

MID-LIFE CRISIS:

A TRANSLATION OF A RUSSIAN NOVELLA

BY LIUDMILA ZAKHAROVNA UVAROVA

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Mid-Life Crisis is a novella written by Liudmila Zakharovna Uvarova, a prolific writer of fiction in the Soviet Union. This work is important in portraying a realistic view of the modern Soviet family. I have translated her story to make it accessible to non-Russian speakers.

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INTRODUCTION

ARTISTIC INTENT

Translating is challenging, yet fascinating. The interpreter must be able to translate the essence of a text into symbols which are comprehensible in a different language. The person translating the text has an important role since he/she affects how the meaning will be perceived by the audience. Language is so complex that it is impossible to translate word for word. It is imperative to have an understanding of not just the words, but also the underlying tone which has a cultural meaning. Rather than translating the cultural meaning literally, which would end up confusing the reader as to the exact meaning, it is more useful to find an equivalent phrase which conveys the same idea. For example, the phrase "don't make an elephant out of a fly," which is the literal translation from Russian into English, would sound better translated into English as, "don't make a mountain out of a molehill." This is the English equivalent which is a common colloquialism.

The work I have chosen to translate is a novella entitled Mid-Life Crisis written by Liudmila Zakharovna Uvarova in 1982. Unfortunately, there is not much

information about this writer as well as about most women writers in the Soviet Union. This is one of the reasons why I chose to translate a woman writer. The only way for them to gain international attention is through a translation of their work. By making this text available to English readers, I hope to expand the audience for Soviet women writers. Liudmila Uvarova was born in Moscow in 1918. She continued the legacy of her educated family by studying at the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages from which she graduated in 1950. She then went on to teach German and eventually switched to writing. She is one of the most prolific Russian women authors, having written over 20 volumes of short stories and novellas. She also belongs to the Writer's Union, which is the only way to gain legitimacy as an author in the Soviet Union.

Uvarova's themes include family conflicts and the change of perceptions and relations as her stories progress. Her emphasis on continuity is shown through the relationship of several generations of a family. Her work is realistic by her portrayal of characters facing significant and difficult moral decisions with no resolution in the end. This makes her style especially interesting since it points out some of the social problems in today's Soviet society. The housing shortage has resulted in cramped, uncomfortable living conditions where several generations are forced to live together in a one- or two-room apartment. This is the

cause of much discord and discontent due to the lack of privacy and poor quality of living space.

The role of Soviet women is also a significant factor affecting the family situation. Soviet women are the most overworked, underappreciated citizens in the Soviet Union. Not only do they have to work outside the home, but they must also be responsible for taking care of the home which includes childcare and shopping, the latter of which involves standing in line for hours each day. These every day stresses are obviously not conducive to a harmonious family life, but are part of common problems they face.

The situation presented in this story is realistic and typical in that it reflects the increasing emphasis in society on social problems.

AUDIENCE

One of the effects of the Soviet Union's new policy of Glasnost (openness) for Americans has been a surge of interest in the Soviet Union, its people, culture, land, and literature. Many people would like to know more about this mysterious country we used to regard as our enemy, but few have knowledge of the language to obtain this information. I have translated this story so that people who do not have any Russian skills can have access to it in the English language. My goal as a translator is for the audience to be able to read this story without it being glaringly obvious that they are reading a translation. I myself have read books which have been translated and it was apparent due to the stilted style of the text. It gave me the feeling that I was missing something. As a result of the choppy translation, I was not convinced that the translator understood it either. Therefore, my intention was for the translation to read smoothly while maintaining accuracy, so that the reader can identify with the story without being distracted by a deficient translation.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

When I first began to study Russian I was unable to read literature in the original so I read many short stories in English. However, I was intrigued by how the translators were able to transpose an idea or thought of one language into different symbols represented by another. As my language skills progressed, I read the stories in the original and compared it to the English version in order to analyze for myself the methods used to translate.

Each translator develops his/her own unique way of translating, however reading about the methods that professionals use, has influenced me and the way I look at translating and the role of the translator. One of the most significant problems of translating is the struggle to maintain accuracy without being too literal; to keep the spirit of the meaning, without altering the text. I believe that a balance between these two ideas is most effective. Keeping in mind the opposing ideas of two translators assisted me in maintaining this balance.

In her article "Nabokov's Rewriting of Dryden's Laws of Translation," Kristine Anderson expounds on Dryden's theories on translating and Nabokov's revision of some of them. The balance of these two ideas helped me write a more effective translation. Two of Dryden's points that I found

noteworthy were: do not improve the original, and do not follow it so closely that the spirit is lost. It is very tempting to embellish the author's words to fit the translator's own style. To some extent the translator is going to affect the translation by his/her culture and time era; this cannot be helped. We cannot rise above our cultural influences, but we can be aware of them when translating. And it is actually useful since we need to translate the text in a way that people in our culture would understand. But by improving the text, the translator depreciates the integrity of the author. The job of a translator is not to be an editor or author, but to interpret the intended meaning of the author and relate that same meaning in language and vocabulary that non-native speakers would understand.

One should also keep in mind Dryden's second point which is to remember the spirit of the meaning. It is important to be accurate but not go overboard to the extent of disregarding the fact that a literal meaning is not going to make sense to the reader. For example, when people were wishing me luck on my thesis presentation, they said, "Ni puxa, ni pera," which literally means, "neither fluff nor a feather." If I were to say this to an English speaker, he/she would have no idea what I meant. Therefore, an equivalent phrase is needed which conveys the same meaning. For this phrase, "break a leg" is the best alternative. However, if I were to say "break a leg" literally translated

into Russian, people would be offended that I wished such bad luck on them. It is possible to be accurate without translating word for word, by providing an equivalent phrase which carries the same feeling.

Nabokov's concern was that if one concentrates only on the spirit of the word, he/she will lose sight of the actual meaning and will tend to revise the text rather than translate it. He felt that Dryden advocated paraphrasing too strongly to the point of rewriting the text.

Understanding these two positions was critical in my attempt to effectively translate this short story. My intent was to translate it in language that the reader would understand, which means I had to keep in mind the spirit of the meaning, but at the same time preserve accuracy and avoid enhancing or modifying Uvarova's intended meaning. My method for doing this was to make sure that I first understood the meaning of a phrase in the Russian context before translating it into English. I would then translate back into Russian what I wrote in English to figure out how accurate I was.

