as well. In general, the bath was the best way to solve many important matters. In the clouds of steam the stern manager heads would thaw and become amenable to various kinds of trade-offs.

Our group was composed of the chief of police, the head of the local market, me, Zhora and the lieutenant-general. Sometimes friends and guests would join. Not only did we have a friendly way to communicate in the healing steam, but solved some issues as well... It was a fraternal party, where everyone contributed: the lieutenant-general provided the bath, I provided the food – the hash soup, non-filtered beer... In a word, we each brought what we could.

Lenya was watching my manipulations with fascination. And I listened to his stories and could not believe my ears : the man had traveled half the world. In his stories Paris, Zurich, the Alps, Spain would interchange...

“Just think,” a thought flashed,” the guy is just twenty-nine years old, and where has he already been to.”

“Lenya, but when did you first try skiing?” I asked.

“Well, I was seven years old. When your son grows up, we’ll be sure to put him on skis. At the same time,” Leonid looked at me slyly, “his dad, too.”

“Well, God bless. Just bear in mind that I, although athletic, cannot fly.”

“Go downhill, the wings will grow,” grinned Lenya.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” I shook my head. “Coaching long?”

“It’s my fifth year now!”

“And how is it? Is it your calling?”

"Igor, I understood the secret..."

Zhora chuckled:

"You've got secrets everywhere..."

Lenya looked at him very seriously:

"One doesn't need a lot to just put some youngsters on the skis. To train them properly – the skis should not be the limit. To grow a champion, he should be groomed, pampered with good conditions: hotels, cable cars, and more," Lenya gratefully looked at me, "fed not only with porridge. A balanced diet, I know it myself, is the basis of success. Plus the best inventory. You won't go fast on bad skies."

"Look," said Zhora, "guys, let's fly to Laganaki. Lenya, are you ready to show us your team, so we can see whether your athletes are ready to defend the honor of our country!"

One of national ski team training bases was located in near by Laganaki.

Zhora squinted and looked straight at the head of the flying school. The latter scratched his head.

"No questions!" he exclaimed. "I'll give you helicopters."

"The inspection delegation is coming!" Zhora exclaimed and asked. "Lenya, do you have just the male athletes or female athletes as well?"

"Zhora, you give it up," I said sternly, "these are not interns, but athletes."

Lenya laughed.

"The girls are great, Zhora. Future champions. You'll see."

"You'll see, you'll see," the general muttered. "it's spring, and they want snow."

Joking and fooling around, we continued to bathe.

* * *

The helicopter took us up to a great altitude. The mountains below seemed to be right on the palm of our hands. It took my breath away! Rattling, the huge steel machine rushed

into the sky, rocking, and I sat, glued to the window, could not take my eyes off the beauty that lay before us.

We were shaking, circling. We anxiously looked at each other and laughed nervously... My soul was filled with the anticipation of something unusual.

Finally we landed at the base. With summer right around the corner, suddenly landing in the middle of winter was shocking. Snow was everywhere – kilometers of pristine snow.

We were immediately surrounded by the athletes. More precisely, girl-athletes who started chattering, throwing questions and requests at Lenya. They met him as the man of the family. He was even-tempered and cheerful with every one of them.

The girls were a sight for sore eyes. Looking at them, I realized that these were future champions, perhaps some of them would set a new world record.

Lenya showed us how to stand on skis properly, how to brake, how to cope with sticks and squat.

I pushed off and rushed down the mountain. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. On both sides fir-trees were flashing, the whole body grew tense, the track devoured all of my attention, and the descent took all of my strength. I could only think one thing: not to fall!

Kilometers of sparkling white snow, the enormous speed... I yelled from happiness and joy.

“Woo-hoo!”

Mountain picked up my yell and multiplied it with echoes. I breathed in deeply... The air could be cut with a knife: sticky, clean, fresh.

A valley opened its stunning beauty below. What can be more beautiful than this? This was the extreme I lacked in my measured and boring everyday life. I pushed harder with the sticks and rushed downhill.

XLI

Our plant was huge, and the Party organization consisted of more than a thousand communists. Naturally, with such a size, it had the status of the District Party Committee.

The secretary of our Party organization was Aleksey Viktorovich Danilov. It was a very influential position, independent from the plant's administration.

That winter Aleksey Viktorovich and I were going to Krasnodar to the Regional Committee event.

Late in the evening the day before the meeting he was helping me prepare for the presentation:

"Igor, don't be stubborn. Do as I say. It isn't the first year I'm in the the party field, my advice would only do you good."

"I know," I snorted. "It's just tedious, preparing this damn report for the third time, and it's still at starting point..."

“That’s where you’re wrong. Everything is very good. Especially if the emphasis is where I’ve put the marks. They’ll love it.”

We were friends with Danilov, we had established a good relationship, and I trusted his vast experience in Party work. He helped me in many ways. This was an exception to the generally accepted rules, the leaders of Party organizations would usually keep apart, boasting of their independence from the head of the company. For many our freindship was a genuine surprise.

With some difficulty he managed to curb my youthful zeal to change everything at once. He was saving me, so I wouldn’t break my neck because of my youth.

We were preparing for the road very early in the morning.

“Igor, the drifting snow is coming,” said Danilov, leaving the administration building.

He approached the car, opened the back door and began to climb into the back seat, slowly and awkwardly. Groaned for a long time, while comfortably arranging his injured leg.

“Rheumatism is twisting me,” he complained, noticing my eager eyes.

“We need to make it,” I said anxiously.

Danilov raised his watch directly to his eyes. He always wore a huge watch, so it would be convenient to keep track of time. His round, good-natured face gave out his good soul. I had no disputes with him. We worked in perfect harmony.

“And where’s Anatoly?” I asked in surprise when an unknown guy with a clean-shaven chin got into the driver’s seat. He smelled of machine oil and gasoline he had just filled the car with.

“I am the replacement driver, Igor Alekseevich, Igor Troyanov.” Only then did I recognize him. “Anatoly is ill.”

“Let’s go. We are running late,” I commanded.

The blizzard intensified. Danilov turned his head anxiously.

“I can not see anything.”

“Do not worry, Alex,” I said. “We’ll make it.”

The Volga’s engine roared.

“Will we make it in two hours?” I asked the driver.

“We’ll make it,” he nodded grimly.

Danilov opened the newspaper with a crunch.

I became absorbed in thoughts, replaying the details of the report in my head. But my thoughts were more occupied with the weather. Nothing had indicated it was getting worse, and then – “bang!” on the day we had to go to Krasnodar – a blizzard.

“We may be late,” I thought. “We’ll be late!!!

The driver drove as fast as the road and the visibility let him. But I was uncomfortable – the new driver, it seemed, drove less confident than my Anatoly...

When we drove out of the city it was still early in the morning. Light had not yet cleared the pre-dawn winter darkness, the blizzard howled like a witch, the car would periodically skid on the turns.

“Careful!” I said to the driver. “But keep in mind, we need to be there on time.”

He did not answer, absorbed with the road.

Danilov briefly laughed behind my back.

“What is it, Aleksey Viktorovich?” I asked.

“Oh, a funny bit of news,” he did not tell me what his laugh meant, and I did not want to ask again and plunged into the report.

An hour passed. I looked up from the papers and looked around.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Leaving Ust-Labinsk now, Igor Alekseevich,” replied the driver in a hoarse voice.

“Bad... We are going too slow,” I thought. I turned back. Danilov was immersed in reading. I felt something in the pit of my stomach. “I ate something, perhaps”, I thought.

The blizzard became even stronger.

I almost began falling asleep, the monotonous ride acted soporific, then I suddenly felt rather than saw, that something grew dark on my side, the driver swore, the brakes squeaked badly, and the Volga went skidding.

It all went black. Through the glass plastered with snow it seemed that a huge monster grew in our way. I instinctively dropped my head on the driver’s knees, avoiding the threat.

Bang! There was a powerful crash, and I was thrown at the windshield.

* * *

Two cars collided, mangled, stood frozen at the cross-roads. People began gathering around the scene. Passengers ran out from other cars. Frightened, they approached the scene of the accident, looked at the broken into bits Volga, groaned, gasped for air...

“Yes, he’s covered with blood, we can’t see his face...”

“Is he alive?”

“How could he be alive? Look, the whole hood is covered with blood.”

I let out a barely audible groan.

“Just look, he’s alive!”

“Hey, you, hurry! There’s a station in five kilometers! Call an ambulance! Hurry!”

A car took off. Concerned voices and tips rushed from all sides. The blizzard intensified. One could not see anything over two meters. Danilov barely got out of the broken Volga. The right back door was jammed, and he tried to open the left one for a long time:

“Where is the boss?!” He shouted. “Alive? Take him to the hospital!”

He tried saying something else, then somehow he lurched awkwardly and began falling down, his hand scratching the side of Volga.

Snow was falling so thickly, as if it wanted to cover us up to our heads. People were bustling around. Ambulance came in a rush and all the injured were taken to the hospital. I didn’t see any of that.

* * *

When I awoke, I couldn’t understand where I was.

White walls. Blinding light bulbs, sparkling tiles and the many, many busy people around.

I tried to raise my hand...

“Lie down,” I heard a man’s bass.

Right above me, leaning towards me, stood a doctor. Confused doctors, were running around, exchanging phrases.

A hell of pain shot through my whole body. It seemed that I was being torn to pieces.

“Where am I?” I asked in a hoarse whisper.

“In the hospital,” there was a sympathetic female voice. “You’d better keep silent for now.”

The pain was getting stronger and stronger some place under the skin. It was running in a wide measured flow, threatening to flood the entire body, and then take over my mind. I tried to swallow the lump stuck in my throat. A hoarse groan went out from my mouth.

“Shut up,” the female voice told me again.

I squinted, trying to see whom it belonged to. It was a nurse, applying bandage on my head.

I tried to estimate the size of the disaster. The jacket on me was torn. The head appeared to be in blood.

They gave me an injection. I almost did not feel it. The doctor, the surgeon, who spoke to me first, came up to me, picked up a needle and pricked my heel.

“Do you feel anything?”

“It hurts,” I pulled my leg.

“It is good that it hurts,” the surgeon was delighted. “And like this?”

Once again, I felt the pain and burning after. The doctor nodded, satisfied, and gave a short order.

The nurse made the second shot. The pain intensified.

I lay prostrate before the people in white robes, helpless, while my head was buzzing like an alarm that was just out of reach.

“Inform the Regional Committee in Krasnodar,” I whispered again.

The nurse looked at me angrily.

“Stay down,” I said. “Be happy, that you are alive. We’ve reported already.”

Whether it was from the injections, or from shock, but I fell into a state halfway between sleep and wakefulness.

Several times it seemed to me that I was being taken somewhere. I opened my eyes and realized that I was actually being taken on a gurney. Then they lifted me up and shifted to another table. When they raised me, an unbearable pain shot through my whole body. I screamed.

“Stop screaming! I need to check how many ribs you broke,” a woman’s voice muttered in anger.

The radiologist took little ceremony. I wanted to see her, but she was out of my sight. I moved again and then groaned.

“I told you,” she replied gruffly. “Now you will feel pain all over. Be patient.”

She walked over and started turning me on my side, and I howled again, as if they put a pitchfork in my ribs.

“Ah!”

"Be patient, son," she said affectionately. "That is all."

I gritted my teeth. With a soft rattle the X-ray machine turned on.

I lay there, afraid to breathe, so as not to wake the sleeping pain.

"Wow," I heard the doctor's remark.

"What happened?" I asked in a barely audible voice.

"You're all broken, that's what."

She stepped out of the booth and called the nurse in the corridor that had brought me to the X-ray. Together they put me on the gurney again.

"If I live, take me home," I said. "I do not want to stay in the hospital. It's better at home."

"What a whim!" The young nurse that was taking me on the gurney was outraged. I felt the cement floor unevenness with each fractured bone. My eye involuntarily caught the dim, flickering light bulbs on the ceiling.

"You should be sewn up, not taken home," the nurse continued to exhort, not paying attention to my "oohs" and "aahs."

"I'm telling you," I tried to raise my voice, "to take me home." The nurse did not react. "I'm not asking"

"Why are you so cranky!" All of a sudden she exploded and ran off somewhere, leaving me lying on the gurney in the inspection chamber.

She returned with the previous doctor, who now looked even more angry. He looked at me indifferently. Then he picked up a pen, held it to my nose to and told me to follow the tip. He started to wave the pen in different directions, then frowned and put it away.

"Concussion, but, in general, not too heavy," he said and looked through the X-ray pictures, lying at the foot of the gurney. "Fractures, too, but I do not see any need for an operation."

He paused.

Another doctor came into the observation chamber. This one was older and more stately. His gray hair was hidden under a white cap. If not for the glasses on his nose, I could take him for a butcher from our plant.

The new doctor also looked at my pictures, exchanging mystical phrases with his colleague. They were not paying attention to me.

"Well," said the older one, "surprisingly, he did not break the spine. Apparently, lucky. Long-term therapy."

"I will not stay here. Take me home!" I demanded.

The "butcher" had finally decided to pay attention to me.

"We cannot let you go home, Igor Alekseevich..."

"I'm not staying here."

The doctor smiled.

"Only at your own risk. Understand, you can not go right now. At all. And how your body deals with the road to the house, no one knows," he said worriedly, and scratched his chin covered in a three-day stubble.

"I agree to suffer, only bring me home," I wheezed.

The doctor shook his head.

"Zina, prepare the papers to discharge him. Just make him sign that he has refused to be hospitalized," sternly said the surgeon.

Nurse Zina rushed to fill out the necessary paperwork.

"Here," she handed me a sheet, "sign here."

I signed.

"We'll give you some painkillers for the road. You will soon feel better," she said sympathetically.

Then, very carefully they put me on a stretcher, and I briefly passed out again.

I came to in the car. It was an ambulance.

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?" I could not help being frightened.

"Home, we're going home," the nurse reassured me.

I closed my eyes.

* * *

Lida was busy in the kitchen, while Sergei was playing in the room with his favorite cars, when the doorbell rang. Lida wiped her hands, walked into the hall, opened the door and froze.

Strangers were standing in the corridor...

"Lida!" I called in a weak voice.

The people moved aside, and Lida started sliding down the wall, pressing her hand to her mouth and uttering a long "e" that women make, when grief comes into their home.

"It's okay, Lida... I'm alive," I moaned.

* * *

They brought me in on the stretcher. Lida started screaming, clutching his head.

"Alive, alive," I kept repeating quietly, "stop."

"What happened to him?" she rushed to the medics that were carrying me.

"Stop it... You see, I can speak," I reassured her.

Apparently I was a frightening sight – blood showed through the bandages, dark circles under the eyes.

They hardly moved me to the bed. The pain was hellish. The slightest body move felt as though they stabbed me hundreds of needles. I groaned.

"Help him," wailed Lida. "How did it happen?" She turned to the nurse.

"How? An accident. Be thankful, your husband is alive," she chuckled.

It must be that a dose of sanity that passed from the nurse to Lida, because she suddenly calmed down and pulled herself together.

"Tears won't help. A hospital is necessary, but your husband refused hospitalization," she nodded at me. "It's nothing,

he'll come about," she said encouragingly. "Well, he'll be lying here for a while."

"How long?" Lida asked fearfully.

"While the bones grow together."

"Calm down, Lida," I spoke up, "I'm even going to dance. I'll recover."

"And how long will it take?" Lida asked the nurse.

She glanced at me, then at the nurses, then at me again. Shadows of terror and compassion ran across her face... I guess my shuttered face, all in bloody cuts, had put her in shock.

I tried to get up on one elbow, it caused a new attack of pain.

"Keep in mind, he must stay in bed at all times," the nurse said.

Lida's eyes widened in horror. A slightest touch would cause me pain of various severity, from resembling a light bite to being hit with a sledgehammer...

Again, I tried to get up on one elbow, but my hands refused. I groaned and leaned back on the pillow, waiting for the pain to retreat.

"Well," the nurse said at last, "here's your prescription." She looked at me again with regret, then at Lida. "Actually, your husband needs hospital treatment. No one knows what his prospects for recovery are..."

Instead of responding, I weakly waved...

The nurse smiled suddenly.

"Igor Alekseevich?"

"What?"

"You are damn lucky."

I closed my eyes. Weakness came in waves. Lida went to see off the nurses. And I lay there, broken, still staring at the ceiling.

Lida was very pale when she came back into the room. She had stopped crying, but the red eyelids and faded eyes spoke

for themselves. I sat up, reached out to take her hand, soothe her – that immediately resulted in terrible pain throughout my body.

Lida anxiously rushed to the table where the drugs were and brought me a handful of pills.

“The doctor told you to take these when the pain starts.”

I silently patted her arm.

“Don’t worry.”

“Igor, how did it happen?”

“The blow came from my side,” I whispered. “They said that I was thrown out of the car by the impact, but I don’t remember. I woke up in the hospital.”