Keeping in mind the validity of both translators' hypotheses aided me in maintaining a balance between precision and the spirit of the meaning.

TECHNIQUES

There is no magic formula for translating, but by identifying and resolving certain difficulties in translating, the translator develops his/her personal technique.

What made this project challenging was identifying the difficulties and then resolving them in the process of translating. In this process, I developed a new skill. While studying Russian, I had always been taught that to speak the language effectively, it is important not to mentally translate from English to Russian, but rather concentrate on thinking in Russian. This was essential in learning to speak the language more fluently, but written translation requires a different skill. It was especially difficult at first when I would read the text and could understand the idea being conveyed in a Russian context, but found myself unable to adequately transform this idea into English. However, as I progressed through the translation, I found it easier to find an equivalent phrase in English.

My intention in translating this work was to retain as much accuracy as possible without translating too literally. Realistically, that is, if you want your audience to understand the text (in my case, as an English speaker), the

goal of the translator should be to retain the accuracy but at the same time, find an equivalent meaning. The attempt to translate literally in order to be accurate is a contradiction in terms. Languages cannot be directly translated. Therefore, the translator must be able to understand the foreign language well enough to be able to infer the meaning and then find some equivalent phrase or word that exists in the other language so that the audience will understand. Translating literally does not help the reader because although the words themselves may be in English, the meaning of the word has not been translated, since the phrase or word still carries the cultural context of the other language which will not be clear to a non-native speaker.

Each language has its own idiomatic expressions, and the task of the translator is to find the closest equivalent so that the intended meaning will be understood. For example, at one point, Larisa says that she tried to stop herself from answering, but she already had her "teeth on the bit." This is not a typical English phrase, but a direct translation of a Russian expression which means that she had already gotten too upset about the situation to stop herself. Although a reader may eventually be able to infer the meaning, the feeling that one has an understanding of the text will be lost.

In order to infer the meaning the author intended, the translator needs to understand the tone of the work. The

tone encompasses more than just words, but also the feeling the words possess which is not always obvious or direct. For instance, in order to come up with the word "brown-noser" as Larisa's description of Rubber Plant, I had to think about her tone as I analyzed the various possibilities. The word she literally said was "flatterer," but this could also be used in a positive sense and it sounds somewhat artificial. This word does not have the negative slant she intended. "Parasite" was another choice, which conveys the negative tone, but this word lacks the context she meant, which was that he flattered her father to get help from him. Therefore, I chose "brown-noser" since it conveys the negative feeling she has of Rubber Plant within the context showing that he flatters people to use them to obtain his goals.

The use of sarcasm and irony are prevalent in the story. Since these are more subtle styles, they are more difficult to translate, but are vital in understanding what the characters really mean, rather than what they are saying on the surface. There were times when the direct translation of a sentence failed to emphasize the irony or sarcasm. I then adapted the sentence to our cultural context in order to make the sense clear. For instance, Aunt Valia was speaking in a sarcastic tone since Larisa refused to admit that the family was having a difficult time handling the abandonment of Kuzia. She says, "I can see you have more luck than you know what to do with." Literally

she stated, "You have a great deal of luck." However, this phrase could be a positive statement. I adjusted the sentence to show the irony of the situation as she sees it. This was done where I felt it necessary to stress the irony or sarcasm when the actual word for word translation failed.

This type of style has often been used in Soviet writing as a device to avoid censorship of their work. Authors would have an acceptable theme to satisfy the censors, but interwoven into this theme would be examples of irony and sarcasm which negated the exterior theme. The accurate translation of these indirect styles of speech and tone is essential to the meaning of the text, but is difficult since irony is not something tangible; it is not found in the words themselves, but in the tone and feeling of the words. Therefore, if the words are translated as separate entities without context, the true meaning is lost.

The use of dialogue also predominates in the story, along with internal commentary from Larisa, the main character whose point of view is represented. These two types of writing styles require different methods for translation. Dialogue tends to be more direct and colloquial, whereas internal dialogue is more reflective and analytical of the situation presented to the characters.

In translating both spoken and internal dialogue, it is important to take into account the type of language which would be used for each character. For example, although Larisa is perceptive, she is, in reality only a ninth grade

student and therefore her speech tends to be colloquial. However, she has had to mature more quickly than most of her peers due to her role in the family as caretaker and since she is perceptive and understands the situation better than anyone around her, her internal dialogue is more erudite when she reflects on the significance of her insights of the family. Therefore, when choosing among various alternatives for translating her thoughts and speech, I tended to choose more colloquial speech, but since much of her perception is internalized, I translated accordingly by using more elevated language.

Rubber Plant (Samson) on the other hand, is phony and therefore his language tends to be artificial and flowery. He makes a point of using words and phrases that are rather obsolete in conversation in order to show his self-proclaimed sophistication. However, his immaturity shows through in his speech which is too unrealistic. At one point he says, "...I would just love to go right into the kitchen and for the edification of everyone, make you this very same five minute pastry." The word "edification" sounds artificial but I chose to use it because that is exactly the tone he uses in Russian.

Larisa and Arkashka give Samson the nickname "Rubber Plant" not just because he is artificial, but a rubber plant is a symbol of a certain type of person in the Soviet Union. There are certain people characterized by their desire to show that they are sophisticated, but do not really possess

the qualities to actually be sophisticated. They are the type of people who buy rubber plants to show what they see as sophistication on the surface, but everyone else sees it as bad taste.

These character traits are essential to understand before taking on the task of translating since our speech pattern and tone are affected by our personalities.

One particular stylistic problem I had was the difference in sentence structure and delineation of paragraphs. In Russian, if an idea or phrase is closely related to the next one, they are separated by commas, whereas in English, this would be considered to be a run-on sentence. For example, while looking out of the window, Larisa describes, "People in great numbers passed by. It was Friday, the last working day of the week." This sentence in the Russian reads as, "People passed by, many people, it was Friday, the last working day of the week." This sentence, which violates one of the basic rules in writing English, detracts the reader from the point of the story, so I changed the structure of the sentence to conform with the English writing style. This was difficult to resolve at times because the meaning of the sentence could be altered if it is not separated properly into several sentences.

The Russian style for paragraphs, on the other hand, seem to follow the opposite rule. Even similar ideas are often divided into separate paragraphs which made it seem as

though the thought was incomplete at the end of one paragraph, then suddenly brought up again in the next. In English, when another speaker begins, the author starts a new paragraph, but if additional information about the same speaker is given, that information is in the same paragraph. This is not the case in Russian, which made the style seem awkward and disjointed. I consolidated paragraphs where I felt it was necessary to adhere to the English style since the frequent paragraph breaks, inappropriate to our standards, were disruptive for the reader.

Liudmila Uvarova did not have any clearly defined chapters in her story. She placed asterisks between separate ideas or change of scene. Therefore I myself chose how to divide the chapters. I divided them into four main chapters in accordance with critical points in the development of the story. To separate the minor changes of the story, I skipped extra lines.

My first chapter begins with Larisa's account of Kuzia's (her mother) decision to leave the family to live with her lover and the events leading up to this. The chapter concentrates on the confrontation with her mother and the reaction of Larisa to this news. It ends right after Kuzia leaves and the daughter thinks about how this will affect the rest of the family. I separated Chapter One from Chapter Two at the point where I felt the impact of the situation needed to be emphasized. If the chapter had not been divided at the point when her mother left, the reader

would not have felt the full effect of the pain and burden Larisa now bears. I also divided Chapter Two from Three at another critical point where I felt the reader needed to feel the impact of the situation at hand. The separation of chapters at these points gives the reader a chance to think about the significance of the events which just occurred in the development of the story.

Chapter Two starts with a flashback to Larisa's childhood. She tries to reconcile herself to her mother's decision and her recounting of her childhood makes the family situation clear. Although at the beginning of the story, Larisa states that she thought her family was united, that the family "suddenly fell apart," the reader sees that this was merely self-deception. She was in a dysfunctional family where she had to be responsible for the welfare of the family since her mother was incapable. When she reflects on her past, she realizes that her family had always maintained a facade of unity. Only when viewed in retrospect do the problems which were always in existence in the family become evident. The second chapter ends with the knowledge that Larisa's Dad (Vadim) knows her mother left and they contemplate how to deal with the situation. Chapter Three starts off the first night without Kuzia. The family tries to hide the hurt everyone feels and acts as though it were any other day. Larisa is always convincing herself that no matter what happens, Arkashka must do his homework, the dog must be walked, and life goes on. No one

in the family wants to show his/her true feelings and so each member must deal with the grief silently. Chapter four is the first contact the children have with Kuzia since she left. Arkashka and Larisa see how selfish Kuzia really is and the final chapter ends with the feeling that they will never see her again. Each chapter begins and ends with a critical turning point in the story which is representative of the development in each chapter.

By addressing particular difficulties and discovering how to resolve them, I have developed my own approach to translation which I tested and revised as I translated this work.

CHAPTER ONE

Last fall our united, solid family fell apart. In any case, from childhood it had seemed united to me and then - it suddenly collapsed.

It all happened this way, to start from the very beginning: I got back home from school earlier than usual. Our Geography teacher was sick and a German was sent in her place, but during class blood suddenly gushed from her nose. It turned out to be a hypertension attack. She was quickly taken to the health clinic and we were all sent home.

Before I could reach the house, I unexpectedly ran into Rubber Plant, a relative of Dad's, who announced his existence not very long ago; about a few years ago, I think. Before that we didn't even suspect that Dad had such a distant, unknown relation. It seemed to me that Rubber Plant appeared to be rather embarrassed and decidedly not happy at this chance meeting.

"Are you going to our house?" I asked him, "Or just leaving?"

"Why no, I was simply passing by," he answered, not looking me in the eye, but somewhere above my forehead.

I invited him over of course, just to be polite because I didn't like him much. "Why don't you come over and have some tea?"

"Why no, I can't, thank you," he answered as before, looking above my forehead.

That's right, Kuzia is sick, I suddenly realized. She had the flu but now seems to be getting better. We all, Arkashka (my younger brother), Dad, and I, called Mother Kuzia . She liked this because from childhood everyone in her family called her Kuzia, and she admitted that whenever she heard the name, she felt as if she were a little girl once again.

"So, are you going to stop by?" I asked without any particular enthusiasm.

"Sure. I mean no," Rubber Tree answered absently and started walking quickly, almost running away from me. I glanced at him in astonishment and followed him with my eyes.

What's wrong with him? That's not like him. But after all, usually he was polite to everyone, almost to the point of being sickening. He showed up at our home about two years ago. He arrived one Sunday when we were all home and asked for Dad - Vadim Sergeevich Kashelov.

"I am Vadim Sergeevich," Dad said. "And who are you?"

In reply he rushed over to Dad and hugged him tightly. Then briefly let him go, affectionately gazing into Dad's shocked face and again began to squeeze him with all his might. "Uncle Vadim," he said, "I am aunt Lily's son."

"Aunt Lily?" Dad asked him in turn.

"Yes, Aunt Lily. I hope that you remember her."

"Of course I do," said Dad, blinking his eyes with uncertainty, and I quickly realized that he absolutely did not remember any such Aunt Lily. But one must know Dad's delicacy, his fear of insulting anyone at all by a single word. But why would I say a word? By even a slight glance.... My brother Arkashka claimed that even when meeting a dog, Dad used the formal form of you, so as not to accidentally offend its self-esteem.

"So then," Aunt Lily's son went on, "until now Mom and I have been living in Yelets. Mom is still there, but I have come...."

"Very good," Dad said.

"I am Samson, Aunt Lily's youngest son."

"Very pleased to meet you," said Dad smiling too widely so that Samson would not suspect that he had not come at a very good time.

Later, when I was in the kitchen making dinner and Kuzia was in the living room entertaining Samson with polite conversation, Dad quietly whispered in my ear, "G-d as my witness, I absolutely do not remember him. And I do not know of any Aunt Lily...."

"Oh stop it," I said. "You simply forgot."

He continued doubtfully, "It's true, I did live in Yelets a long time ago with my Grandmother, Mother, and there were some very distant relatives...."

"That's great," I was reassured. "Everything is clear."