I looked at Lida and my soul became calmer – I was at home, protected.

I barely swallowed the pills. I felt the taste of blood in my mouth.

“Do you want me to bring you anything?” said Lida.

I shook my head.

“I think I am, in fact, very lucky,” I whispered.

The road, the snow and the truck, appearing from nowhere, came up before my eyes.

“God I hope I don’t end up being crippled for life,” was the thought running through my head.. As if she heard them, Lida said:

“We need to do something!” muttered Lida as if it was a spell, looking pained at my face.

“Don’t make things up, I will recover...”

“What if you feel worse?” Frightened by the sole thought, she said, when I closed my eyes. “Tell me what you need.”

I shook my head:

“Nothing.”

How well did I now understand the value of this blessed state – good health, which I suddenly lost in a second. This

ability to carelessly control my body, without feeling any hesitation when you want to raise your hand or leg.

Why did the Lord cause all this?

"You look better already," Lida interrupted my gloomy thoughts.

"That's good," I hissed under my breath. "But you look better than I when first I met you."

Lida seemed very unhappy when she looked at me.

"Go to Sergei, and I'll lie down," I whispered and then fell into oblivion.

As in a dream, I heard her talking on the phone.

"Hello, Dad? (She called my father that) Igor was in an accident." Pause... "Just brought him in, he's all covered in blood..." words were difficult to hear through the sobs, but I was not trying to hear it all. "they were going to Krasnodar. Close to Labinsk," words sounded as if through cotton wool. "He insisted that they bring him home."

I didn't hear the end of the sentence. I fell asleep. When I opened my eyes, Lida was sitting next to me.

"You called my father?" I asked.

She nodded silently.

I could not move, just lay there, stiff. At least I could move my tongue.

"You scared him..."

Lida's eyes filled with tears again.

"Shut up already..."

I almost laughed because I was able to trick pain, which had let me go, and still wouldn't return. Maybe, in fact, the pills were miraculous.

Lida wept quietly again. Suddenly the memories came flooding back of how she was expecting our first twins, and fears began to win over my soul.

I woke up from doorbell. How long did I lie unconscious?

I barely mastered the series of movements required to get up. Perhaps at this point I was like a fly, that had its wings and half of its legs torn off.

A whirlwind burst into the apartment. I heard the my father's voice while still dreaming.

"Where is he?!"

My father burst into the room as he was: wearing a coat and a winter hat. Upon seeing me, he gave out a relieved breath and flew towards me.

"Alive?! I can see you're alive! What happened?" he trumpeted.

"Well, Dad..." I leaned back on the pillow.

Father pulled a chair close and sat down heavily, so that it squeaked. He scrutinized me.

"How are you, Igor?" He asked tensely.

"Lousy!" I said.

"I see... But there is a God... you're alive." Father raised his hands above his head. "What happened to you? Lida couldn't really explain."

"Well, of course.... An accident. We flew into a truck. I have broken everything, the doctors said."

"The doctors... the doctors know everything..." Father smiled sadly. "You go ahead, stay in bed," he told me.

A compassionate and sympathetic expression appeared on his face.

I closed my eyes, as if falling asleep. It is one thing to command, and another to depend on someone. My father looked at me carefully.

"Can you move your hands?"

"Yes, Dad, it's all right, just feels like a tractor ran over me."

"Why didn't you stay in the hospital?"

"To wallow in that hole?! They'll heal me to death. Better at home..."

“Home... Home...” mimicked my father... “Well... The main thing is your arms and legs are in place. Don’t worry, we’ll put you on your feet. I’ll arrange, you will go to Moscow.”

“Why Moscow, Dad?!”

“And who needs you like this here?!” he immediately raised his voice, “When they heal you – then go back to your sausages. And now – come on – get well!”

He turned and shouted into the next room, where Lida was taking care of Sergei.

“Daughter, set the table, we need to have a good drink to his health. As they say, miracles happen, but they rarely bring food with them.”

I passed out. Seconds and minutes went on again...

“In general, it’s all clear to me,” I heard the thunderous voice of my father again.

“Isai, why are you stuck there? Come in... Look at that lucky guy, Lisa!”

I opened my eyes, and couldn’t believe what I saw: Isai and Lisa were standing behind my father. I could imagine anyone else come visit, but not them.

“Where did you come from?” I gasped.

Lisa leaned over me with her tired face and kissed my forehead. A barely perceptible scent of perfume was coming from her. Her infinitely kind eyes remained the same as before, but the face – the face looked gray and withered.

“Igor,” she whispered. “I was so scared when Aleksey told me. Thank God, we were close. Rushed here immediately.”

Isai’s face appeared behind her. The same familiar sparkles of the forever restless adventurer were dancing in his eyes.

“You’re doing fine,” blurted Isai. “You’re the man! Keep it up. The main thing is you’re alive, and the rest will heal up soon,” he laughed, pleased with himself.

“Well, then, a day or two, and to the hospital in Moscow. I’ll get everything arranged,” Father boomed.

Each of his phrases showed confidence. He stood up.

"Where's my grandson?!" he said on his stentorian voice.

This was my father. The world revolved according to his will.

Lida immediately appeared in the doorway, holding Sergei in her arms.

"Oh, the giant! You see what a hero!" trumpeted Father. Sergei smiled, held out his arms.

"He recognizes his grandfather, he does," Lida was touched.

"Lisa, help Lida," my father ordered, like a captain on the bridge. "We need to have a meal."

He was confident that I'd be okay, and was in his usual element: he commanded, he ran things.

Seconds and hours galloped by again.

"How did you survive..." Isai inquired rhetorically.

"Oy vey!" Lisa chimed in. "There is always time to die!"

She kept peering into my room, briefly wandering into the kitchen, where Lida was busy, with my father and Isai already sitting down.

They were having small talk.

And Lisa kept repeating, each time she came back to them:

"It's a miracle that he was so lucky."

"Miracles do not happen," Isai said. "It's good luck."

"The Torah says, miracles are intended for those who lack faith," Lisa said stubbornly, and her lips curled into a thin thread.

"Celebration is in order! The second birthday!" Father boomed, already a little drunk.

Despite the late hour tart aromas were coming from the kitchen.

It seemed to me that my father was busy with Sergei, taking him in his arms, kissing him on the cheeks and forehead, then throwing up into the air and listening to the joy-

ful laughter of his grandson – our heir, and a sense of peace filled me.

I could relax.

Father continued to raise glass after glass, saying toasts.

He did not make “tragic” faces trying to be “sensitive”, he told jokes – one after the other. Now and then the names Gennady Brovin and Vassily Zinyakov would come out. They discussed some meetings, my father recounted his conversations with Brovin, Brezhnev’s secretary, recalled how they met, arranging a Chechen to be appointed as a director. I was still working in Anapa back then. Isai was groaning and gasping, and even Lisa would freeze, hearing what bigwigs my father hung with.

Our small kitchen was extatic when Isai and Father began to cackle with joy and fun in two voices, as if fending off the melancholy gloom, which had been brought to our house by the terrible accident, with their cheerfulness.

Lida brightened as well.

Fright and terror left her, like the wind. Now she just seemed tired and thoughtful. I suddenly realized how much she was shocked by my accident, how exhausted her hard-as-strings nerves were. Only self-control held her back from crying again, but anxiety was visible in her every gesture, every look she threw in my direction. And it was all a product of the very second she thought I was crippled or worse.

Lisa was helping Lida as well as she could. Involuntarily I studied her – she looked unhealthy. Her complexion was ashen. The hair, once lush, had gone gray and thin. A colorful handkerchief was tied around her head. I knew that she was going through a difficult time.

“How do you feel?” Father asked when Lisa sat down to rest beside him.

“Thank God,” Lisa simply replied.

Father nodded.

“How’d the operation go?”

“Don’t you see it yourself?” Lisa looked reproachfully at my father, then touched her headscarf that was hiding what was left of her luxurious hair.

“They were digging in her brain,” Isai quietly responded. He wilted instantly at the question of Lisa’s health.

“Well, what do the doctors say?” Aleksey demanded.

“They say that we should wait. They have done what was necessary,” echoed Isai.

“Hope, that’s all they say,” Lisa added firmly, and a severe crease appeared at her mouth.

Father shook his head.

Lisa’s eyes were always full of suffering, but today, seeing me alive, she was happy.

* * *

The next morning, as soon as I woke up, I asked:

“Lida, who called me?”

She started listing names. I interrupted her.

“Put the phone next to my bed, I have to answer myself.

My irrepressible nature haunted me.

“Igor, I agreed with the nurse, tell me, when it’s very difficult we’ll give you a shot,” Lida warned, placing the phone on a chair next to the bed.

“Where’s my father?”

“Dad promised to come in the morning.”

No sooner then Lida said it, the bell rang and the powerful figure of my father appeared on the doorstep.

He ran into my room and said, happily surprised:

“Ah! Already with the phone. Don’t jump too much! So, I have talked about your accident. They are expecting you in Moscow, in the clinic of the Fourth Department. Today I will fly there to settle everything. There will be no problems with this. The main thing is how to bring you to Moscow. Better go

by train. You won't be able to climb up the ramp to the plane in your condition.."

"Surely not, Dad..."

"To the brighter future!" He laughed. "Be ready to go tomorrow or the day after. Organize the accompanying medics, this and that... And see you there."

As always, he preferred action to meditation.

His lively energy seemed inappropriate to me at times. But I had fully inherited this trait of his character, which had saved me more than once.

He briefly talked with me some, then said goodbye and drove off to the airport.

I looked enviously at him. The fact that I was bedridden, was a torture for me, worse than the actual physical pain.

I leaned back on the pillow. The telephone erupted a loud ring. I shuddered. How long did I sleep? Did my father come or was it just a hallucination?

I picked up the phone:

"Hello. I'm listening..."

"Bah! What, are you already answering telephones?!" the voice of Zhora Troitsky greeted me from the receiver. "Yesterday you had all of us worrying. Tarada called, he was interested in how you were!"

"Well, you see how it is," I said quietly. "How is the meeting?"

"Forget about the meeting. It's okay. You need to get on your feet now. Pills, medicine, medication, anything you need – just tell me. We'll organize everything."

"I have, like, everything here."

"Good, good," Zhora laughed.

"Tell me, how is Danilov?" I asked.

There was a pause...

"I'll come to you if you aren't sleeping."

"If you are curious to see a cripple, then come."

In some fifteen minutes I heard Lida opening the door and heard the familiar rumble of Zhora's voice in the hallway, the chime of cans, bottles, as if not one guest, but a whole company had broken into the apartment.

Zhora was asking, Lida was answering, joking...

His sheepskin coat thrown aside, he burst into my room, converted into a hospital room by my father and Lida.

"Well, hello, Igor!"

He sniffed. The room smelled like medicine.

Zhora had a bag full of oranges.

"Just like if I was in a hospital..." I said with a smile.

"This is for you to brighten up the gray days of recovering and celebrate your birthday," Zhora gave me the fruit.

"You know, we celebrate my birthday in the end of August."

Zhora laughed:

"Now we will have another reason to drink to your rebirth."

His face suddenly became serious:

"Yes, you were really born under a lucky star."

"I won't argue. Well, enough of this! Tell me how is Daniilov?"

"Igor..." my friend's voice faltered.

I looked at Zhora, surprised.

"He died. We didn't want to tell you... This tragic absurdity..."

"What?" I thought I had misheard.

Zhora looked guilty, and the point of this terrible silence was beginning to reach me.

"How did it happen?" my voice sounded hollow. "He was sitting in the back seat?"

"Most likely, he hit his head on the front pillar of the car."

"What front pillar, I'm telling you: he was in the back!"

"Igor, the roof folded in half from the blow, and the front pillar came a meter long inside... He was hit with it. It looked like just a scratch on the outside. The driver said that he even

jumped out of the car himself... Ran round, looking for you. The driver said, his last words were: "Where is the boss? We have a meeting to get to!" and then he fell unconscious right there at the car. They brought him with you to the emergency room... They thought that you were there the most serious case, and it turned out – there was internal bleeding in his brain, they put him on the table, performed the operation. But it was too late."

I listened with horror, and my head did not want to understand the meaning of these words.

I am alive and Danilov is dead.

The doctor's voice reemerged in my memory: "You were damn lucky, Igor Alekseevich..." So that's what she meant. That I was going to die, but survived, and my friend, who was sitting behind and had to live – died.

So, I was really born under a lucky star?!

I could not hear what Zhora was saying.

His voice was as fresh as a spring breeze. But I thought about Danilov, his three daughters. About life and death. I remembered that Danilov was reading a newspaper, and again, as in a terrible nightmare, saw myself falling head first on the driver's knees, as if someone was replaying the terrible footage – the car is racing, then suddenly slows down, I hear the tires squeal, and – a monstrous boost throws me with full force on the windshield, a flash – a dazzling, bright one, and then I feel nothing, and can not hear and can not see.

So as it turns out, this is what death looks like!

Whom does it shy away from? Whom is it approaching? By the laws of physics, I should have been dead.

How I survived, I could not understand, but the fall saved me. But Danilov, who was well protected by the row of seats, died.

"All right, Igor. What happened – happened. The main thing is for you to recover," Zhora's voice came to me once

again. Apparently, at some point I almost passed out. "If you need something, please call, we'll organize everything. I will not bore you anymore."

He came to me, leaned over and shook my hand. Everything was a blur.

* * *

I was taken by an ambulance from home to the funeral. I said goodbye to my friend through the open door of the ambulance, sitting up on the stretcher. People had gathered by the thousands. All the space in front of the coffin was filled with wreaths. The black mourning ribbons were waving in the wind like snakes. Danilov's wife and children huddled in a corner, detached, having cried all their grief at home, exhausted.

I mentally promised that I would do everything I could for his girls.

* * *

I was taken to the train station in an ambulance accompanied by doctors, who carefully brought me in on a stretcher into the compartment, booked entirely for me.

Lida clung to my unshaven cheek with soft tender lips, I felt the salty taste of tears, which she secretly shed, gently said goodbye to her, and the train moved slowly – farther and farther away from the platform, past the small villages, the Kuban Cossack villages – ahead to the distant and inviting Moscow.

Most of the tedious road I lay with my eyes closed. My whole body ached because of the train shaking.

I felt like an exhausted traveler, tired not from walking, but from thinking about whether I would remain crippled for life, whether I could get back to work soon.

I promised myself not to think, to rest and save my strength for the struggle to recover I had to endure. "Pain is nothing – the main thing is I'm alive!" I said to myself.

Now I knew the value of good health, this blessed state, when the body listens to you. How glad I was, seeing every new day of winter – the mere thought that I could have missed seeing all of it.

The nurse that accompanied me, a soft, attentive woman, tried to talk to me delicately at first, to distract me from the pain, telling me about the joys of simple rural life of her husband, who goes fishing...

But I listened poorly and replied at random. It wasn't interesting to me. Realizing this, she soon stopped and would only inquire intermittently how I felt, and if an anesthetic injection is necessary.

On the next evening an ambulance was waiting for me in the same way on the platform in Moscow, and it took me to the Fourth Department of the Ministry of Health hospital, where a private room was waiting for me.

* * *

As my father had promised, a conference of doctors gathered the next morning. I was taken to a room covered with white tiles, which was full of doctors.

The nurses fussed, someone was taking my blood, someone was studying the analyses then everyone congregated around the medical god in the blue cap, who entered followed by his entourage and silently stood next to me, staring at the X-rays, my medical history and analyses.

"Anything bothering you?" he asked me.

"Just tired. And the pain."

"You'll relax soon. And the pain will pass."

"Hopefully!"

With unconcealed irritation I looked at his well-groomed face, the white strong fingers that were feeling my bones. He acted confidently, as if in a religious rite.

"You should relax this way yourself!" I thought, and said loudly: "The fact is I need to get back to work again as quickly as possible."

The doctor grinned, looked sternly at me as if I had said an obvious stupidity, then called someone out sharply, rummaged in my papers, fished out an X-ray, put it to light and stared at it.

"I hope it isn't hopeless?" I asked.

"Hopeless or not – it is not us who decide, darling, but Mother Nature or His Majesty luck," he said, "but can you say one thing for sure: we will put you on your feet, right in the time commanded to you by nature, and not one day earlier. And if you need to hurry somewhere, you can safely forget it. Is that clear?" And he looked at me sternly.

* * *

All this time Lida lived with our son in Armavir. During the two months they patched and repaired me, my deputy saw to it that the house had fresh food and everything they needed.

Every second day, despite his busy schedule, my father would visit me. Stately, noisy, he entered the room, and it seemed smaller at once.

"I come, like a priest, for confession and communion," my father shouted, laughing. "How are you here?"

"They take X-rays, massage me, stick needles in me... I have the feeling that I am a pillow for pins."

"Do you need me to bring you anything?"

"Dad, I'm treated like a minister in here... How did you do it?"

"What about it? Honor and respect. You know the secret is just that, "Everything else, "he waved his hand, "is only the result of that – and my father laughed triumphantly.