Dad quickly agreed with me, "Yes, of course. Only we don't have to let them know that I had doubts, O.K.?"

I nodded to him and carried some cups on a tray to the room. Then we all listened to Samson who shared various details of his life with us. It turned out that in Yelets he was the best student in Literature at the school, and his compositions were read to the whole class for the edification of the other students.

After graduating from secondary school, he went to work for the local newspaper and gradually climbed the corporate ladder. At first, he was a messenger, then a free-lance reporter and finally they gave him a permanent position on the staff in the department of Public Services. Then he began to write, as he himself expressed it, long feature stories and all kinds of essays.

"Did you serve in the army?" asked Dad.

Samson imploringly folded his hands together and pressed them to his chest, covered by his tight, silk knit shirt. "Uncle Vadim, what's the matter?"

"What do you mean?" Dad was startled.

"How could you refer to me with the formal 'you'?"¹ And Samson pleadingly raised his hands as if appealing to a higher justice. "You loved and spoiled me so much long ago in my childhood. You, who I also learned to love and respect and you refer to me as if I'm some kind of outsider by calling me with the formal 'you'."

"Pardon me," Dad mumbled, flustered. His glasses instantly steamed up from embarrassment. He removed them and absentmindedly started to wipe the lense clean with a paper napkin. A searching, almost ingratiating smile, such as I have never seen from him before appeared on Dad's face. He was probably trying in some way to redeem himself for his involuntary 'sin' against Samson.

"I forgive you," Samson uttered condescendingly. "When it comes down to it, I really can't actually get angry with you."

"Yes, of course," Dad said.

"And I did not serve in the army," Samson went on and added in a serious tone, "you see, I have fallen arches."

"What does that do - does it hurt a lot?" asked Kuzia.

He explained smiling, "No, don't be silly. It permanently frees you from military service." He turned to Dad again, "And then I had decided to set out for the capital. Everyone had been telling me the same thing - Go to Moscow! Go to Moscow!"

"It's just like the sisters in Chekov's The Three Sisters," Kuzia commented under her breath.

A broad smile shone on Samson's face. "What? What did you say? You know, that's really clever!"

"Oh no! That's not true," Kuzia was embarrassed and blushed to the point of almost turning blue. She lowered her eyelashes and immediately became so young-looking that

Samson must have genuinely wondered, looking at her and at us - can it really be possible that we are her children?

"So then," continued Samson, smiling at Kuzia with one side of his face, the other expressing respect to Dad. (How he did this I still can't understand, but it worked).

"Everyone kept saying, Samson, you must go to Moscow. There you will make something of yourself; there your talents will find you worthy employment, but only if you go to Moscow!"

"What talents do you have?" I asked.

"And then I made up my mind," he continued as if not hearing my question. Most likely he didn't consider it necessary to explain anything to me. "I dropped everything and left for the white stone city."

"Very good," said Dad, sighing. "Wonderful."

"Only don't think, Uncle Vadim," Samson hastily interjected, "that I intend to trouble you at all. I will live with my Mother's cousin, Aunt Kapa. Do you remember what a pug nose she had? And also the time a bull almost knocked her down?"

"Why, of course, of course," Dad answered and looked at me sharply from under his glasses because I was making such faces, trying to keep from laughing.

"Yes, I'm going to be living with Aunt Kapa. She has two rooms on Seleznevka Street. The rooms aren't great, but what can I do? But on the other hand, I will have my own separate place and with a residence permit, everything has been settled.² It turned out that Aunt Kapa has excellent

contacts. Who would have expected that? It's simply amazing!"

"Yes, of course," mumbled Dad politely and asked, "And where do you plan to work?"

"And that is the most important thing," said Samson. "My dear Uncle Vadim, I have come to you for help..." and he explained the problem. He needed Dad to set him up in some kind of publishing job at a magazine, newspaper, or if worse comes to worst, at a publishing house.

"I need to arrange a job for you?" Dad said in surprise. "But I'm not a journalist or a writer. How would I know how to get you a job?"

"Oh stop it, Uncle Vadim," objected Samson confidently. "You think that because we are provincials, we don't know how things are done?"

"Exactly what do we know?" Dad asked.

"Why, even in Yelets we've heard about you, that your word is worth a lot..." Samson seemed inspired; his eyes sparkled.

Boy, what a brown-noser, I thought.

And meanwhile, Samson continued, "Your word, Uncle Vadim, your unsurpassed authority.... All you have to do is say the word...."

"That's enough," Dad interrupted him. Even Dad's mildness couldn't stand this unrestrained burst of flattery.

"Really, you mustn't talk like that."

"Help me, Uncle Vadim," said Samson, placing his large pink hands together. "I beg of you."

"Really, Vadim," said kuzia.

"Yes, yes, O.K...." Again Dad took off his glasses and started to wipe the lense. "O.k., I'll do what I can."

Samson turned out to be surprisingly persistent. Already by the next morning the phone rang and the voice of Samson cooed into the receiver, "May I speak with Uncle Vadim?"

"It's for you Dad," I said. "The guy from Yelets is already after you."

"You mean the Yeltsian has his eye on you like a target," Arkashka corrected me.³

Dad looked at us reproachfully and picked up the receiver. "Yes," he said. "Hello, hello. No, I haven't had time yet, but I will try. Please don't say that, there's no reason to."

It's starting, I thought. The stream of molasses is starting. I said this to Arkashka who was getting ready for school with me. "The stream of molasses is starting."

"Not the stream but the flood," said Arkashka. "This relative is the last thing we need, don't you think?"

"I do," I answered.

Samson came over the next day and stayed until 11 pm and again came by two days later. By the end of the week, Dad's kind acquaintance, an executive secretary of a magazine hired Samson as a free-lance correspondent.

Samson's joy defied description, "Well, Uncle Vadim, what did I tell you?" He kept saying, "What a guy I am!" He was so sincere and genuinely happy that even I, who had immediately taken a dislike to Samson, just couldn't help smiling when I saw his happy face and shining eyes.

As before, he kept coming to see us often. I think that he took to coming by even more often because Aunt Kapa didn't have a phone and he arranged almost all his work over the phone. As soon as he took off his coat, he would pick up the telephone receiver. "This is the journalist Molochkov," he would usually start the conversation with his numerous heroes - the Director of the Wedding Palace, the Director of the Department of Education, the Head Cosmetologist of the Beauty School, the Manager of the souvenir section of the Moscow Department Store, and so on.

Arkashka and I didn't like him. Arkashka nicknamed him 'Rubber Plant.' "He is so much like a Rubber Plant - big, kind of good-looking, and completely useless," Arkashka said.

"So be it. He's a Rubber Plant," I agreed with Arkashka and we both gradually got used to this nickname.

We would often say, "Rubber Plant called," "Rubber Plant is planning on coming over now....," or "Rubber Plant was chattering on the telephone the other day for a couple of hours and no one could get through to us."

One day Kuzia heard us calling him that and was surprised. "Why such a nickname? Does Samson really look like a Rubber Plant?"

"He does!" Arkashka answered confidently and I added, "The spitting image! He's a horrible brown-noser".

"Kuzia sensibly asked, "Why, are all Rubber Plants brown-nosers?"

And I was at a loss as to how to answer her. In my opinion the name Samson didn't suit him.

At first Kuzia was somewhat guarded around Samson. She seemed to scrutinize him, trying to determine what kind of person he was. But he eventually managed to win her over. He knew that she dreamed of a velvet jacket and managed to get one from the Moscow Department Store. He brought it home in a luxurious lilac box and tied it with a purple satin ribbon.

"Take it, auntie dear," Samson said. (He had called Kuzia 'auntie dear' since the first day he arrived). "Take it; it comes straight from the best store in Helsinki."

Kuzia quickly untied the ribbon and gasped in delight when she saw the jacket. She instantly tried it on and dashed to the mirror. None of us, including Samson, Dad, and I or Kuzia herself could hide our admiration. The jacket was so becoming on her. It was dark blue with wide carefully elaborate shoulders and the lapels were streaked with deep blue.

"Did I get it right?" Samson asked Kuzia.

Without taking her eyes from the mirror she answered, "You sure did."

I later said to Arkashka, "And he even managed to buy off Kuzia. What a guy, huh?"

"He will never buy me," Arkashka said firmly, and I repeated after him,

"Me neither!"

But Dad, you need to know our Dad, severely commented once, "Why do you keep picking on him? And besides, he is a relative and is alone in Moscow. He likes to come visit us and wants to be pleasant and useful."

I couldn't restrain myself and burst out laughing. "A Fir Tree that grows in a forest is not as naive as you, Dad," I said. "A relative? Likes to come visit us? He wishes to be pleasant to us? Just think, if you weren't a Doctor of Science and Director of the Laboratory Institute, like hell he would have come to you to remind you about your kinship, and you can believe that he would never have started to come see us."

"You are a cynic and harsh beyond your years," Dad said. At this, our short argument ended, without convincing either me or Dad.

But meanwhile, Samson kept gaining strength. He was hired on the permanent magazine staff and he started managing the new advice column. His new job suited him since the range of his interests was unusually vast. He

took it upon himself to give advice on absolutely all areas of life.

He gave advice on how to maintain good relations with a divorced husband, how to keep one's dignity without losing one's self worth, how to develop a friendship with a disagreeable mother-in-law, how to bake a pie in 15 minutes from a minimum amount of flour, how to sew an elegant dress from pieces of an old knitted jacket and only one skein of yarn, how to properly captivate a man whom you want to attract, what is the best kind of floor polish, how to make a dog's coat shine like silk, which fruits make better jam and which, better marmalade, what kind of letters to write to one's sweetheart who is on a long business trip, what hairstyles are popular, what wallpaper is best in the hall and kitchen, what kind of lotion to use for younger-looking skin, how to do home repairs, how to study languages on one's own, how to fix a sewing machine at home, how to preserve the freshness of feelings in a long marriage, who to invite to a wedding, to a birthday party, and to an anniversary party for excellent and long service at work, how to keep a husband who has a roving eye, and many other not less important and useful things.

He signed his name with these words, "a girl's best friend." One day with my own ears, I heard him laughingly tell Kuzia, "You can imagine auntie dear (he continued to call her that) how many letters I receive! What secrets are entrusted to me! They probably confide in me like they have

never with anyone else before. We sometimes get together in the office, pick a few letters at random and read them out loud, laughing our heads off, honest to G-d!"

"You really betray the secrets of others?" Kuzia asked.

Evidently realizing that he blurted out something he shouldn't have, he began to argue with unnecessary vehemence to defend himself. "Why no, auntie dear, I would never do such a thing. We just take some of the least objectionable letters and put our heads together to see how we can help people."

At this time I was setting the table - putting down the plates and silverware and slicing the bread. I imagined someone, maybe in some ways, similar to me, deciding to write a letter to the editor "a girl's best friend" and every day waiting for an answer like manna from heaven. But this 'girl's best friend' himself is laughing hysterically over this letter, in which someone writes what is most heart-wrenching and personal. I couldn't stand it anymore and said, looking right into Rubber Plant's face, "I also consider it immoral to laugh at other people's letters and discuss them with everyone."

Samson's rosy cheeks turned crimson. However he said rather calmly, even affectionately, "Believe me, Lialechka, it's not quite like that..."

"Lialia," Kuzia said. "I beg of you, please don't interfere."

But I was already upset. Mostly, I didn't believe him. I was irritated by his sugary, affectionate tone and besides, I really detested him. "Samson, you yourself said that everyone laughed their heads off in the office at the letters that all kinds of people write you and expect advice in return."

"No, you misunderstood me, Lialia," again said Rubber Plant. He had already managed to calm down and pull himself together. His eyes, in their usual affectionate and appeasing manner, were looking back and forth from me to Kuzia.

Just then, I too decided to pull myself together. What's the sense in arguing with him? After all, it was just like trying to cut Kucel'⁴ with a knife, and he was the kind of person who would slip out of it anyway. All the same, he would be able to persuade Kuzia that it wasn't at all the way it seemed. The main thing for him was to convince Kuzia, and basically I was of little interest to him.

Without answering, I went to the other room and sat down at my desk. I mentally promised myself that never, under any circumstances or for any reason would I write letters to strangers in any editorial offices or in any institutions.