"They give me injections a hundred times a day."

"Be patient. It does you good," Father smiled gently.

"The professor saw me. He said that they were told to be especially careful with me."

"That's right," Father nodded. "My people. Do not worry. I'll take care of them. They won't be disappointed..."

"I understand that you have them all so confused that they do not understand who I am."

"You're lucky," Father snapped. "I talked to your doctor. It's a miracle that you did not break your spine."

"But now they can do it, because they massage me almost twice a day. You should see the nurses here..."

"That can wait. You're here for the treatment and not on the date," Father chuckled again. "Listen, here's new joke I heard..."

He began telling the joke, and I lay there and thought that the the warmth my father showed me helped me heal better than the medicine I was given . He was laughing, making jokes, sharing the news about Lida and his grandson, asking what I needed, kept filling me up with oranges and all of the kinds of things that you are supposed to bring to the hospital. I looked at all this, and my heart was filled with warmth from the care my father could give, how much love he could give us, which, as I have sometimes thought, he deliberately hid not only from us but also from himself.

I was slowly getting better. And less and less often would I ask myself: how did I survived? The wise men were right when they said: Do not be curious about something you can do without. Otherwise, you will learn more than you will able to understand.

* * *

Periodically Zhora Troitsky would call.They also called from the plant telling me what was happeing and asking about my health. A month later, Anatoly the driver called.

"Igor Alekseevich, how are you?"

I smiled.

"Do you want to bring me oranges? The doctors tried the latest achievements of medicine on me. They just might go down in history for helping me."

"Igor Alekseevich," Anatoly, seemed concerned, "and what do I do with the broken Volga? It was almost new."

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s destroyed. You can wait for the examination to sue and claim damages. Then do the repair...”

“Don’t wait,” I interrupted. “I still need to go places. Try to restore it. What is there to be done?”

“It needs a new body. Entirely. New windows. The engine with the gear box survived.”

“Don’t wait. The car must be on the move when I return.”

“Got it.” Anatoly said goodbye.

I stared at the ceiling. The inaction was depressing. I looked longingly at the calendar, counting the days until I was to be discharged.

“Interesting, what is Lida doing now?” I thought.

* * *

Lida was busy in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She turned down the gas, the porridge for Serezha had to cook for a long time – and went to open the door.

In front of her was a woman with a department bag in her hands. Lida did not immediately recognize my mother. Turunge was dressed oddly. In a short coat, three dresses sticking out from under it, worn one above the other.

Lida backed away, my mother, pushed her and ran into the hallway, screaming, “Where is he? He’s dead, huh?! Dead?!” she ran deep into the apartment.

Lida followed her.

When she reached the kitchen, Turunge stopped and asked calmly:

“Where’s Igorek?”

Only then did Lida realize that they had told her everything about me, but with rumors as usual – exaggerated and frightening.

Zahar, my uncle on my mother’s side, who lived in Krasnodar, was aware of my accident. What he told her, no one

knows, but Turunge immediately went to Armavir, praying to all the gods that I was alive.

What pictures her imagination would draw – I don't know, but she almost believed that things were very bad.

Lida began reassuring her.

She had heard so many stories about the poor Turunge, but mostly from Havo. Perhaps the prospect of being face to face alone with my mother did not seem attractive to her.

She gently continued:

"Turunge, don't worry. Igor's all right."

Turunge stared at Lida, as if not knowing who she was talking to.

"Where is he?!"

"He is alive, alive. In a hospital in Moscow."

A spark of distrust flashed in my mother's eyes.

"It is not true! They are hiding the truth from me!"

Lida was confused, and then she said tenderly:

"Please speak softly, you'll frighten the child!"

Turunge didn't hear. But, as an angel, Lida continued reassuring her, telling her that I was treated well, that there was no danger any more, and I was all right.

Reassured, my mother found the usual share of sanity.

"Show me my grandchild, daughter," she said.

Lida brought out the sleepy Sergei. Turunge looked at him, and for moment her face changed: young, beautiful, as if there had been no prison, no hardships, as if she saw me in front of her.

She reached out to Sergei to take him, but Lida recoiled, frightened.

"He is sleeping," she whispered. "We don't need to wake him up. He'll be scared."

Turunge knowingly looked at Lida, nodded. It was difficult for her to cope with emotions.

Did she think people were afraid of her or did the pain of the past grievances wash over her? She stood in the middle of

the kitchen and began asking about me again as if I was little and needed her protection.

Lida patiently answered all her questions.

Turunge calmed down. They had some tea and she started her journey home.

In the hallway Lida slipped money into her pocket. I think, Turunge did not even notice.

She left without saying goodbye.

Lida was pursued for a long time with my mother's suffering eyes, and terrible loneliness emanating from her, which accompanied her everywhere she appeared.

Lida told me about Turunge's visit on the phone and could not help adding:

"Igor, I think she's so lonely."

"Don't worry, Lida, there is someone to look after her."

I did not take to heart Turunge's pain and anguish, immersed in the problems of my recovery and other concerns.

* * *

Two months later, I was released from the hospital. Truly, if your hour has not come, even medicine won't kill you.

The doctors of the Fourth Department performed a miracle, putting me back on my feet.

I left the hospital, and stopped for a second. It was such a wonderful feeling, as if they had removed the shackles from me. I turned my face to the fresh wind, that was blowing all the sickness away from me.

The sky seemed surprisingly bright after the gray hospital ceiling. The tree branches were swaying, as if welcoming me with the noise of their leaves.

The car, sent by my father, was waiting for me. We went to the airport, and from there – a flight home to Armavir.

Complete recovery was of course still far off. I had to first learn to walk without the crutches, then without a cane.

But my youth was doing its job...

Soon I was running as before. As ancients said: to everything his own hour. A time to give birth, a time to collect stones, and also – to comprehend the truth.

I have always had a simple relationship with truth: no matter where I was, it would always find me.

It did this time as well.

When I returned to the Armavir the men had restored my Volga and bought a new body for it.

The accident and everything that happened might seem a bad dream, if not for the legal formalities.

As always, when two vehicles collide, in our case, the truck and the company Volga, an investigation was initiated. A trial was scheduled.

Suddenly, the mother of the guy who was driving the truck came to visit me. She was a short broad-hipped woman in a shabby coat with sad eyes.

She entered the room and stopped, not knowing what to do, afraid to sit down, and remained standing. I already knew about her. She was a single mother, raising five children without a father. The guy who was sitting behind the wheel of the truck was her oldest. The breadwinner and family's only support. He was serving his time in the army.

I asked her to sit down. She suddenly said pleadingly:

"For God's sake, help me, this is my first-born, he could be imprisoned. A lot depends on you. If you don't sue, it could mitigate the sentence, and if you say that it was an accident..."

She did not finish. Her genuine grief and despair spoke for themselves.

Something moved in my soul. Danilov was not coming back. To ruin another life, of an innocent guy?

"Calm down, I'll do what I can. Tell your son to come see me, I want to talk to him," I told her then.

He did not wait long and arrived almost immediately.

I asked him a few questions. He was a normal kid. Well, say, they put him in jail. He will return a felon.

I then made the right decision. Picked up the phone, dialed the number of the city prosecutor:

“Babaev speaking, connect me to the prosecutor.”

“Hello, Alexander Alexandrovich, this is Babaev.”

I heard a greeting.

“Yes, everything is fine. Thank you. I’m sitting here now with the man – the driver of the truck, with which we collided on the way to Krasnodar. This was a tragedy. Why would we create a second one? Try to close the case. It would be a pity to break the fate of this guy. His mother is alone. He is the only breadwinner. I do not have any material claims, therefore, please, if possible, try not to break the guy’s life.”

I hung up and looked at the guy.

“You’ve heard it all.”

He looked at me as if I were God.

“Igor Alekseevich. Igor Alekseevich...” he repeated.

“You can go now!” I waved at him.

XLII

It was early spring. The trees seemed carved in marble on the background of the blue and white sky. Foliage, quite gentle, had barely touched the branches of the trees, and the world was young, as at the very beginning of creation.

Lida seemed somewhat frowning.

“What are you thinking about, Lidusya?”

The carriage with the child went over a dry branch, and Lida did not even notice.

“I was used to the idea that all is well at home, and when my mother is upset, everything falls out of my hands.”

“What happened?” I was surprised.

“Well, something is not right with Dad. Mom says he is not himself. Sits without work. And when there is no work, one inevitably begins to wonder. I don’t really understand, but it seems to me that Mom and Dad are not getting along like they used to.”

“What do you mean, Lidusya? Anna Grigorievna, she’s just an angel... It seems she would almost brush dust off Ilya.”

“No, Igor, I’m feeling it, as a woman. Mom is angry at Dad for something.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m telling you, I do not know. I feel it in my heart. And in her words, it’s just – dad sitting at home or playing cards with his friends. He keeps going somewhere, he doesn’t work. I think there are some savings...”

“Trust me Lida, knowing your dad, they have to be pretty serious.”

“I feel that something has changed between them.” Lida stopped. “And why is something always wrong,” sighed Lida sadly.

“Now ask where evil in the world comes from. You complained that Dad was never home – it was bad, now he sits at home, and that too is bad?”

“Well, Igor! Mom did not say anything. How do I know what they have going on there. When a man is left without work, melancholy attacks him.”

“You always say that,” I said.

“Look at yourself... While you were lying in the hospital – what you were like. I do not know what is more important to you – work or family.”

“Well, Lida, is a taboo question.”

“I do not like to see Mom upset.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Lida smiled and kissed me. Then she gave a radiant smile and hugged me again.

“I don’t recognize you!” I whispered softly to her.

“Come on, no one is here.”

“And Sergei!”

We both laughed.

I kissed her. The rays of the setting sun lit up her face in the most delicate peach color, only the greatest artist in the world would be able to paint. I felt like my soul was soaring

upwards. The tenderness and trust Lida's look was sending to me became a part of my soul, the key to the very light that we had in front of us.

"You're driving me crazy," I whispered. "And don't worry about your father. We'll figure something out."

* * *

I walked into the office of the city prosecutor. He was sitting at the table.

"Sit down, Igor Alekseevich, read this."

He threw a sheet of paper on the table in front of me, covered with neat handwriting.

"What is it?"

"It concerns you," he hesitated.

It was an unsigned letter stating that I was behind the wheel of the car in the accident. Why did they draw such a conclusion? Just because I had restored the body of the company's Volga with state money, spending three-thousand-plus of the people's rubles, while the citizens responsible for the accident would normally have to compensate it. Maybe I was to blame after all, since I defended the soldier-driver, and did not make any financial claims!

Utter nonsense!

"So what?" I asked. "What can you ask from the miserable mother of many children and her son?!"

The prosecutor waved his hands.

The cruelty of human hearts, the desire to drink someone's blood at all costs was coming through in every line of that letter. How could I take away money from this poor woman in court?!

"I understand that this anonymous letter is calumny. But the fact remains. I must react somehow."

"Well, do react, what can I say."

Who was behind the denunciation? Who wasn't at peace with my person? As my ancestors used to say – "A man sel-

dom dies a natural death – in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this is a result of human envy.”

Of course, the case fell apart, but they battered my nerves. I have since had a very clear idea about human kindness.

When I told my father about situation, about the anonymous letters, and about the rumors that I was behind the wheel, he smiled and said:

“You know, your grandfather kept saying to me: “He who is not persecuted, is not a Jew.” Each of us is responsible for the sins of others. Get used to it. Envy is the last of the senses, that dies in a man. This is our world.”

We both laughed bitterly. It was the rare moment when we felt a mutual understanding.

“So, Igor, take care of the ones close to you – and then fate will take care of you in a difficult moment.”

“Speaking of the ones close to me! Dad, Ilya has a certain situation,” I said. “He is out of work. Do you think it would be fine if I walk to Anatoly Georgievich about his situation?”

Father began thinking.

“Igor, perhaps, it would be best if I go with Ilya myself to Tarada. I’ll “tie him up for myself”, and then we will solve the problem. We’re meeting with him anyway,” Father concluded.

I nodded in agreement.

We talked some more about our family affairs and then said goodbye warmly.

* * *

My father soon came to Krasnodar just as he promised. Ilya Vladimirovich also rushed to the city. There they agreed to meet at a restaurant.

The dimly lit restaurant hall with light green walls was cool and almost empty. A smell of fried food was coming from the kitchen enticing appetites. Father waved to Ilya and gave him a hug.

“Damn, Ilya, you look good!”

“Thank you for kind words, Alex. But, you know, they don’t pay anyone for their pretty eyes.”

Friends laughed, patted each other on the back, and hugged each other again – as if they were posing in front of invisible photographers.

“Let’s toast to seeing each other,” Father raised his shot glass

Last time Father saw Ilya, Lida’s dad looked elegant like a British dandy – his hair was brushed back, he was wearing a foreign-made suit with a handkerchief in the jacket pocket.

Ilya raised his glass.

“You never change, Aleksey! And what’s even more amazing is that you never get tired. For as long as I’ve known you, each time we see each other, you always look like you just came back from vacation.”

Father laughed.

“If you only knew how much work my “vacation” is, old friend,” Father said giving Ilya a meaningful look

Waitresses were swarming around the table. Father looked at one of them:

“Daughter, bring us everything you’ve got.”

The “daughter”-waitresses, took care of the guests with utmost care, following the etiquette rules to the letter

The table was rapidly changing – golden potatoes, freshest trout, a giant plate with greens, ruby red tomatoes, emerald green cucumbers and a jar of ice-cold vodka tempted the friends.

Father threw a hearty handful of greens into his mouth.

“So, Ilya, why are you upset? Some cute girl turn you down?”

The men laughed.

“Laughter is pretty much the only thing I have left now days,” Ilya Vladimirovich said with a sad grin.

“You thinking about calling it quits?” Father said disapprovingly. “You are a young man, Ilya! Stop this at once,” he laughed. “You’ll have plenty of time to rest when you are old, but now you still have a lot to do! Stop fooling around and come to Kuban, we’ll set you up.”

Ilya Vladimirovich shrugged his shoulders: I’d love to.

Father moved his fingers through his gorgeous hair:

“And how are the kids?”

“What can I say, Alex? The kids are alright. Everyone is doing their own thing. What else can one wish for?”

“That’s of paramount importance,” Aleksey agreed.

The men were silent for a while.

“Couldn’t find you right away! Hiding like wartime partisans!” they heard a voice from behind them.

Father quickly turned around and a smile graced his face. He got up, and Ilya Vladimirovich stood up with him. Anatoliy Georgievich appeared out of nowhere. As always, he was happy, open and larger than life.

Father hugged him. Tarada then turned to Ilya Vladimirovich, and hugged him ceremoniously – the hug was strong and festive, as if he was apologizing for not seen him often enough. Next to Father and Tarada Ilya Vladimirovich appeared smaller than he was.

Those two could be poster boys for the phrase “people happy with themselves”. The freedom that they enjoyed was derived from the power that they wielded.

The friends moved to a private room – a sign of respect Tarada and Father saw everywhere they went in the Kuban region. They sat in a circle, equal distance from one another, as if they were warriors getting ready to tell stories of their heroic battles.

There was no need to introduce Ilya Vladimirovich to Tarada – they meet at my wedding.

“Let’s drink to our meeting! My throat is drying up,” Father started

"There'll be plenty of time to drink! Now I am hungry," Tarada protested.

The pitch of his voice was different every time he spoke. It was as if he was playing it like a musical instrument.

Father loved informal meetings like this one, where old friends could speak their minds with no need to hide your true thoughts or feelings:

"Hungry? What nonsense is this? Who in the hell eats when seeing old friends?"

"We'll eat whether you want it or not," Tarada kept on, winking at Ilya, as if saying "don't mind us, until we make enough jokes about each other, no serious conversation is possible".

"Fine, if he demands it, we will eat," Father responded. "See my stomach!?" he poked Ilya in his ribs. "It can fit everything on this table, and it still won't get full. Don't know how that happens. Can't get drunk either. Maybe someday science will unlock my secrets. Maybe they'll even make a world changing discovery."

Father laughed loudly and raised a shot of vodka into the air.

"Mountains don't meet each other, but people should often!" he proclaimed.

Tarada nodded in agreement.

"A toast to our meeting."

Aleksey gave him a sly look.

"I read the local papers with your speech at yesterday's Party meeting. As always, you were great! I am in awe!"

Tarada gave Father a soft smile.

"Stop teasing me. You want me to believe that you read anything?"

"Papers – of course. Need to be up to date with what is going on," Father responded. "Here in Kuban we feel amazing, and that is because of you here," he said, continuing giving Tarada a sly smile

It was if a beautiful girl caressed Tarada's hand. You could tell that my father's words pleased him.

And Father knew all sorts of jokes and compliments that he could tell for hours.

Tarada then put his head in his palms, shook it, and then lifted his eyes.