Rubber Plant crossed to the other side of the street and disappeared. I ran up the stairs to the sixth floor.

Like Arkashka, I didn't believe in elevators. I opened the door with my key and saw that a light in the hallway was on. It can't be possible, I thought, that Kuzia got out of bed. After all, she solemnly swore to stay in bed all day. But maybe Arkashka had come home. Though he did want to go to the Pioneer's Palace right after school. But it wasn't Arkashka; it was Kuzia. Kuzia was standing on a step-ladder, pulling down a big blue suitcase from the attic.

"Hello," I said. "What new nonsense is this? You're home sick from work and your job is to lay down and get better, understand?" This is the way it was at home. We would talk to Kuzia as if she were the youngest of us all, needing the most care and supervision.

Kuzia didn't answer me, but got down from the step-ladder and put the suitcase on the floor. Screwing up her eyes, she looked somewhere above my head. She had big, grey, wide-opened, near-sighted eyes. She was attractive when she squinted. Some people thought that Kuzia squinted out of coquettishness, but in fact, she was near-sighted although my Dad and I thought she really was a flirt. For that very reason she would not wear the glasses that she needed so badly, but then they did make her look older. She refused to wear low-heeled shoes. Because she was so short, even at home she only wore stylish shoes with outrageously high stilettos.

I asked her, "Are you getting ready to go somewhere, Kuzia?"

"Well, yes," she answered.

"To the clinic?" I asked, but she didn't answer as if she hadn't heard me.

I went to the kitchen, cut off a slice of black bread, salted it and took a pickle out of a bowl. Crunching the pickle and taking bites of bread, I stood opposite Kuzia. She was still holding the empty suitcase in her arms. Then she turned to me.

"Let's go to the kitchen, Larisa," she said. We need to have a talk. Usually she called me Lialia, and less often, Larika. And suddenly for some reason, she used my full name which she had never done before. I was immediately put on guard.

Kuzia sat down at the table and started to smoke. She smoked beautifully, barely inhaling, each time leaning her head back and following the stream of smoke with her near-sighted eyes. She held the cigarette like a man, carelessly but at the same time elegantly, not like some women who smoke, with their cigarette dangling between their fingers like a charm or key.

"You are a big girl already," Kuzia said. "You'll soon graduate from secondary school."

I shrugged my shoulders, "It's really not that soon. I still have about a year left."

"But still, you are already grown-up."

I smiled. Annoyed, Kuzia asked, "What is so exceptionally funny?"

"Judge for yourself, Kuzia," I said. "What sort of a strange person are you? When it's to your advantage, you tell me, 'you are still little, wait awhile, grow up and then we'll see....' But like now, 'you are already grown-up'. Just explain, when do you tell the truth?"

Without answering me, she carefully put out the cigarette, pressing it into a saucer. I can't stand the way she acts. She thinks that everything is an ashtray. I would often find her cigarette stubs everywhere - in flower pots, candle holders, and sometimes even in the wine glasses still in the hutch.

I walked over to the table and threw the cigarette into the garbage chute and placed the saucer in the sink. I will give it a good washing later so that it won't smell like tobacco.

"So just when do you tell the truth?" I repeated, smiling. Really, none of my classmates has a mother like that. Even among Arkashka's friends, you won't find a mother like ours. But maybe we love her also because she is the way she is - ridiculous, maladjusted, and kind of clumsy as if she, not Arkashka and I, is the youngest in the family.

"Basically you are grown-up, Larisa," Kuzia said, sighing. "Of course, you're really a big girl now but somehow you don't live the way I would like."

"And how would you like me to live?" I asked.

"Like other girls your own age. Have fun, go to movies, some parties, and finally, fall in love, run to dates, write notes..."

"And were you falling in love when you were my age?" I asked.

"Did I!" Kuzia exclaimed, looking at me dreamily with her near-sighted, squinting eyes. "And how! And I would run to dates in weather way below freezing, just in my high-heeled shoes to Kisel'ni Street. There was a boy that lived there and I strolled back and forth along the street so that I could run into him.

"Well, what happened? Did you see him?"

"Yes," said Kuzia. "Finally, he also fell in love with me, but it cost me lots of trouble and two bouts of the flu." Her small mouth quivered in a smile, flashing her tiny, even teeth. "To put it bluntly, I lived the way I liked."

"Please," I said sternly. "Don't compare me with yourself. Grandma was an ideal mother and a wonderful housekeeper. After all, I remember her. I did meet her a few times. But you, in our family, to be honest. . ."

"Yes, yes," Kuzia said regretfully. "I know it's all my fault that you spend a lot of time doing housework, going shopping, and often make dinner because I am so awkward."

I was afraid that she would start to cry. She could easily burst into tears, but also just as easily calm down,

which was why I shouted at her, "Stop it, Kuzia, that's enough!"

"No," Kuzia said, "it isn't enough. I do know that you're the one who keeps our house together. You, and a little bit your Dad."

"Every home has its own micro climate," I said. Dad often said that.

"And don't you find that difficult?" Kuzia asked.

"I'm used to it."

"Now it will be even harder," Kuzia said after a pause.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"I am leaving," Kuzia said and took a new cigarette from her pocket. This was another habit of hers that nobody else had, I think. She always carried cigarettes loose instead of in a pack. She would sometimes pull out a cigarette from either her pocket or purse. Once she even came across a cigarette in her compact. We all tried to talk her out of this habit, arguing that smoking was a bad habit. Arkashka tried to persuade Kuzia to quit smoking although I even caught him smoking more than once.

"So, you're already well?" I asked, biting off the last piece of pickle. "Where are you going then, Kuzia? The clinic, probably to get off the sick list?"

"No," answered Kuzia, "not to the clinic."

"Wait a minute," I said, "there's something I don't understand." And suddenly, in a flash, I understood

everything. Everything just the way it was. "You are going away for good, aren't you?"

She nodded and her eyes filled with tears. She was crying without twisting her mouth and her nose didn't turn red. Usually tears make people less attractive, but they didn't spoil her looks. They rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the collar of her dress. But it's amazing what complete nonsense you sometimes think about at times like these. I thought that the white collar would turn gray from the tears and would seem messy. Why at serious, difficult moments in life do you suddenly notice some nonsense which impertinently jumps in front of your eyes and distracts you if only for a short time? Or is this a defense mechanism of the soul? Otherwise it would be incredibly difficult to put up with everything that we as people have to bear.

Dad once said, "Great pain must be accompanied by minor unpleasantness so that then one can forget about his troubles for awhile."

I don't know if he thought of such an idea himself or read it in some book, but in any case, this is unquestionably true.

"Please try to understand me," Kuzia said.

"Understand. You are almost grown-up. There's a man that I love and cannot, absolutely cannot live without him." She inhaled deeply and started to look around for something to put her cigarette out against, but not finding anything

suitable, she pressed the cigarette forcefully against the marble slab of the window sill.

I silently took the cigarette stub, threw it away, and cautiously wiped the window sill with a rag.

"Are you listening to me?" Kuzia asked.

"I am," I answered.

"You're already an adult," she repeated. "I am sure that sometime you will fall in love with someone and then you'll understand what happened to me."

"Well, you know," I didn't stop myself, "There's no sense in waiting for me to understand you."

"Why not?" Kuzia asked, blinking her eyes, which had grown prettier by her tears.

"Because I just won't do it," I said harshly. I could have said many more cruel and malicious words to her, but I didn't say them because I felt sorry for her. Yes, despite everything, I felt sorry for her, but she didn't feel at all sorry for us.

And besides, I fully realized that she was in love with Rubber Plant and he, one must assume, was in love with her. No one in the family had noticed or suspected anything. Neither Dad nor Arkashka. But I had seen and noticed everything. It's true that at first I thought, no way, it can't be. I'm just imagining things. Rubber Plant was constantly gazing intently at Kuzia but I tried to convince myself, she is already old, she'll soon be 36, but

he is not very young either. He is 27 and to him she is just an old woman. Then why is he looking at her like that?

But she probably liked him looking at her. Whenever he came over to our house, it was as if she were suddenly awakened from sleep. Her eyes sparkled and shone. She laughed often, and her laughter was rather strange, as if it didn't belong to her.

Arkashka once said, "Kuzia, your laughter is like a mermaid's." She was suddenly embarrassed and blushed.

And I suddenly realized everything. And it became clear to me why Rubber Plant found himself near our house at such a strange time, why he seemed embarrassed, as if afraid to meet my gaze. Yes, that's the way it must be.

Kuzia clasped her hands together. "I know what you are thinking."

I didn't answer.

"You are thinking about Dad. He is a wonderful, excellent, remarkable man...."

I said dryly, "Save it, about Dad."

"No, I must, I must say it!" she exclaimed. Again the tears streamed from her eyes. "Really, can't you see that I'm suffering?" That it's incredibly difficult and painful for me?"

My late grandmother, her mother, once said, "insensitive egotists love to show off their tribulations and savor them with pleasure." Grandma most likely didn't

have Kuzia in mind. But then again, maybe she did. She knew her well, better than anyone else.

"What can I do?" Kuzia asked sadly, looking at me from under her heavy, wet eyelashes. "What can I do if my own daughter condemns me?" She didn't wipe off the tears which were running down her cheeks. And although I loved Kuzia and couldn't stop loving her, it somehow suddenly seemed to me that she was playing a role, looking at herself from outside like a stranger, enjoying her suffering.

I had even almost said, "Oh, you are really quite an actress, Kuzia." However, I caught myself in time and said nothing. She walked over to me, maybe intending to hug me, but I stepped back and she dropped her hands.

I turned away and went to my room. Deep down I expected that she would come after me and start trying to convince me to forget everything I heard her say. I was already prepared to forget about everything and never, never remember and not once reproach Kuzia. But no, she didn't come after me and didn't call me.

I don't know how much time had passed - 10 minutes, an hour, or maybe more. I was standing and looking out of the window at the street. Cars traveled along the bridge. The roof of each car was gleaming from the rain as if it had just been waxed. People hurried along the sidewalk, many with umbrellas. And again, some ridiculous nonsense shielded me from the main thing. Not only women, but many

men had colored Japanese umbrellas although they are more suitable for good, sunny weather.

Last July all four of us set out in the car for Vladimir. Dad's old 'Zhiguli' trudged along with all its strength. Kuzia sat next to Dad and Arkashka and I sat in the back. The sun was shining, the highway was long and smooth, and the wind was blowing toward us.

Arkashka asked, "Are you happy?"

"Yes," I answered. "I'm happy, and you?"

"I would be 100% happy if Shamrai were here."

Shamrai, our mongrel dog, whom we unscrupulously passed off as a Siberian Husky, didn't come with us. I remembered him then and my heart skipped a beat. How he looked at us when we led him away to Aunt Valia's and left him there. How he looked; reproachfully but not resentfully. I mean, if you want to leave me behind, go ahead and leave. I'll put up with it.

About three years ago, Arkashka found a tiny puppy in the grass, not far from our house. It was black and white with a black tail and white paws. What a cute little dog!

"What a sweet thing he is," Kuzia said when she saw him. But seven or eight months later, the 'sweet thing' grew into an enormous, big-eared, happy dog, who was reckless and had an uncommonly voracious appetite.

Shamrai especially loved ice cream cones and pelmeni⁵ even more. Arkashka took care of him devotedly and named him Shamrai. He took him for walks five times a day and

unselfishly bought him ice cream cones without even touching them himself.

We left Shamrai at Kuzia's sister's, Aunt Valia. It was impossible to take him this time. We were planning to visit churches and cathedrals, and of course we weren't allowed to enter a church with a dog.

But we knew that he would be happy at Aunt Valia's. She loved dogs, cats, horses, and birds. Kuzia seriously thought that it was from Aunt Valia that we inherited this particular trait - the love of animals. Kuzia herself never hurt animals, but she also didn't particularly like them either. If Shamrai is living with us, that's fine, it doesn't bother her. But if he's gone, she won't cry or miss him. Not like Arkashka and I. We simply couldn't imagine how we could live without Shamrai. Dad was like us; he also loved every living thing.

Kuzia opened the door and stood at the threshold. "Well, that's all," she said sadly, raising her eyebrows. "I'm leaving."

I didn't want to ask her but did anyway. "Does Dad know?"

"I wrote him a letter."

"And he never suspected anything before?"