"My poor mother," he started. "She often told me "Tolya, the one who has a bigger mouth, is going to be right. He can bite off the most". In Bessarabia, we had a national dish – *mamalyga*. You have it in the Caucasus too," he poked my father, "but ours is made differently. And in our town, only my Russian mother knew how to make a perfect Moldavian *mamalyga*."

"I always considered you a Jew," Father smiled.

Tarada laughed so loud that shot glasses shook.

"But my mother knew no other Moldavian dishes," he continued. "But her Ukrainian *borsch* or Russian *pelmeni*! The chefs at the best Moscow restaurants could not match her cooking. She was a special person. She believed everything she was told. If you showed her the Moon and told her it's the Sun, she would believe you. But she had the most incredible intuition. The kind God gives only to great mathematicians and gullible women. She could always guess when you would have good luck or not. If she told you to raise the stakes and play – I always listened. If she said "be careful" I would fold and I'll always end up winning! I still don't know how she did it. That is a mystery scientists need to solve. Maybe if her last name was Messing, I'd understand, but she was just my poor old mother..." and Tarada shrugged his shoulders.

"Many things can't be explained," Ilya Vladimirovich, who was silent until now, chimed in.

"Yes, yes...", Father agreed, lowering his voice to a conspiring whisper, "I believe that there is a God – I have no doubt about this, may the head of the Regional Communist

Party forgive me. But if He,” Father pointed his finger to the ceiling,” has been in hiding for the last two, or however many, thousand years, not showing Himself to anyone, even the most worthy of us, then I say we don’t owe Him anything. What are we to do then? Follow the commandments of Earthly wise men – “Eat, drink and enjoy life!”

Father let out a victorious laugh and lifted his glass.

Truly, the art of conversation is as eternal and limitless as the Universe itself! Nothing excites people more than a heart-felt conversation.

The men kept talking about all sorts of things for a long time. They raised a topic, and kept it flowing like virtuoso violin players playing a priceless violin. Many topics came up – yesterday’s football game, Medunov’s mood today, a new Party decree, or a fresh joke from Ilya Vladimirovich.

The friends had move the plates away from them a while ago, and were just enjoying the atmosphere of trust and kinship.

However, a true master of conversation always knows when the right time comes to raise the issue he is concerned with: Aleksey mentioned Ilya’s problems.

Tarada sobered up immediately and started thinking.

“So Ilya needs a job?” he asked, making sure he understands what is asked of him.

Father nodded his head.

Tarada went quite, thinking for a few moments, then slapped his hand against his knee.

“No problem! How can I not help a wonderful man like that!” Tarada knocked back a shot of vodka. “I’ll settle everything. Ilya, the problem is as good as solved. I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you where to come.”

Ilya Vladimirovich was grateful to Tarada and wanted to raise a toast to his health. Father, noticing how Tarada was waiving his arms, as if saying “No need, for this. It’s not a big deal”, interrupted the two:

As my people say – “ he who encourages good deeds is even greater than he who does them!”

The three men laughed and raised a toast to Aleksey.

Ilya's situation was solved with such warmth, brotherly care and ease, that it didn't cause any tension. My father's openness and desire to help were truly inspiring.

The next day, with just one call, Ilya Vladimirovich was appointed the director of procurement firm in Labinsk – a small Cossack village near Kislovodsk.

* * *

I couldn't wait to see Lida and tell her that the problem was solved. When I came home at night she had shocking news for me.

“I called home. My mother told me everything about the meeting.”

Lida gratefully kissed my cheek.

“Thank you for helping my dad. Who can help him, if not you?”

“First of all, there is nothing to thank me for, and secondly, you better thank my father.”

“Honestly, I think Father didn't expect anything else.”

“The closest people are there to help each other out of all sorts of situations,” I said.

Lida stared at me intently. She stared at me for so long that I was surprised. She looked at me as if she saw me for the first time. A silence fell over the room. It lasted so long that it seemed that the air started to tingle in the room. Then Lida came up and kissed me.

“You are so prickly, Igor. But I love you.”

“Sure you love me!” I laughed off. “Who else would you nag if not for me?”

“I don't nag at you, really,” Lida pursed her lips like a little girl. Her glance was like asking me do not tease her.

“Oh, you don’t nag? Then you’re the best wife in the world.”

I hugged my treasure. Our shadows were one on the wall, like shadow of one person. Perhaps this is happiness, when even your shadows seem to be one.

“You know, Mom and Dad decided to go to Labinsk,” Lida surprised me.

“What for?” I was surprised and opened her hugging arms.

“I don’t get it either. She says that Dad needs care.”

“For how many years had she thought otherwise, while allowing him to disappear for months?!” I was surprised.

“I told you...” Lida looked at me with reproof. “They are going through a difficult period now. I think as long as all of us were home, me, Larissa, Volodya, my mother always was doing something, but now... I think she is lonely. Larissa has her own life, as I have mine. She is all alone at home. All day long. And she also wants to support Father. You think she doesn’t see how bad he is?”

“If she started to see it just now, then she’s been hiding her good sight for a while,” I joked.

“Joke all you want... You don’t understand, it’s a struggle for my mother.”

I looked at Lida with wonder.

“She is leaving home for the first time. She’s been living in the same place for so many years, and now just imagine... They’re going somewhere where everything is new.”

“And where will they live?”

“Mom says they’ll rent a house. I don’t know. She never went anywhere with Father and suddenly wants to. I tried to talk her out of doing it, but she doesn’t listen.”

“Okay, let’s see what happens,” I concluded. “I am sure that Ilya Vladimirovich will take care of everything.”

XLIII

The village where Ilya Vladimirovich went with Anna Grigorievna, made an impression from the very first moment, as soon as they got out of the car.

Some men, wearing tarpaulin boots and gray woolen jackets, with flat caps on their bald heads were talking about something, huddled in the middle of the yard. They cut their conversation for a second to look at the car and Anna Grigorievna getting out and began talking again noisily, wildly gesticulating and cursing.

A bit further out there was a shepherd with a whip in his hand. He was wearing a long raincoat, had a cigarette butt on his lower lip, and was wearing dirty tarpaulin boots. His cyanotic face could speak volumes about his lifestyle. This place seemed to be out of this world. Precisely, out of the world which Lida's parents were used to.

The sun was setting. The dusk rapidly started to fill everything around, it started to drizzle against the roofs and win-

dowsills. Somewhere far away locomotives honked: stridently and hoarsely as if challenging each other to a duel. The few street lamps that lit the only one square here, that could hardly be called a square, seemed to make the darkness worse, not better.

It was the place where they would live away from home for an unknown period of time.

Anna Grigorievna cringed.

Ilya Vladimirovich had rented an apartment, which was recommended to them by their new friends in the procurement agency.

So they started to live like newlyweds – in a new place, alone with each other, getting used each other all over again.

Everyday life started to flow steadily and boringly in its dreary consistency: Ilya Vladimirovich worked and Anna Grigorievna took care of the house. Although she didn't have any particular cares, only washing, ironing, cooking.

She was used to cooking for an entire family, checking if husband has all his shirts tidy and ironed, and also she always had time to look after her children. She was cut out for hearth and home. The whole house was held together by her, thanks to her daily work! Here it was all different – she had time, which she had nothing to spend on, because everything has been already cooked, clothes washed and ironed, house clean and the day was still far from over.

And if someone from the outside would have thought that they were living in peace and harmony, they would be very wrong.

My father asked me once:

“How is Ilya? Haven't heard from him in a while?”

“He is okay, Dad, as far as I know. Lida talks to him more often than I do. But in general, he got into quite interesting situation, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” Father inquired.

“Just what Lida tells me, and what I see for myself.”

I quickly told him what I think.

Having lost his income, Ilya Vladimirovich had become somewhat depressed. For the head of household it was painful not only in terms of the lack of money, but also because of a completely different, more global reason,” losing a job for a Jewish man who had to support a family was more than just being without money.

It was similar to being discredited in a society where your weight in the eyes of your wife is directly dependent on the amount of money you bring in. If this amount decreases, so does your authority at home.

It wasn't an idle observation. It was the reality with centuries of family-life traditions behind it.

Ilya Vladimirovich's internal struggle was so strong that it got to Anna Grigorievna as well. The children had already grown up and left the family nest. The parents were left to themselves.

That was when Anna Grigorievna decided to go to Labinsk with her husband. Maybe this was her way of supporting Ilya Vladimirovich. To make up for all the years of unwitting alienation that comes when life's routine and already grown up children gradually alienate husband from wife, turning them just into good friends.

Anna Grigorievna seemed a little bit faded by the time they arrived to Labinsk, but still had her figure and the beauty of Jewish lady with black and occasionally flashing attentive eyes. Little by little she began to make herself at home and even make some plans.

She had never worked anywhere in her life, she was a housewife... But once she ended up on the fringe, she decided to make up for lost time – she enrolled in accounting courses in hopes of eventually finding a job.

She had no doubt that she would succeed. However, the reality disappointed her. Of course she didn't go anywhere to

work. Who knows if she couldn't find a job or if just she didn't want to. Along with her shadow she ran the household all day long, cleaning their tiny, gloomy rooms where no one talked by the radio, and in her spare minute she just read the book that she brought with her.

The luggage she brought, which wasn't unpacked yet, was standing in a visible place, covered with dim polyethylene as if a reminder that at any moment she could go back to her daughters...

One can only imagine how she perceived her new position! Neither the typical home atmosphere nor the comfort of a good house. Everything was new, small and most importantly – there was an unbearable feeling of living like a bird trapped in a cage. The reality was unexpected for her.

At first, when Ilya Vladimirovich came home from work, she tried talking to him. Over time she began to notice that she doesn't know what to talk about with her own husband. She tried to get interested in his work, but whether she didn't have enough knowledge about the very specifics or Ilya didn't want to go into details, but after two or three questions she fell silent, finding the silence more appropriate than chit-chatting about nothing.

Then she would yawn, claiming she was tired and headed to the bedroom as quickly as possible.

The next day was the same. Ilya Vladimirovich went to work and again she was stuck within her four walls without any idea of what to do, without the usual circle of friends or beloved view out of the window, she was all alone with her loneliness.

She was cooped up indoors like in prison – in heat and solitude, with her thoughts and memories that she had been storing up in her mind for decades.

But all her memories about living together led only to past annoyances which, as it turned out, she still remembered. And it led her to despair. Her own mind suddenly opened its darkest secrets.

The past was not a cradle, but a prison which had about as much inspiration as a tiger cage.

Being face to face with the man whom, as long as she could remember, she called her husband, she was suddenly facing an innumerable amount of awkward questions that grew out of the past.

Why did he leave her so often? Whom did he meet there? Why did he treat her this way?

Maybe if things didn't change, if he didn't lose his income, she'd keep living just as she did. If they didn't leave the old house, she'd have lived the same life, same as before, prohibiting herself from feeling, remembering and being annoyed. But here, being locked away from the world, the situation suddenly changed.

Perhaps she would like to cuddle up to her husband's cheek passionately, but she couldn't and with horror she realized that after years of living together, little by little, they became estranged from each other, became estranged from the spiritual affinity that binds together only people who love each other.

And now they both had to pay the price for it.

Something that they took for spiritual closeness in fact was nothing more than just simple common interests. But the children had grown up.

She looked out the window. There were sullen strangers walking outside. Even their look already instilled anxiety. And that is what she came here for?

The fact that Ilya became a stranger was clearer day after day, after every time she touched him, when he came from work tired and hungry.

* * *

"What are you so stressed out about?" Ilya Vladimirovich asked her, when she met him one evening with a plate of kurze with delicious pieces floating in it. "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing. Probably my blood pressure. I'll go lie down. You eat here. I'll clean it up later."

"Oh, Anna Grigorievna, stay, "Ilya Vladimirovich tried to grab his wife's hand.

She deftly dodged.

"I said I'm tired, leave me alone."

"Oh what made you so tired?" Ilya Vladimirovich exploded. "Did you carry heavy bags all day or what?"

"Maybe I did. What do you care? "Anna Grigorievna snapped and called Ilya Vladimirovich "ti", the informal "you", for the first time in their lives.

Ilya Vladimirovich was dumbstruck.

"I'm tired too, I worked."

"It's just words," said Anna Grigorievna coldly, "but no one really knows where you've been."

Ilya Vladimirovich was at a loss for words. He wanted to answer something, but couldn't. He was shocked by Anna Grigorievna's frozen stare. She'd never looked at him like this. And it was like an ice shower.

Anna Grigorievna went to her bedroom, closed the door and began to sob. She sat on the edge of the bed in total darkness...

Everything floated before her eyes. Their wedding, the birth of their children and then the darkness obscured all of it. A strange, incomprehensible darkness that engulfed her.

Anna Grigorievna couldn't say where it came from. But this darkness had destroyed everything. As a woman she tried to submit to the situation, she tried to fix it and then suddenly realized that it is just impossible – we cannot change our past. Grievances of the past appeared in her vision, eclipsing any possible mercy by an impregnable wall."

"We're just not used to being together," suddenly she said aloud, wiping her tears with a handkerchief. "And it's impossible to change."

She laid down facing the wall. It seemed easier for her to calm down, to understand what was happening to her and most importantly – to decide what to do for herself and for her children.

“Actually it could be possible to take steps to get closer,” she whispered, “but for this I have neither the strength nor the generosity of soul.”

She understood it well enough.

The next morning she got up early as always.

Ilya Vladimirovich pretended that nothing happened yesterday.

Silent, Anna Grigorievna put in front of him a blue bowl with some ridiculous, as she thought, patterns, a plate with an odd crack, like someone had used all her dishes during the night. She poured some coffee. Then suddenly, in a strange and unfamiliar voice she said, clearly stating each syllable.

“I thought all night, Ilya Vladimirovich...”

He tried to smile and laugh it off, but didn’t get a chance.

“And I want to tell you that tomorrow I’m going back home. I won’t live here anymore.”

And with the last word she dropped the saucer. Slowly, as if in slow motion, the saucer fell on the floor and broke into small pieces.

“I’ll clean it up,” said Anna Grigorievna so coldly that for the first time Ilya Vladimirovich didn’t know what to say.

* * *

When Lida told me about it, I couldn’t believe my ears.

“What did she do?” I asked again.

“Mom said she came back home alone.”

“No way!”

“She said that she spoke to Larisa, who asked for her help with the kids, then Mom left. But I think she just ran away.”

And then Lida told me about how they have been living for these three months. We were both silent, thinking about what happened.

“I wonder what happened?” I finally said.

“That’s the thing, my mother says that nothing happened. She was just disappointed.”

“Disappointed in what?”

“I don’t understand...” Lida lifted her hands in dismay.

“Or did you want to say – disappointed in whom? Is there something wrong with her relationship with Ilya Vladimirovich?”

“I don’t know,” Lida looked frightened.

“Come on, it happens,” I waved it aside. “Stop it.”

“Do you think they can make up?” Lida asked me hopefully.

“Sure, of course. Wait and see. Just give it some time.”

Lida listened carefully and nodded like she was forcing herself to believe in what I was saying with such confidence.

XLIV

I flew into reception and immediately headed to the office. A storm was gathering outside, somewhere there was a slight sound of thunder. “Is there a storm coming?” – I had an unwitting thought when closing the door. Amid familiar surroundings I acted almost automatically. I unfolded the morning newspapers.

“Igor Alekseevich, there’s a meeting in 40 minutes,” my secretary reminded me.

“Yeah,” I said.

Newspapers wrote about the same things: five-year plan in four years, the rice crop in Kuban – Medunov’s accomplishment. I looked through the pages. One tacky headline caught my eyes: “The corruption epidemic”. This article was about cases of corruption that involved the “Ocean” Sochi store’s director Arsen Pruidze – he was caught taking a bribe. In addition there were names of people whom I did not know, but the number of people who fell under investigation was impressive. It was a continuation of the famous “Fisheries case”

when the entire top management of the USSR Fisheries was arrested, and now it seemed like they decided to finish off the people in the regions. It's different when a person is arrested in Moscow, or anywhere else. But this case is here!

My secretary's voice interrupted my thoughts:

"Igor Alekseevich, your brother called and asked you to contact him."

"Thank you" I said, threw aside the newspaper and immediately called Slava:

"Hey, Igor," he said on the other end. "Where are you? I cannot get you on the phone for the second day in a row."

And only then I remembered that I have been already told about his calls.

"Haven't time to turn round, Slava. What's new?"

"Igor, I need your help..."

"Go ahead."

"You know, I've met a girl. I would like you to look at her. Everyone that Father's matchmakers found was just awful! But this one is completely different. But at the same time she is Jewish. So Father will not mind. Your opinion is important to me."

"No problem, Slava! I can come with Lida to Rostov, let's hangout somewhere and talk."

"This Sunday then. Deal?"

"Deal."

I put the phone down. What a surprise! What is his girlfriend like, I wonder?

That weekend Lida and I got into the car and went to Rostov to meet my brother's girlfriend.

"Slava seriously decided to get married again?" Lida asked on the way.

"Yes, Father is still searching for a bride for him. He let everyone know, we're all very aware that Slava is going to get married."

“So?”

“Lida, if you could just see all those ladies. A nightmare! Such awful, older, dirty women. He is a modern secular man, he needs a different kind of wife. Father and Misha Babaev can’t make it work.”

“Then it seems like he wants to get married against father’s will.”

“Uh, no. This is another matter. Her mother is a Jew. Thus she is a Jew. But her father is Russian. Moreover, she is not from the countryside. So, not as close-minded as the girls from those dull villages.”

* * *

I recognized Slava from the back by his tall and fit figure.

“Slava!” I waved to him from afar.

He was walking with a girl, holding her hand.

“Hello, Igor.” We hugged. “Hello, Lida,” Slava kissed her. “This is Ella.”

There was a beautiful girl of average height in front of us.

“Well, let’s go to the Vesna restaurant? You must remember this place,” I suggested.

Joking and sharing memories we went to the restaurant and had a wonderful time there, talking, laughing and having fun.

I gazed at my brother’s girlfriend and was pleasantly surprised that she was sociable, good mannered and at the same time she was open enough.

The next day I got a call from Slava:

“Well, Igor, what do you think?”

“You know what, I won’t give you any advice. But she is a good choice. A nice girl. The rest is up to you. Father and his friend won’t find you a village girl you like, mark my words.”

Slava laughed in response.

“And what does Lida think?”

“Well she has similar opinion about it. It’s difficult to get to know a person well after only one meeting, but Ella has made a good impression on me.”

After I hung up the phone, I realized that I hoped that Slava has finally found his soul mate and he would be happy with her. I replayed the tenderness with which he smiled at her again and again, recalled how attentive and courteous he was at the restaurant. It gave me a reason to believe that their relationship had a future.

XLV

One evening I came home late, as always, got to our floor and rang the doorbell.

Lida opened the door.

“Finally!” She hugged me.

I had just noticed Lida’s strange facial expression, and I saw a woman standing behind her... Turunge.

She had awry ashy hair, a round puffy face and her eyes were wet, as if she’d been crying. But she wasn’t. She looked at me perplexedly and the ocean could be seen in her eyes. The ocean of tenderness for as if she was still seeing a little boy in front of her.

She looked like she was sixty, but actually she just turned fifty-two years old. The signs of inexorable old age appeared on her face earlier than the usual, natural time.

Something bitter stirred in my chest. I rushed towards her. Hands opened by themselves, and she suddenly found herself in my arms, and it seemed I could hear her heart beating heavy.

Loudly and furiously, as if it, rather than her voice, was repeating my name.

Turunge looked at me for a second, then took my face in her rough palms and froze.

“Son,” she just whispered.

“Come on now,” I felt a wave of embarrassment flooded my face. And not even from her gaze, but after the realization that in front of me was a woman who gave birth to me. The feeling was so unexpected that I was taken aback. I didn’t know how to behave in her arms. The woman I called “mother” was the woman who raised me – Havo. It was impossible to get an instant feel that in front of me was my real mother.

Excited, and feeling like a fish out of water, I took her to the kitchen. Lida was fussing about already, putting the kettle on and getting some sweets.

I didn’t know what to say, other than the most banal words:

“Sit down and let’s eat.”

She nodded and then looked at me in surprise like she didn’t know what to talk about with her own son either.

“No, thank you, son.” She looked at Lida and said as if she wasn’t with us in the room. “What a good girl you’ve got! Apparently she cooks very well.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Her cooking is delicious.”

There was a long pause again.

“It’s good.” Turunge said confidently, with some kind of pride, as though she had never doubted that this is how it should be.

“What about you? Is everything okay?” I asked. “Has anything happened? How is Zahar? And the other brothers?”

I asked the question almost at random.

“They are all good,” replied Turunge with an emotionless voice. “I really wanted to see you.” She smiled. “I’m all alone out there. Of course they come to visit me, but... It’s not like if you came.”

These words were like a whip. “I could’ve at least gone once” – I thought.

“I wanted to see what you’ve become,” Turunge quietly continued. “I only have the one photograph.”

She dug deep into her bag pulled out a photo. I couldn’t believe my eyes. There was a little boy with long bangs on the photo. Wearing long socks. Standing on a chair. And there was a young woman next to him.

I felt sick. It was Gena. This photo of him which she always had with her. Then she took my picture. Then Slava’s. And Elina’s.

“You’ve all grown up so fast,” she absently said and looked at me and at the same time – through me.

There was such naive maternal pride in her voice as if we were the only children in the world who managed to grow up and become adults. She said something and it seemed like she was getting happier talking about us, going on about our success and about what’s become of all of us.

“But how did you find my new apartment?” I asked unexpectedly.

“I’ve already been here. When you were at the hospital.”

“Oh right!” I remember what Lida told me.

Turunge looked at me with tenderness. I looked at her, sometimes unable to bear the overwhelming love radiating from her eyes. And then it dawned on me that the woman in front of me is not just the woman who gave birth to me and nursed me, but she is the woman who wanted to raise me! But this opportunity was taken away from her... I got a lump in my throat. Lida’s quiet footsteps distracted me from this storm of emotions. She returned to the kitchen carrying Sergei in her arms.

Turunge turned and froze. Her face beamed. She stared at Sergei, and I stared at her. In just a second, mother’s face totally changed. Wrinkles smoothed, there were shining stars in her eyes, full of life. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Oh my grandchild... my cute baby...” she spread her hands to Sergei.

At that moment Turunge seemed to be totally happy, as if instead of Sergei she saw me, the same one year old baby whom she wasn't able to nurse, wasn't able to carry in her arms, and who was eventually taken away from her.

Her eyes lit up. She looked at me, questioning, asking if she could hold him.

Lida, as if hearing her unspoken question, gave Sergei to grandma.

I nodded.

Turunge gently took the baby in her arms as if he was a crystal vase. Little Sergei was surprisingly calm. He looked at the unfamiliar woman with his huge shining eyes and kept silent.

Turunge closed her eyes and held him tight against her breast. Perhaps, for a moment she was able to believe that she was actually holding me and that light in her eyes, those tears which she'd been waiting for all her life finally appeared.

I looked aside. My eyes were treacherously stinging and I felt empty inside. But then from somewhere in the depths of my memory floated the phrase: “God can not keep up everywhere and with everything so that is why he created mothers.”

Before I did not understand what that meant, but now I understood and felt it. I stood and looked at Turunge, as if only now life's major mystery was revealed to me, as plain and simple as the alphabet, majestic as space itself.

This mystery lied in the nature of maternal love which both she and I had been deprived of. I don't remember how long this attainment of truth took – a moment? A minute? An hour? It shocked me and vanished. Hypnotized, Lida and I were standing and looking at our baby who was lying Turunge's arms.

Suddenly the boy twitched and immediately Lida leaned over to take him. As if hearing a silent signal, he started to cry.

“Let me take him,” gently said Lida, taking Sergei,” he is quite heavy already, isn’t he?!”

She instantly took him out of the kitchen. Turunge looked after her a little bit absently. She understood everything. Her face started to grow old, it was flabby and covered with wrinkles again. The smile faded. And once again I saw a woman who had grown old prematurely in front of me.

I felt infinitely sad.

“Do you feel unwell?” I asked Turunge.

“No,” she said quietly. “Perhaps it’s time to go.”

Her voice was muffled and distant. She sighed like a bird which was caught back into the snare and she smiled at me.

“What about tea?” I suddenly remembered.

She nodded and sat down at the table. We were alone. We were sitting there for a long time and I couldn’t stop asking her about life, telling her about myself. This was so natural and at the same time so surprising. I even wondered: “Maybe offer for her to live with us? Why she should sit and rot in the Dagestan? I could buy her a house here! Well, not here but in Kislovodsk... In same city with my family. I could look after her there. She is not feeling well...”.

“She is out of her mind”, “mentally unstable” all these labels have been assigned to her. Sometimes she really did lose control of herself. But her mental illness was caused by the grief and misery that she had to endure.

And suddenly I had a thought. I have a mother – Havo. It seemed like betrayal. My feelings for Turunge were crushed, I was bound by guilt

Maybe that’s why I couldn’t do what I was thinking about at that moment of our closeness. What I later greatly regretted...

She was a woman with a broken fate, she’d never asked anything for herself, didn’t demand, she needed only one thing: the love which I couldn’t give her at that time.

She lived only by the instinct of unrealized maternal love. She could instantly forget all the bad things out of her life if she had her children and grandchildren.

What was most striking, during the whole conversation she never said anything bad against my father. On the contrary, she had enough strength to be grateful to him for how successful we'd become.

She stayed the night with us.

I could not let her go just like that.

But in the morning I didn't think to ask her to stay, I didn't recall yesterday's thoughts about buying her an apartment somewhere close to us. My life and cares carried me in a different direction.

At parting I gave her a hundred rubles – as if it was all that I could give to her. She looked at me with her blankly loving bottomless eyes, then turned and quietly started to go down the stairs.

After three decades I was asked why had I given her so little? After all, I had the opportunity to fully support her?

And in fact the answer was simple.

I was committed to another family. And it was my father's family who cast out the woman who gave birth to us – he cast her out not only from his life, but also from our life.

Those feelings were more of momentary pity for an elderly woman, a sincere compassion to her unenviable fate, but nothing more. The true understanding of her pain and tragedy came later.

XLVI

On the day of Slava's wedding our yard on Katyhin Street was bustling. Women ran around the tables, which were covered with white tablecloths, bringing and taking plates of food, dishes of fruit...

They waited for the rabbi who had to bless the young couple. Celebrations in our house always showed that our family had Jewish roots and Moses and his teachings meant something to us.

Women, who helped serve and cook, scurried back and forth, ran into each other, laughed and in a hurry came back. Male guests were moving slowly, but their wives, on the contrary, fluttered like butterflies. The sun was hot but the fresh breeze blowing from the mountains brought a pleasant coolness.

Lida and I arrived when celebrations were in full swing – an urgent issue in Armavir made me late.

The street in front of our house in Kislovodsk was full of cars – full of colorful cavalcade with the shine of Volga metallic luster. It was the luxury version which are markedly different from the

serial production cars. Lenya Bodnev's car especially stood out – with chair covers made of furs and sparkling reflectors.

We got out of the car. Hubbub and bustle in the yard stunned us for a moment. I smiled and Slava immediately ran to me. We hugged each other.

"Hi! Congratulations! I hope you found your better half." I warmly patted his back. I wanted to tell him something special, but nothing came to mind. So I just patted his back.

"Slava, I'd like to congratulate you," said Lida with a smile.

"Glad to see you, my dears! Thank you! Come in, we are all here. I'll go and find Ella."

"I want to kiss her too," Lida delighted.

I looked around. I knew everyone here – almost all the guests were father's Krasnodar friends. They immediately attracted everyone's attention, sitting somewhat apart as if emphasizing the invisible border between them and the rest of the world.

And what were they wearing! The white shirt with colorful tie, nice expensive suits that you will not find in usual stores. Looking at them, it became clear that they have a sharp eye for people and they are able to get what they want. It seemed like they dictated their own rules, not vice versa. The glitter of diamonds adorned ears, fingers and necks of their wives, as if stolen from the Northern Lights... Looking at them, it became clear to everyone that these people felt that they were a privileged caste; the elite. Some other people scurried around them, feeling obliged to come first and greet them.

But in general there weren't a lot of guests. Forty or fifty people.

When we were talking about whom to invite, Slava emphatically said to Father: "I don't want a crazy celebration, let's make it quiet, family only."

"Lida, let's dilute this company with our society" I took her arm and went to Father's friends.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a strange couple standing next to Ella and wondered: “Who might they be?”. But my attention immediately switched over to something else: many of the guests watched with some special interest how Lida and I moved towards the “elite” company.

“Good afternoon, everybody, I’m glad to see you here!” I turned to the guests.

“Wow! Igor, hello my dear!” Stas boomed.

“Look at him, busy guy came to see us! We barely see you,” Misha Gilyadov joined in. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him last.

“Long time no see!” said Lenya. “Lida, hello, glad to see you.”

“Good afternoon, Leonid, hello,” Lida ceremoniously greeted Bodnev and his wife.

“Day promises to be hot today,” I greeted everyone else.

“It doesn’t matter, Igor, the main thing is that we met up together due to this beautiful occasion.”

“Yes, Slava found his happiness.”

“You know what Jewish happiness is – sometimes you find it on the first try, but sometimes have to search for it hundred times.” Gilyadov chuckled.

“Ah indeed?! She is completely different. She is not a Jewish woman from the villages. She’s a modern girl, got the goods,” I retorted.

Yes, Ella was different from all those distant relatives of Gilyadov, whom for many years he was trying to marry off to me, then to Slava.

And then I was washed over by a shock wave. I felt cheerful and then heard a familiar voice:

“What’s going on here?! Bored?!”

It was our father. He came up and immediately everything around became brighter.

I turned around to say hello and hug him, but he just nodded as if we have greeted each other five times a day at least.

“Really stagnated, I see it,” his sly voice had a mystery to it.

A woman appeared from behind him, carrying a tray, on which were placed glasses of vodka and wine.

“It’s time to cheer up!” My father raised his glass. Everyone ceremoniously touched their glasses, filling the space with crystal chimes. It was a stunning moment not only by its solemnity but by genuine warmth of the joy of the meeting.

“Well, is it great here!? Not like there,” Aleksey waved somewhere to the fence side. “What fresh air, nature, right?” He spread his hands, indicating the sprawling picturesque foothills.

“You never change,” Bodnev laughed. “Let’s drink to your health!”

Aleksey had poured clear liquid into the glasses.

Women huddled in a circle and discussed something emotionally with each other. The men continued to drink and tease each other while waiting for Tarada.

“Alex, why did you always go to work by train?” Gilyadov suddenly asked, mischievously looking at his friend. “Really, I don’t understand. You probably still have your Volga in the garage, haven’t you? And still by train?”

The friends laughed.

Father shrugged his shoulders:

“I don’t need to prove anything to anybody!”

“But Bodnev drives his beauty so that even if you don’t want to, it’s hard not to pay attention to it!” Gilyadov continued to harp on.

All our friends knew and didn’t lose a chance to joke about Lenya’s passion for cars, which even eclipsed his passion for beautiful women.

“Each of us finds comfort where he can,” said Aleksey and his dark eyes were full of bottomless lake splashed waves. And this time it wasn’t clear if he’s angry or just pretending to be.

Gilyadov couldn't control himself.

"Aleksey, with your abilities you could afford a lot. Yeah but really, we all know the truth!" he rolled out his words as if hammering nails into listener's ears. "But we don't understand one thing: why do you pretend to be a humble guy? You just rebuilt the whole house! The interior finish alone is already expensive! Wow! Also moved the garage – it is also the whole affair! But still.. by train..."

Aleksey grinned:

"Misha, what are you talking about?"

"No," harped on Gilyadov, "tell me where you hid your money? You don't use the Volga. You use a company car, if you spend your money hand over fist – then only in restaurants, you have an apartment in Moscow with only two small rooms. Where's the money, Zina?!" he quoted a line from a song popular at the time.

"Unlike you, I make smart decisions. I buried it all in a pit where the old garage was. What is money? Garbage! So I buried this garbage with all the trash."

"Did a money tree grow on that spot by any chance?" one of friends asked.

"I poured cement on it, so nothing can grow there," seriously replied Aleksey.

The friends laughed.

"Oh... look at you! So you had a reason to renovate everything here. And also transferred the garage to another place because of this too. How sly you are, brother. How many bags did you bury? Five? Ten?"

"It'll be enough for three lives!" Alex winked at booming laugh.

"Look, what a cunning fellow!" Gilyadov said to all of us. "In the garage and poured cement on it! Not many people would guess.

"I have more to say... If someone need to keep something I still have room there. It's much safer than a bank. Welcome,

feel free. Ah why are we still talking about the temporal. Let's discuss the eternal. Lenya, where is your glass? Let's raise our glasses!" said Father, pouring, "I want to drink to you, my dear! You are my friend and without a friend vodka is just water."

And they threw back more shots.

"Have you heard about Ocean?" he said to Gilyadov.

"What about the Ocean? Well Pruidze was arrested. The whole year this case was held off until..." he replied.

"You've got to be smarter," firmly said father.

"Yeah there are enough smartasses in Sochi," Gilyadov brightly said. "Gelman hasn't been pinched yet?"

"What does this have to do with Gelman?" asked Father.

"Wasn't the investigation continued?" Gilyadov pointed upward.

"Where to?" Bodnev remarked with authority. "There is only the First Secretary of the City higher up. And it's better to not even try to contact him, heaven know how it'll turn out.

"Voronkov is an experienced guy," said Stas Belyakov. "He did nothing wrong. A sociable fellow. I know him well, his friends were my students."

Lida and I walked away from the group.

The atmosphere of happiness and peace was in the air above the small groups standing in the garden

Father's friends, as well as the other guests, were waiting for the ceremony to begin, when everyone would say congratulations and wish happiness, when the bride and the groom would be under the *Chuppah*.

Slava, with a smile that he couldn't get rid of, looked like the honor roll high school student waiting the results of exam. He darted to Ella his amazed glance as if unable to believe that she was his saving bay, which would protect him from adversity.

Loud congratulations were heard from all sides. Some of the women were quietly discussing the bride's dress. Someone has already eaten without knowing what to do.

The magnificence of nature made the modest dishes seem a little better. No, the food was plentiful but I couldn't help paying my attention to the dishes. Why did they serve such plates for Slava's wedding? I knew this was the second one but it was still a wedding. After all the son of Babaev was getting married.

Slava came to Ella, hugged her and said something. Ella gave him a grateful look back. Slava smiled. It seemed that Slava finally found his happiness, he looked like a man in love.

Men hugged and patted him on the back. Someone said:
"Congratulations my dear!"

Slava gave thanks, embarrassed, nodded.

"The bride is beautiful! Keep weather eye open for her!"

My brother was laughing as usual, shaking his head again as if agreeing that his darling is really special. Women in the crowd were trying to find the bride to pay her compliments.

Ella embarrassedly accepted congratulations. In one hand she had a prayer book and the other she held the hem of the floor-length dress made of silk.

Behind her was her mother. She smiled at me and her smile was troublesome – as if she had rented it and it was really owned by a different person, without any warmth of a loving mother.

Father walked by. He was focused. His eyes burned. There were people talking around, everyone was at ease and relaxed...

My ear caught the conversation:

"Where is Tarada?"

"Hasn't arrived yet. He has an important event."

"Do you know what's going on in Sochi? Something is being investigated..."

People were people... gossiping about their superiors, subordinates, discussing life...

I looked at Ella again. Her face was glowing.

"You'll see," I whispered to Lida Slava didn't find her by accident."

"They even look alike," said Lida.

"Mazel Tov!"

"Mazel Tov!"

I came up to Ella, hugged her and she blushed.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Nervous," she said innocently.

"Come on! Believe me it'll get easier after today."

Ella laughed:

"I don't think so. Women are always women. They are a little scared, a little flattering, a little gossip. And they are always worried."

I nodded in agreement and went downstairs to see if the table was ready. Had a vexing thought again that the plates on the table were so unassuming as if this wasn't even a wedding. We used these daily. Although the house was full of crystal, which would be much more appropriate for this occasion.

I went upstairs:

"Dad, why not put out better dishes? We have a lot of great china here..."

I did not have time to finish the sentence. The front of the hot, sultry air or puffed steam from boiling kettle hit me:

"You are going to tell me what to do?!"

"What's wrong with you, Dad?"

"It's your brother's wedding and you just come here, not helping, and start giving orders?"

I looked at my father. His face was getting dark with anger.

"Dad, what's wrong?!"

"You bastard!!!" He roared and slapped me in the face.

At the same moment father's friends ran to him, grabbed his hands, trying to keep him back.

I instinctively covered my face with my hands.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted.

Tweet of birds, hubbub voices – all merged together. Being convulsed with anger I stared at my father at short range and then turned around and took off.

“Lida, let’s go!”

Quickly, barely feeling my legs as I walked, I hurried down to the gate.

“Father, what’s wrong with you!?” I heard Slava shouted behind me.

Breathless silence was in the air over the yard. I literally felt dozens of eyes glaring at my back. Lida, stunned, ran after me.

Havo got out of the house and I almost knocked her down.

“My son! Wait a minute!” Havo’s scream pierced my ears.

She grabbed my hand. But I gently put it back.

“Mom, for God’s sake don’t do it! I’m done! I’m leaving!”

I hadn’t felt this bad since I turned twelve, when Father beat Gena in front of my eyes.

Havo gazed into my eyes and screamed at the whole yard:

“Aleksey, what are you doing!” and burst into wordless howl.

She beat her head with an increasing frenzy as Jewish women have beat themselves in moments of grief and despair for centuries.

But Father came up to the small table which was standing with bottles on it and without looking at others poured himself a full glass and chugged it.

* * *

The driver pulled away. I mechanically glanced at the fence which hid our happy home just a minute ago, and at this moment I almost visibly saw something dark that actually existed in our Father, something unknown, unreal, like a bottomless pit which sometimes takes precedence over everything I love in him.

It was a confirmation of the old truth, which I have heard from someone: our life with all our passions and pleasures is only half ours. Something else controls the second half which opens only occasionally – as a true identity – just after a little knock over the shell.

I felt like a fugitive overtaken by sudden rockfall. Who was half out of the marble captivity, and then the new oppression hit him.

I had to do something.

“Away, away,” I whispered to myself, “to hell with everything!”

“How dare he! In front of people...” I didn’t even notice that I said it aloud.

“Igor, he was just probably drunk,” said frightened Lida.

“What? Just drunk?” I almost screamed as if in front of me there loomed the face of my father but not of my darling.

“Don’t say that,” Lida tried to grab my sleeve.

“Don’t touch me.”

I brushed away her arm preventing any further words and explanations.

“You just try to get it... He’ll remember nothing tomorrow. He was just drunk!”

“Drunk?”

I exploded.

“To his own son in front of others! He is a jerk!”

“He’s your father.”

“Lida, you don’t understand! I know my father when he is drunk. He did it deliberately! I’m sure he knew what he was doing.”

In a rage I struck the door trim.

The silence in the car was like the calm before the storm. One spark and everything was about to ignite.

We rushed toward as if the car was being pushed by my rage and anger, resentment and something else, strange and unknown.

“How much anger he has inside! And for whom? For his own son!?”

Father’s shouts was in my ears again.

The car bounced over a road bump.

The road seemed to hammer me more into my memories of the horror, shock and humiliation. Frightened eyes of my friends... They saw it all. They were witnesses of it. How will I look into their eyes tomorrow?!

I felt like a persistent smell of Father’s wrath was chasing me. Lida looked scared, both at me and at the road. I didn’t notice how the car got to our house.

I opened the door and immediately rushed to the bathroom – ripped off my shirt and put my head in running water. I wanted to wash away that humiliation which seemed forever sowed into me by the man who called himself my father.

* * *

The next morning I had only opened my eyes, memories of the last day hit me as a waterfall.

I was ready to break all I remembered into small pieces!

Again and again I asked myself what had happened there – at the wedding of my brother which I had been waiting for so long, and which I had helped with and which was so important to me.

My thoughts were interrupted by a phone call.

“Igor, listen to me,” it was Slava. “Please forgive father.”

“Slava, let’s not talk about it,” I interrupted him.

“Well, no, you just listen...”

“Do you understand what happened?”

“Just forget about it.”

“I can’t, Slava! Explain to me why he did it?”

“Just stop trying to understand it. Please don’t harbor bad feelings against Father. And find a way to make up somehow.”

We talked some more and I ended the conversation. I felt heavy-hearted. I couldn't imagine making up with Father.

XLVII

Two months had passed.

During this time I never tried to get in touch with my father.

“If you want your soul to be okay,” Lida said once, “contact first. Call him. Meet.”

“Lida, what are you talking about?”

“But why not? What do you have to lose? Call him first. He’s your father.”

“Lida! He hit me in front of others!”

“He didn’t want to, I assure you.”

“So he hit me against his will?”

“Igor, calm down. Find a way to make up with him. Something that’s acceptable to you and would enable you to meet up soon.”

I stopped... I was assailed by conflicting emotions.

I wanted to “return to Father” – this could be the key to my peace of mind. And then I remembered one covenant that long

time ago I've got from my life: "Don't snap at people you love even if the whole world pushes you to do it".

Same with my father, even if for a moment I tried to think that God would repay him back after what he made with me, the world began to laugh at me.

* * *

Lida still continued reminding me that I have to take the first step towards reconciliation.

I was stubborn.

A call from Slava pushed things along:

"Igor, Father is going to Kislovodsk. You could come..."

"I have too many things to do, Slava."

"Well, it's up to you. But I advise you to meet him."

Everyone around said that I need to make peace with Father. But no one knew how to do it. And I decided to let it be. I'll went to Kislovodsk, pretending that I don't know he is there.

* * *

I drove to the plant, headed to the office past reception. It was drizzling outside, but the sun was visible through the gray clouds.

"It seems that there won't be thunderstorm," I said half with jokingly noticing the startled look of secretary who had stopped her phone conversation and looked at me awestruck.

She shyly smiled and stood up:

"Igor Alekseevich, Leonid Tyagachev is on the phone."

"Transfer it over to me."

I shut the door, sat on the edge of the table and loudly blurted into the phone:

"Lenya, hello!"

In response there was the joyful voice of Tyagachev:

"Igor, hi! How are you?"

“You know how. But nothing I can’t handle.”

Lenya laughed:

“It’s not easy to ski on asphalt, otherwise I would instantly take your stress away. So wait until the winter and then we’ll have fun.”

“Yeah...”

“I have a favor to ask of you. My friend is the director of the Moscow House of Journalists restaurant – Tsygankov, by the way, the restaurant is great, we’ll go visit him. Anyways, he’s just burning out at work. So he is going to Zheleznovodsk to recover a bit. Can you meet him?”

“No problem, Lenya. I’ve made a note. I’ll do it.”

“You know everyone in Zheleznovodsk right? Take care of him. A trip is a trip, but if you talk to the head doctor the way they treat him is going to be totally different.”

“Lenya, it’s a done deal. I’ll personally take care of everything, don’t worry.”

The wind finally dispersed the clouds outside the window and the sun started to shine brightly.

“Send the car,” I said to the secretary through the intercom.

* * *

We met up with Father casually, as if nothing had happened. I looked at him.

He was frowning and stressed. He was a little embarrassed – the feeling of guilt was in his eyes. I felt it from a distance when I walked toward him, but I felt the warmth of his gaze as well.

He held out his hand and said simply:

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

He made a vague gesture with his hand.

“Let’s have lunch,” I said.

My father looked at his watch.

“You know what, Igor,” he said, “I’m hungry as hell. And I have a lot to tell you. The conversation on an empty stomach is a the road to an ulcer!”

He looked pleased, in other words – the same, all-powerful.

“Are you planning to stay long?” I asked.

“Same as usual...” He waved the question aside. “How is it going at work? What’s new?”

I began to tell a joke.

Father laughed loudly.

A million emotions raced through my mind while my father laughed at my answer. I saw in him the same Father again whom I knew and loved always. We had turned the page in the book of our relations.

* * *

On the day when Tsygankov arrived I sent the car to the airport to meet him. Right from Krasnodar he was brought to me in Armavir. Gena was with his wife Sonia – a statuesque beautiful Jewish lady. I rolled out the red carpet for them. While the table was being served, I called the head doctor of the health resort.

“Hi! My friends are going to come to you soon. Treat them well, please. And book a room for me too for a couple of days, I’ll be there later.”

My guests from Moscow seemed good and open people. We had some food and then, having given them their gifts, I sent Tsygankov with his wife to Zheleznovodsk to that health resort of the Fourth Department where all nomenclative elite went on vacation.

“I’ll come to you in a week. You make yourself at home,” I said goodbye to the guests.

And exactly in one week we greeted each other in the lobby of the health resort. We shook our hands and smiled broadly.

We became fast friends. Tsygankov was a man with a sense of humor who loved good conversation and who understood the point in it.

“Igor, thank you for getting me in here. There are royal conditions here indeed.”

It was very hot outside.

“Let’s play some tennis?” He suggested suddenly.” There are excellent courts here and they’re empty most of the time. The visitors apparently are not fans of this sport.”

“I’ve never had a chance to hold a racket in my hand.”

“Nonsense! It is not difficult! Come on, I’ll show you.”

Tsygankov was so insistent and light-hearted in his desire to show me the game.

“This is a very good sport to keep fit.”

That is how I picked up a racket for the first time.

* * *

The next day my arm and legs muscles were unbearably sore, moreover I fell down on the court, scraping the skin on my palm. But I felt like a hero.

“This is a sport of true gentlemen,” Tsygankov taught me. “Tomorrow you’ll be fresh as a daisy.”

Actually my mood was excellent. Even Monday and endless meetings couldn’t ruin it.

Another meeting was over. Everyone ran like scalded cats to their departments. I began to look through the morning newspapers.

This tradition was common among all the heads of Soviet production. I was looking through the newspapers not to waste a lot of time and at the same time trying to catch anything interesting, like putting some pieces of information allowing the brain to decide what is important and what is not.

As always I glanced at the page and the words “Ocean Store” caught my eye, the surname Pruidze was in the title.

It was another article about the director of the Sochi famous Ocean store, by the name of Pruidze, whose name had been already on the pages of Kuban newspapers in relation to bribes.

I wouldn't be interested in this news if it didn't mention Voronkov, the Secretary of Party Committee in Sochi. Usually such cases never mentioned the party. This time it looked a bit different. I carefully read the article. But soon I forgot about it being absorbed with stuff to do which all my days were full of.

Around a week later I had lunch with Zhora Troitskiy, who suddenly looked intense, leaned over to me and whispered:

"Heard the news?"

"What do you mean, Zhora?"

"No, nothing... just wanted to ask..." he was confused. "Ah okay, forget it... nothing serious. Aren't you going to Dombay?"

I chuckled.

"You called me here for this?"

"Well, you know, sometimes you just want it," Zhora laughed, as if doubting if I understood him correctly. "Sometimes one doesn't even know oneself well."

"What do you mean?"

It would be great to go to Dombay. To leave all worries and think only of the joy that the descent from the mountain brought.

"Ah I mean another thing..." Zhora interrupted hastily. "Why go skiing? Without Tyagachev? What if you suddenly get a bloody nose?"

I looked at him, discouraged. He looked somewhere past me as if he was worried about something, but he was afraid to ask.

"Let Tyagachev should come with us, and then we will tail him. Otherwise it's not interesting," he added.

I was completely confused.

He leaned back in his chair and stretched blissfully. His wiry figure showed a passion for healthy lifestyles. We talked some more about the ski equipment and gear. He was obviously hiding something. Suddenly Zhora squinted his eyes and looked around.

“So didn’t you hear the news?”

“Maybe you can just tell me what it is you want?” I looked at him in exasperation.

“Ah, well,” Zhora waved. “You are sitting down?”

“Yes.”

“I advise you to fasten your seat belt.” Zhora squinted his eyes again. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Medunov was summoned for questioning.”

“Who?” I froze in amazement with a fork in my hand, before bringing it to my mouth.

“Yeah... Sergei Fedorovich...”

“You are crazy?” I turned around, wanting to make sure that no one would hear.

“Nope, as you can see,” said Zhora without a trace of irony.

His voice was strange and he even got up from his chair. He had a habit of bending over to someone who spoke with so his mouth hovered just above one’s ear, threatening to spray saliva. Now, I too switched to a muffled whisper.

“Who could have called him in?”

“Investigators... There was a long history about Sochi with this Ocean store. Don’t you read the newspapers?”

“I do, do...”

Voronkov was the First Secretary of the Party Committee of Sochi. One thing to be the Director of a store and another – the First Secretary of the City Party Committee... Mentioning such people in connection with the police was same as spitting against the wind. However, Zhora clearly wasn’t joking.

“But what did Medunov do?”

“Well he worked in Sochi when it all started” Zhora whispered “Voronkov was his protege.”

“So what? Big deal?”

“The fact is that he was still questioned. These men from Moscow are not fools. They know where to aim.

“Be careful with these stories... You can lose your job for spreading these rumors,” I couldn’t resist.

“The entire Regional Committee is discussing it already. They have been ordered to be silent and keep their mouths shut, but you see... if not me then someone else will tell. I thought you should know.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said firmly.

“I didn’t believe it either. But this information is from reliable sources.”

I looked into Zhora’s eyes. I didn’t like that slippery overtone. It’s not for him to judge what I needed or didn’t need to know. I tried to turn the conversation to another topic. But Zhora just stopped the conversation. Then we started to talk about something else and I realized that Zhora had said everything he knew.

We had eaten something, chatted, but my thoughts were far away. Not that I was shocked to hear the news about Medunov... Just this possibility that someone was able to accuse such a person was fantastic.

“He’s close to Brezhnev,” I suddenly said aloud.

“What?” asked Zhora perplexedly, he had already switched to another topic.

“It’s not serious, it just impossible!” I exclaimed, sure that he was out of trump cards.

Zhora chuckled.

This response suddenly increased the degree of my doubts. What if we didn’t understand something? What if we missed something right under our noses?

Both Zhora and I lost our appetites. He started having doubts about what he had just told me.

We were silent. Suddenly there was nothing to talk about.

* * *

I walked down the street without noticing the passerbys. People were laughing, quarreling, hurrying about their business. A couple of times someone swore at me: “Look where you’re going!”. I didn’t even pay attention to them. Different thoughts spun in my head. I kept thinking about my conversation with Zhora. My intuition told me that I could only find out the truth by comparing different people’s lies. However, what was Zhora lying about and what was true?

XLVIII

Every time my father's friends got together, they behaved like siblings.

Common business, living together for many years in the same area, the memories of the past, linked them together. No need to use a lot of words to relive the past.

When Tarada came to Sochi, he always dropped by to see Gelman. That time, Bodnev also happened to be there and everyone came to the Caucasian Village restaurant. It was a nice company, and Gelman's waitresses scurried around demonstrating increased attention.

"I'm tired, Misha, so tired," Anatoly Georgievich with annoyance, when they met, exchanged their greetings and sat down at the table.

Gelman listened without interrupting.

"Various guests come from Moscow," Tarada continued, throwing a napkin away from him. "Sergei Fedorovich asked to meet them. One time the whole delegation arrived. Well

I met them but then I have to make sure all of them have a good time! I'm so tired of them."

His voice sounded as if from far away, reminding of a trumpet sound, signaling the end of some important campaign. Tarada spoke smoothly and quietly, but in his voice occasionally became scratchy with metallic notes of disappointment. Time and again he brought his glass of sparkling champagne to his lips; he clearly wanted to relax, to relieve the burden of care.

"Misha, I have long lived with the feeling that not everything in this world is as it should be," he started from far away. "And of course our region is not really peaceful place now days. We must keep an eye on, one never knows, you'll be eaten and won't have time even to make a sound."

"That's right..." Misha coughed. "And not only in the region, nowadays our life is not really calm, but you make it even more troublesome," he gently teased.

"Well, you don't say!" Tarada frowned. His face expressed concern. "There are enough people who let our life be hectic."

The friends went silent. They said nothing, but the shadow of the rumors about the Iron Bella and Voronkov were hanging over the table.

"Okay," Tarada looked around the table, "gloom is sin, as Marx said," and he laughed at his own joke. "Who's muddled in this story?" He poked Gelman in the side. "You think it's the quiet ones? No! The most inveterate and restless hooligans. Sometimes it's necessary to act against the rules and depending on the situation," Tarada became serious. "And now the situation is," he looked at Gelman, "that you need to have time to act. Otherwise you will be guilty in your parents' eyes, and they've given you every opportunity to succeed in life." Tarada knocked on wood, "but you lived as a sissy!" Tarada spit over his left shoulder three times.

"You want to say that you can't fight fate?" Bodnev asked. His question had obvious subtext.

Tarada nodded. Good mood came back to him little by little.

“Well, yes... As for me it’s better to be guilty to others but not to ourselves,” he said suddenly. “I’m the same breed as Aleksey. We cannot wait for a resolution. We can suggest how things will turn out!” Tarada’s voice was mischievous. “Do you know our rule?” He turned away from Bodnev and stared at Gelman. “He shook his head impressively. “Be forceful with chance, but gentle with luck. That’s it. Must be able to take what life gives you, that’s how it is.”

And Tarada bit a crunchy pickle from the plate, grasping it with two fingers. All three of them laughed.

“You are like a traffic cop, Tolya,” Bodnev said.

“Why?!” marveled Tarada falsely.

“Don’t you get it?” Bodnev broke into laughter. “You can do a lot of things... regulate someone’s moves, what someone gets, where someone should move to.”

“What do you mean regulate? I give thanks. People become responsive only when you do things for them. This is the law of life. You – for them,” Tarada became extremely serious, “and then they – for you.”

He said it with some special intonation, talking about a sense of gratitude, which allows for getting out of people beyond what they could even give.

Gelman nodded in agreement.

“All our life is predetermined by law, they surrounded us like a fence, but we’re people made of flesh and blood,” Anatoly Georgievich mysteriously added, “and sometimes it is necessary to jump over the fence.”

“Important to know where to jump over, and where to walk around,” said Gelman.

“Why are you so worried?” Tarada suddenly turned angrily to Gelman. “Did something happen?”

He asked inquisitively and it was clear that he was completely sober and in control.

“Oh no, nothing special. Son is going to apply for university.”

“Is he that old already?” asked Tarada with amazement.

“Children have a tendency to grow,” smiled Gelman.

Tarada nodded.

“Where is he applying to?”

“To Beef and Dairy University. He wants to go to Moscow.”

“That’s where Yanushkin is, isn’t it?” Tarada looked happy. “Do you need help?”

Gelman expressively looked into his powerful friend’s eyes and said nothing. Tarada waved his hands like a magician.

“Deal,” he said calmly. “All done.”

Gelman smiled.

They raised their glasses. The evening came to an end.

Gelman said goodbye to each of his guests personally. Anatoly Georgievich left first, then Bodnev, then the others began to leave.

* * *

Sometimes it seemed like time slowed down, like nothing in this world was changing, and everything was always the same, regardless of it’s variety – everything was repeated, our joys, our problems, our cares.

I don’t know who Father called, but random phrases, which he uttered while talking with me on the phone, made me think that in some way he helped Misha Gilyadov. This was not surprising. Father’s kindness was well-known. Honestly speaking, I didn’t pay much attention to it back then.

There were days when life seemed dull and empty. What was the reason for this – I didn’t understand most of time. That I couldn’t bear the loneliness? It was necessary for the vessel of my soul to fill with new experiences, meetings, partings – not only the sight of my own shadow. Somewhere

around great things were made, “projects of the century” began; I wasn’t so interested in it. The fatigue that engulfed me when I sat down in the chair was akin to the cold that binds the traveler in the dead of winter. During those times I felt that everything that was alive within me had disappeared, -- enterprise, initiative, intentions and expectations, and there was nothing left but the fatigue and irritation, anger, or, at best, boredom.

During those moment moments I had to go away and go to friends, no matter where: to Novorossiysk – to see Tsymbalov – to his hospitable vine storage base where I always cheered up, felt the adrenaline rush through my blood, and forgot about my problems – or if Sochi was on the way – to Sochi, to Gelman.

* * *

The day was unexpectedly cool. By evening it began to rain, with no end in sight. The water in the puddles rose up on the asphalt as a reminder that the summer in the seaside town can be fraught with surprises.

I got into the car. I told the driver the address. We arrived almost instantly.

Behind the alluring windows of semi-dark room of Gelman’s restaurant a chilly gloom prevailed.

“Hello, dear,” Misha embraced me warmly. “Didn’t get wet?”

“I’m in the car all the time.”

“You’re not looking to great,” he remarked sympathetically.

“Oh sure! So many meetings! I feel even worse than I look, Misha! Pour me a drop of the red stuff.”

After the first sip my fatigue began to lift.

We sat opposite one another.

“Nice evening,” I said looking around.

I loved this cozy hall, where one could talk quietly; there were paintings on the walls and elegant bar cased in leather – a recent innovation.

“It’s wonderful that you came here,” said Misha.

We raised our glasses. Misha also looked somehow haggard. I chuckled.

“I see that I’m not the only one exhausted,” I noticed his anxiety. “What’s wrong?”

Misha’s gray eyes seemed to suddenly acquire a disturbing brilliance.

“Prosecutor officers have just visited me. They also visited the other directors. Have you heard about it?” Misha asked lowering his voice as if my loud response could only aggravate his fears.

“So what?” I also lowered my voice involuntarily. Barely perceptible unpleasant feeling struck me. “Is it due to the Ocean store investigation or what?”

Gelman looked away.

I got up and poured a glass from a bottle.

“Why are you so worried about it?” I didn’t understand.

“They are digging their claws in. Get it? Even things that have nothing to do with the Ocean. And most importantly they ask about things...”

“Like what?”

“What is your relationship with Mozgovoy – the Deputy of Voronkov? Did you go to the City Committee parties with him often, what matters did you discuss?” Misha fell silent.

I sipped from the glass slowly pondering what I just heard.

“Heaven knows, something bad is about to go down,” he whispered, glancing around involuntarily. “My gut tells me.”

“I thought you kept in touch with the prosecutors? What are they saying?”

“You mean the local ones? They don’t know anything really. They are not allowed on the case.”

“Who doesn’t allow them?”

“Our prosecutor has lunch in here. He hinted that the Moscow prosecutors play first violin.”

Misha kept twitching as if there’s a nail in the seat, he wasn’t usually like this. – Something is definitely going on.

“I don’t get,” I pushed away a plate from me, “explain things to me.”

“The guys from Moscow get support right from up there” Misha raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“But what has that got to do with you?”

Gelman closed his eyes, as if giving up in the face of fear. His face became impenetrable again.

“It has nothing to do with me.” Misha’s voice wilted as if his vitality left him. “But you know, it’s the same town. We’re all involved equally here.”

“Come on,” I said with disbelief.

My friend’s voice got hoarse. Another second and I’d have thought that he would start coughing. He leaned very close to me and whispered:

“I’ll tell you more... Knowledgeable people say that some people are slowly being taken away. Dragged to interrogations and some of them – even locked up. Something is wrong here. You are right though, we are far from it all.”

After saying goodbye and leaving the restaurant I involuntarily stopped and looked up: fresh air, the starry sky above – I could admire this forever. Life seemed so beautiful. I looked around. What’s there to be afraid of? “Okay that’s enough, there are no barriers which I couldn’t overcome!” – I assured myself as if building a reliable shield.

At that moment I felt that someone was stalking me, watching... I shook my head, trying to get rid of that feeling. The full moon was visible through the clouds; it illuminated everything around with its magical light. Silhouettes of trees looked like the bodies of giants which leaned over to watch

and grab me. The shadows thickened and became uglier. At some point I felt weird.

Suddenly I've got an urgent desire to see Lida.

"Drive to Armavir," I told the driver.

There was a melody obsessively playing in my head all the way to the house but I was constantly thinking about strange things which were happening around and wondering what they would lead to. Gelman's story made me think.

Everyone I've talked to recently said that something bad was happening in the region. The region was shook up.

There was an investigation, someone was being questioned and even arrested. Kuban was buzzing – this was a fact.

XLIX

So they tried to find out whether Medunov was involved in it?" Aleksey asked in amazement.
Brovin nodded.

They were in the Aleksey's apartment, in a typical one-bedroom flat, like old friends, who met up without any particular reason. Alex sat rightward to Brovin, Zinyakov – to the left. The table was set but they ate almost nothing. They looked focused.

Silently, Valya ran from the kitchen to the table and back, quietly appearing and disappearing. Two empty bottles of vodka standing next to the table leg showed the nervous tension that the friends tried to lift by casual conversation.

Brovin suddenly looked around the room and asked:

"Alex, is it "clean" here?"

"Come on, you can talk without any worry. I have everything under control," Alex chuckled.

“Oh sure, sure...” Brovin sighed, looking at an exotic olive on the plate in front of him and sending it into his mouth.

“So you were saying?” said Alex.

Brovin looked at him, then sank his voice almost to a whisper and began:

“This isn’t public information, but we had somewhat of a mess here...”

Father and Vasily Stepanovich curiously raised their eyebrows. Brovin cracked his knuckles.

“I know that your boys are in Krasnodar,” he said to Alex, “keep in mind that it’s restless in the region.”

Father’s face turned to stone. “What happened?” – his glance said.

“I can confidentially tell you that Medunov called THE ONE and complained about the situation. That it’s not good...”

Father and Zinyakov stared at Brezhnev’s assistant.

“Nobody knows,” he whispered. “But it seems Medunov asked for an appointment.”

Zinyakov’s eyes became huge. Brovin lowered his voice more.

“The Boss couldn’t see him. Health, fatigue, you know.”

Alex stared at Brovin intently.

“That seems rather unlucky,” he noted.

“Don’t rush to conclusions,” said Brovin very seriously. “Comrade Brezhnev called Suslov and told him to deal with this.”

Zinyakov leaned forward and Alex stared at the floor as if trying to find something.

“Suslov is nice to Medunov. As nice as he is to anyone,” Brovin sighed. His handkerchief fell down from his pocket. He grunted and picked it up. Then he took the glass and without waiting for his friends did a shot. “Overall, Suslov heard Medunov out and took some measures.”

Father slowly looked up from the floor and looked at his guest.

“Invited that prosecutor Naydenov, scolded him and demoted him.”

Brovin pointedly looked at his companions.

“So, the danger has passed?” Father asked cautiously.

Brovin wiped the sweat from his forehead, thought for a while.

“Comrade Brezhnev is not the same... It won't be easy for Medunov. All the more so after what he did to Naydenov. Prosecution may resort to revenge. Medunov didn't do it correctly. Nothing we can do though... So lets have another one!” Brovin raised his glass as if inviting friends to have a drink and forget all the troubles.

Alex grimaced painfully.

“On the other hand,” Brovin continued as if thinking aloud, “how can they be against the party? Medunov's a cunning fellow. He's been through fire and hellwater. This region is one of the most fertile in the country. Millions of people love him. How did they go against such a person? He's too significant a figure.

Brovin cracked a pickle. Zinyakov took off his glasses, wiped them and put them on again. Alex filled the shot glasses.

“I would like to believe that everything is fine.”

“Impossible to make an omelet without breaking some eggs,” said Zinyakov.

“God willing, Comrade Brezhnev will last at least another couple of years. Everything will settle down. The main thing is to be alert. Otherwise anything is possible. It's not all as easy as it sounds. What's wrong?” He looked at Alex.

He shook his head and said nothing but his face showed his anxiety. The three friends drank again, the conversation changed to lighter topics...

It was already evening outside.

* * *

Father arrived to Krasnodar unexpectedly. He called Slava and I:

“I need to see you.”

These words were said in a commanding tone, so there was no doubt that the meeting should take place without any delay.

As always, he stayed at the Kavkaz Hotel. The TV in the room was turned up to eleven. We warmly hugged each other.

“Why not in the restaurant, Dad?” asked Slava but shortly paused. Father looked on him so heavily that Slava said, “Got it.”

“Can you make the TV quieter?” I asked.

Father angrily waved his hand meaning that I shouldn’t.

While my father served a small table, I stared at the screen – feeble Brezhnev climbed onto the tribune there... Noticing my stare Father angrily remarked:

“No one is eternal.”

He sat down in the chair as if it was a throne. There was only a small table between us.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked.

“About Comrade Leonid.” My father said it very seriously, so we exchanged looks with Slava. Father probably kept something back but we didn’t hurry up with questions.

“How is everything here?” Father asked.

“It’s okay,” Slava said calmly.

“Well, what’s happening here in the region? Are you even aware of it?” He looked at us with curiosity.

“Dad, everything’s quiet!”

“Well, you didn’t think that the Ocean investigation was just the beginning? Someone wants to run a tighter ship here. Igor, you don’t get that either?” Father sternly turned to me.

He bent down, took out a bottle of cognac from the bar, filled the glasses and drank.

"I'm talking about what happened in the region. Seems like everything is over, but I think that those who started this whole thing – they're still around." he nodded towards the TV, "And it's only a matter of time."

"Dad, this has nothing to do with us," said Slava.

"So thank God. Because once it has something to do with you – it's already too late."

"What do you mean?"

Father grunted, making himself comfortable in a chair. He looked at the TV, where Brezhnev hardly moved his mouth. Then he said mysteriously:

"When the lion is tired, the jackals come."

We didn't ask anything, we just listened. Father scratched his forehead.

"Well, guys, I feel that something's wrong here."

Father looked at each of us, as if saying: "Trust me." Then he said, in confidence:

"Listen to me."

Slava raised his hands, as if saying – I'm listening.

"Do you know what happened here? Or the two of you don't communicate with anyone?" Father asked, turning purple again, and his voice became sharp. "The atmosphere in the region is getting tenser with every hour. I'm worried about you. The region is looking forward to some quite fun times." Our father couldn't take his eyes off us. "I'm worried about you. In my opinion, they're looking into Medunov, that's what I want to tell you. Medunov's patrons are not the same as they used to be," he nodded towards the TV screen. "I'm not being paranoid here. I just ask you to be careful, because your benefactor is his right hand."

We were silent.

"Well that's all."

The conversation slowed down. We stayed a bit more but Father had already said the most important thing. Everyone had their own thoughts.

“Well, I have to go,” Father suddenly said.

He began to pack.

When he said goodbye to us, I suddenly noticed that he was restless. His glance was full of anxiety that seemed to exude from his every move.

“Heading to Moscow, dad?” I asked him when we were leaving.

“No. I have some meetings here. Wait for me here. Make sure of it. It’s important.”

* * *

Aleksey liked to spend time in the hotel restaurant. Not that he liked the commotion his visits caused among the local waitresses. He just enjoyed the importance of human relations as he saw them – “you – to me, me – to others, and then back to you again”. It was like the higher mathematics of mutual benefit; one doesn’t teach that in a simple school, but only intuitively learn at the “school of life”.

The clock chimed out eight p.m. Aleksey started to feel fatigued. He closed his eyes and didn’t notice how someone exclaimed next to him:

“Alex! I barely found you.”

Father turned around. Tarada stood in front of him.

“Anatoly Georgievich!” he boomed, embracing his friend. He took a step back, as if wanting to get a better look. “Glad to see you.”

Anatoly’s face expressed that special kind of life satisfaction that only big shots have. Even his body showed it. He lost weight and seemed fit. And his voice became even lower.

“You look good,” Aleksey rendered his verdict, opening his arms.

“You also don’t change,” Tarada smiled, sitting down opposite.

“Well, nowhere to change to,” Alex laughed, “constancy is our strength.”

“These days, one day is enough to turn gray from the changes,” said Anatoly suddenly and stared at his friend.

Alex withstood his glance. “What’s this odd mood?” – his eyes were saying but instead he said:

“Tell me what’s going on here?”

“Same old,” said Tarada. “His face suddenly became a stone wall.” Well we are a province, after all. It’s in your capital, that there is bustling life, but here everything is peaceful, Alex.”

“Peaceful?” Alex was genuinely surprised. “Don’t sell yourself short, something did happen here. I heard it was rough” and he stared searchingly at Tarada.

“Really?” Tarada stared back, and then just looked searchingly into Alex’s eyes trying to find something deep in them, and shook his head. “So the news made it all the way to Moscow,” but his expression still remained calm. “Bad news tends to travel faster than good news,” he added sadly.

Aleksey nodded.

“I think they exaggerated as always,” said Tarada showing all his teeth in a smile.

“What was exaggerated? Tell me how it really was then,” Aleksey suggested gently.

“There’s nothing to tell.” Tarada paused, savoring his food. “There was a situation, not a regular one though, more unexpected. But you know what, all of it was just a monkey business. It isn’t worth our attention.”

“Really?” Alex was genuinely surprised.

He played with a glass in his hand while thinking, looked through it at the lamp light, then returned this glass back, threw a bundle of fresh greens into his mouth and musingly said:

“Tolya I need to know exactly what’s happening? I’ve heard a lot about it but you are the best informed.”

“Alex, I told you, no need to talk about it. It was all nonsense. You don’t believe me? And what about the fact that I’m sitting in front of you – don’t you believe that?” asked Tarada and laughed heartily. “Alex, you’ve become very mistrustful. Believe me we have much more interesting topics to discuss than this. Everything is alright now. Medunov is in place, we work.”

Tarada said it firmly, as if sculpting each word out of marble. But Aleksey didn’t give in. It seemed that this was the official Party Committee line but not Tarada’s own opinion. So what was going on, really?

“That makes me happy. However Artamonov is in trouble... People are being quietly picked off. The Ocean case won’t just disappear, the whole country is buzzing about the fish business. Krasnodar hasn’t been left out of it.”

“Alex, all I can tell you is yes, there were questions. But Medunov closed them all. So let’s end it.” Tarada leaned closer to father. “I have little interest in it at the moment.”

He stared at his friend as if asking him to speak clearly.

“Don’t worry,” Anatoly Georgievich. patted his friend on the back. “Nothing is wrong. There are new guidelines...” Tarada seemed lost in thought.

Aleksey looked at his friend in astonishment. He was keeping something back but said nothing aloud.

“Okay, Anatoly, it’s up to you to tell me or not.”

“Let’s drink, Alex!” Tarada proposed, smiling for some reason. “Let troubles pass.”

And they switched to jokes and chit-chat. Aleksey didn’t pry anymore. The anxiety he’d been feeling since the conversation with Gena Brovin subsided, but did not vanish.

* * *

Aleksey came back to the room when it was already dark.

Exhausted by the long wait, we were sitting and staring at the TV. Father gloomily threw the newspapers on the table.

Fell into a chair, exhaled. He looked at both of us inquisitively.

“I’ve just met with Anatoly. I’ve tried to figure out what was up, if Tarada knows anything about what happened to Medunov in Moscow. According to what he told me he is sure that Medunov returned in triumph and the case is closed. I strongly doubt it. It’s not clear. Tarada is obviously keeping something back,” Father mused. “I feel it. It seems that he almost doesn’t care what’s happening in the region. It’s strange...” He paused, then as if speaking to himself repeated, “Like it doesn’t concern him. I tell you, be careful and take care of yourself. The region is headed for “fun” days. Brovin gave us a signal. The situation is not simple.”

We said goodbye. Father left for Moscow.

L

The trees, like masts with torn sails, embroidered the pond like signs of the leaving summer.

We walked with a stroller along the lake. Looking at Lida I felt an aura of sadness surrounding her.

Sergei woke up and laughed, playing with his toys in the stroller.

“Look,” Lida exclaimed. “His eyes are getting more like grandma’s eyes. First yours. Then mine. Now – grandma’s.”

I picked Sergei up in my hands and threw him into the air. He laughed.

The shadow of sorrow swept through Lida’s gentle and beautiful face again.

“Lida, what’s wrong?”

“Igor, what’s happening?” She asked in return.

“???”

“Are you all right?”

“Why are you asking?”

“You seem preoccupied?”

“My dear Lida,” I kissed her and smiled, “work has never yet replaced relaxation. You’ll see after we go on vacation that everything is alright.”

She looked at me incredulously and then laughed.

“How’s Ilya Grigorievich?” I asked.

The stroller with the child ran over the curb and Lida didn’t even notice it.

“I’m fit for nothing today, after talking to my mom this morning...”

“What happened?” I was surprised.

“Something is happening there again. Mom says dad is not himself.” Lida paused. “You know, my father didn’t seem to leave Labinsk accidentally. He met with one his friend there and he invited him to work in Orkagly.”

“So that’s good! Anything would be better than sitting without work...”

Lida looked sad again.

“It feels like it’s not because of work but just he wants to escape somewhere again. I’m worried. Their relationship is not good again. It seems like they’ll never get used to living together.” A shadow of disappointment passed over her face. “He is seeking freedom again. I see it. All the time he’s looking for something, nonstop. That’s why my mother doesn’t get along with him.”

“But what about you? What can you do?”

Our personalities, despite their monstrous disadvantages, apparently have a great ability to feel better. Perhaps it helps us get rid of our nightmares. And we were laughing again, discussing some domestic news, living same as always.

* * *

Sunday morning began with football.

Life was full of daily adventures as if they were important details, without which any motion mechanism wouldn't be possible.

We met at the stadium with our entire team: Zhora Troitsky, me, Sergei Tsymbalov, the guys with the meat-packing factory, our whole crowd.

Then we headed to a banya together.

Sometimes I thought that I was suffocating in the snare of my own "I". I wanted everything and more – to run somewhere, to do something, to be informed about all the news. But work and routine overcame me, and sometimes I started to feel a wild, insatiable emptiness inside, which spoke in my own voice.

This routine itself forced me to act. Day passed after day, hour after hour – but nothing happened.

* * *

I had barely come into the office, when Zhora Troitsky called.

"Did you hear the news?"

"Which ones?"

"You don't read newspapers?"

"I haven't yet!"

Now there was a genuine amazement in Zhora's voice.

"The director of the largest factory of the region learns the news last?"

"Look, get on with it. What are you talking about?"

"Don't tease me. You mean you don't know?" continued Zhora.

"God damn you, what's wrong!"

"Tarada is done!"

"Done?"

"He left us." Zhora paused triumphantly. "He was transferred to Moscow!" He blurted out. "The Deputy Minister in the Union ministry."

“What?”

I hung up the phone. It was a bombshell. News of universal importance. I didn't know something about Tarada. But the main thing was... What was the reason of this incredible promotion?

The only person whom I could call and find out the answer was Father.

“Father! He should know better than anyone does,” I kept thinking as I dialed the number.

He picked it up almost immediately.

“Hello dad! Did you hear?”

He needed a split second to recognize the solemn tone in my voice.

“You mean Tarada?”

“Yes.”

“I did, I did,” he said with a slight chuckle. “Our friend became the Deputy Minister of Human Resources, as far as I know.”

“Did you know about this?”

“Well there were some rumors but, you know, you can't trust anyone fully...”

“But such secrecy? Honestly, Dad, did he hint about it?”

“It was recently... But, you know, he could've been making it up... and these things can not be solved without going to the very top. And until it's not decided up there, it's ridiculous to discuss anything.”

“What do you mean by “ridiculous?”

“It seems to me that it's all for a reason. And anyway, it's not a phone conversation, let's talk when we meet. Are you coming to Moscow any time soon?” He added.

“I wasn't planning on it.”

“Well, maybe I'll come soon. I have some clothing industry business there. I will let you know.”

He put the phone down. The anxiety he's been feeling every since the conversation with Gena Brovin was gone, he

was calm. Tarada was in the win. And that meant that his sons were not in danger.

* * *

I was sitting in the car and looking indifferently out of the window. The short way to work always ran on the same route.

I remembered Father's fears after his conversation with Brovin and one thought kept coming to me – when will I be able to see Anatoly Georgievich?

There were no meetings scheduled that day. I walked into the office. Wearily dropped into a chair. Selector was silent. I just reached for the button to call Timofeev as the door opened and the secretary appeared as a shadow in the doors.

“Igor Alekseevich!”

“What is it?” I asked crossly. I understood my assistant perfectly and I was confused about obvious frightened look on her face.

“Yeah, Igor Alekseevich, there is a call... from the reception of... the Ministry.”

“What Ministry? Switch it over to me!”

I picked up the phone.

“Have you forgotten me?” There was a cheerful and powerful voice.

I couldn't believe my ears.

“Anatoly Georgievich!”

“Probably haven't forgotten yet? How are you, Igor?!” His voice was so powerful that with one more second he might split my routine day into chips and atoms. “Burning out at work?”

I was confused.

“This job is going to burn without me. My congratulations, Anatoly Georgievich.”

“Thank you. Such a honor, Igor. And so suddenly. I'm just now delving into the scope of work. Come to Moscow some time, we'll talk about the future.”

He said it very seriously.

"I can come as early as next week, Anatoly Georgievich."

"Well, that's quick, Igor! That's good. I have something something I wanted to ask of you."

"I'm listening, Anatoly Georgievich!"

"Igor, Olga will call you, help her with her things. They have to be loaded and sent over here," Tarada's voice sounded warmer, like the mere mention of his wife and home warmed his soul making it supple and responsive.

"No problem, Anatoly Georgievich, I'll take care of it – loading and sending."

"Thank you." Tarada's voice became very affectionate. "I was sure that you would help. And come see me after that, let's talk."

He hung up.

I went to the window. Different thoughts were coming to me. I returned to the papers. The whole rest of the day could not help returning my mind to the call, I was thinking about the amazing life of this man who seems to be able to turn to luck everything that he touched.

* * *

The working day ended when someone contacted me:

"Igor Alekseevich!" There was a soft female voice.

I immediately recognized the calm, smooth, emotionless voice.

"Hello, Olya, hello. Glad to hear you."

"Anatoly Georgievich probably told you about my call."

"Of course. I'm listening..."

"We need a car and porters for our things. I'm free the day after tomorrow, in the morning." Olga spelled the address.

"Sure, I'll get it done," I repeated while writing it down. "We'll send a car, load and send it on its way."

"Igor, you are such a dear" she said a little ironically. "We are very grateful to you."

“Ah what are you talking about, no need...”

“We both know what about,” she hung up.

“What a woman!” I thought involuntarily. “What style!”

I called to order a car immediately, and gave them all the necessary instructions.

On the appointed day and hour they called me. It was a man from a transport company who was responsible for the delivery. His voice sounded a little worried.

“Igor Alekseevich, your order is complete. But...”

“What?” I tensed.

“Well, you said you need a car, a van actually.”

“Yes, and?”

“Well here is the twenty-ton truck needed to load all the stuff,” the voice on the other end of the phone was saddened, “a truck.”

I was surprised.

“So what’s the problem? Replace the car and that’s all! I’ll pay if needed. The main thing is just to load all stuff and deliver everything in one piece. Got it?” I asked sternly.

“Okay. It will be done,” the frightened employee of the company assured me.

LI

Even though we were going to meet with Father in Krasnodar, I ended up coming to Moscow first. The very next day after I was informed that the car had reached its destination, Grechaniy called me and told me to go to Moscow. There were some issues with the Chief Committee, which had to be solved in my presence.

I flew to Moscow, elated. Not as much to solve the necessary issues, which didn't seem all that difficult to me, but to meet my father, and Tarada, if possible.

After settling things with the Chief Committee I called number from Chelokyan's reception.

"Anatoly Georgievich, it's..."

At the other end of the phone he didn't let me finish.

"Speak of the devil! We just were talking about you with Olga. Where have you gone, Igor? You haven't called."

"I'm in Moscow at the Chief Committee, just finished work."

“Igor, I’ll be home in an hour,” Tarada’s voice became serious, “come over and let’s talk.”

“Okay, Anatoly Georgievich. I will be there in an hour.”

I ran out of the Committee, caught a taxi and went to him. Outside my window there flashed people houses, cars. Someone pulled ahead, someone overtook them, and others lagged behind – everything like in real life. I was a member of this hectic race, spinning in the center of events.

* * *

The car stopped softly next to a massive cast-iron fence enclosing the yard. Over the fence stood a great house made of white brick with elegant rich fretwork.

Everything was arranged in the same way as in the Red Street – control room, police officer, a call, a password: “Come in, they are waiting for you”.

I went to the territory as if crossed the threshold of the authorities’ temple, and headed to the door.

A heavy massive and very tall door made of inlaid wood opened easily.

The place in which I stood was difficult to call an entrance, rather it was a huge hall, which was decorated with a crystal chandelier. At the table sat the elevator attendant. I showed him the badge, went upstairs, found the right door, and with a sinking heart squeezed the doorbell.

Anatoly Georgievich himself had opened the door. He hospitably opened his arms:

“Come in, Igor! Glad to see you.”

He looked fit, refreshed, more youthful, as if power returned him his youth force.

I crossed the threshold of the apartment and became unwittingly timid.

Once I was struck by the feeling that, being in the company of Tarada, and in particular, at his house, I felt the attention

of someone who was almost family. Even if he was excited, thrilled, I was suddenly embraced with a sense of peace, as if I, like a ship plowing seas adrift, moored in the harbor of salvation.

Tarada greeted me with his velvety voice, put his hand on my shoulder and then nudged in my back a bit like saying: "Come in, the wonderland is waiting". I nodded, smiled and made a step...

And then I saw this!

Perhaps there are moments when you feel shock. There are not a lot of them in a human life, and they can be counted on the fingers of one hand. But I wasn't ready for this. It seemed not an apartment but a stadium! The rooms were so big that antique furniture, which the apartment on the Krasnaya Street was full of was lost in here, dispersed throughout the space. It looked even more modest. The impression compounded by four meters ceilings, where crystal chandeliers hung.

Tarada noticed my confusion, smiled.

"Sit down, let's drink some tea. Or maybe you're hungry?"

"No, no, thank you," I said stunned.

Tarada imposingly sat at the table as if expecting something. I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and pulled out an envelope, then put it on the table.

Tarada covered it with his hand and dragging to the edge of the table deftly folded in half-open drawer. Then he silently put his hand to his chest and bowed his head almost imperceptibly: thanking me.

"Well, tell me, how are you?!" He said imperiously.

"I'm all right, Anatoly Georgievich. I've recently mastered a new line of smoked sausage."

"That's good, Igor. Well, as for me... Any cases regarding personnel in the Union ministry are on me. You know, I accepted the appointment with great responsibility. This is an

honor. This is a completely different scale.” He took a sip from the cup of tea made of fine china that looked somewhat ridiculous in his huge hands. “And the appointment was, of course, quite unexpected” he smiled modestly. “And there’s still so much to do.”

He said it in such a tone that made it clear this was only the beginning. I looked at him, nodded, listened to his stories, we reminisced about the past, talked about everything. Honestly, I don’t even remember what about. In my mind I was thinking about how high our friend had flown!

We said good-bye. I left the house, still impressed with what I saw. That day could be called a landmark. Augean Stables of past fears were cleaned. I felt that we were the captains at the dawn of a new world.

I still had some things to do and when I got in the taxi waiting for me next to the fence, I wearily gave the address and we rushed off.

Even Silchenko, the Instructor of the Central Committee of the Party, had an apartment in Fili part of Moscow, that was some sixty or seventy meters. And here, the Deputy Minister, living in the same Fili area and his place was at least two hundred and fifty square meters.

This summer day still wasn’t over but advertising lights were already turned on in some places. I was rushing to the Fourth Department of Ministry of Health on business, and the feeling of happy impatience grew inside me, covered me with a warm wave, sinking right into my heart, the heart that was full of hopes for the future.

These were no longer dreams. These became real-life opportunities – there would come a day, when Tarada would take us along with him!

He won’t just say good-bye to us. A year, maybe a year and a half – and then, something would happen. One cannot fight a battle alone. Especially in Moscow. Everyone needs his

own people. And who are his own people? Slava and I, that's who.

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Volume Three