Kuzia thought for a moment before answering. "You know him. Even if he had guessed, he still wouldn't have said anything."

I had to agree with her. "Yes, he is like that."

Kuzia looked at her watch. She was probably already impatient to leave. "See you later, Larik," Kuzia said. She was probably waiting for me to rush over to her with tears in my eyes or even sobbing, and she would burst into tears in return and they would purify us both equally. Purify and reconcile. Why not?

She liked all sorts of simple-minded performances in which it would be possible to show her emotional depth and inherent gentle nature. But I didn't used to think that way. I was just thinking of these ideas because I was mad at Kuzia.

I was mad, resentful, and hurt - all these together for myself, for Dad and for Arkashka.

"I have to leave now," Kuzia repeated.

"All right," I answered. "Good-bye."

She silently bent her head, either saying good-bye, or thanking me for some unknown reason.

The door slammed and the elevator began to hum. I calculated her movements. Now Kuzia is sitting, now she reached the bottom floor, and then went out the exit. I stood up on the window-sill so I could see better. I was right; it was Rubber Plant waiting for her on the street. He walked over to her, took the suitcase from her hand, and they walked away together to the subway or taxi station.

I saw them from behind. The back of his head was pink and round and he was pleased with himself. But Kuzia had sad shoulders or rather, pensive shoulders..

They disappeared around the corner. I jumped down from the window-sill and rushed to the other room. There, on the desk was a piece of paper. It was Kuzia's large, sprawling handwriting which I think I would have recognized from a thousand others.

"My dear! You are exceptional and remarkable! Forgive and understand me. Your Kuzia."

And that was all. No explanations. How and why turned out "forgive and understand me."

Well, good, I thought. He will understand and then what? What will happen to him then? And to us, to Arkashka and me?

I didn't notice that I said these words out loud, but after noticing, I instinctively turned around but of course, no one answered.

ENDNOTES

¹In the Russian language there are two forms of the word "you," the informal, used with close friends, family, and children, and the formal, used with strangers, superiors, and colleagues. What is important to note is the fact that even though Rubber Plant asks Vadim to use the informal with him, he continues to use the formal form when speaking to Vadim. He does this to show his respect for Vadim but the attempt is obviously insincere.

²In order to live in Moscow or Leningrad, one must carry a document granting him/her permission to live in that city.

³This phrase is a pun which is impossible to translate, namely because the word does not even exist in Russian. Arkashka made it up. In her statement before his, Larisa made a joke by rhyming Yelets and the verb which means "to be after someone," which is very difficult to do since the word sounds are uncommon. Arkashka took this pun one step further by making up one word which means essentially the same as what Larisa said.

⁴fruit compote.

⁵Siberian meat dumplings.

CHAPTER TWO

When I was little, we lived on Don River Street in a two story house, surrounded by a neglected orchard. Wild Apple Trees, Plum Trees, and Elder grew in the orchard. There were especially a lot of Elder Trees. It's striking berries stood out among the lush, dark green leaves, poisonous and crimson. Deep in the grass glistened the hard, bitter, little green apples. When I got home from school, I would run to the orchard. I would seem that I was somewhere in the country, far from Moscow.

At this time Dad had defended his dissertation and Kuzia was finishing up at the Financial-Economics Institute. She had entered the institute very late and studied there a long time. First Arkashka was born and she had to take a leave of absence, then her studies did not go well and again she called the same leave of absence to the rescue. But then finally Arkashka started daycare and Kuzia, as she said, had her hands free.

I went into the second grade then. How much I remember! Dad was with me more than Kuzia. All of the most significant events in my life were connected with him. He took me one day to first grade class, and he saw me off to the bus when I went to the Pioneer Camp. During my endless

colds and bouts of strep throat, he sat beside my bed and read me the Grimms Brothers' Fairy Tales outloud.

Of course Kuzia also sat beside me and gave me tea, something to gargle, and hot milk, but she never had time. She always complained that she didn't have time to do anything. Dad said that she wasn't organized and couldn't efficiently manage her time, but he was amazingly organized himself. Besides, everything turned out well in his hands. I think he could even bake pies unlike Kuzia, whose mother, our grandmother, deservingly called clumsy and disdainful of work.

But Dad felt sorry for Kuzia. He said that she was delicate, that she had poor health, and therefore wasn't up to a double workload - schoolwork and a family, so she would sleep in the mornings and he got up much earlier to make me breakfast, braid my hair, and walk me to school. Then he would return home, make breakfast for Kuzia and then run off to work. Before coming home, he managed to run around to all the stores and still made dinner in the evenings because, as he thought, Kuzia ought to sit and study and not waste precious time at the stores and cooking.

Only after I got older, did I wonder just how was it that he himself managed to do housework and write his dissertation? Why then does he have enough time for everything?

I studied at school for one and a half years and then the major renovations began in the house. We had ripped-up

floors, everything was completely stained with whiting, and there were buckets everywhere with paint and jars of emulsion.

And although Kuzia took a leave of absence because Arkashka was still so little, she never stopped complaining, "It is absolutely impossible for me to study in this atmosphere."

Dad said, "What's the matter? Well, you're in no rush, you have a long leave of absence, but Lialia really can't do her homework here."

"What can we do then?" Kuzia asked.

"I'll think of something," Dad answered, as he answered all of Kuzia's questions.

And he did think of something. Kuzia and I started going to the bank, which was located in the building across the street. We would sit there at a big square table where customers usually sat and wrote out money orders and counted out money. Kuzia would dictate to me, "Masha is eating Kasha."

I carefully wrote out the letters in my notebook. Leaning my head to the side, I conscientiously labored and Kuzia whispered quietly in my ear, "Kasha. Do you understand? Not Kosha but kasha!"

People came and left, received money from the teller, or handed it over through the window. Many, I saw, looked at me in surprise and some looked intently at my carefully

drawn words and asked, "Are you doing your homework, little girl? Really, don't you have another place for that?"

And Kuzia would answer as if they were asking her instead of me, "We are having major renovations at home, but she needs to do her homework every day."

One day we, as usual, set out for the bank. We sat down at the desk. I was writing, and from time to time leaning back and dropping my pen. For some reason my arm was really tired, and I would shake my hand or raise it above my head, then began to write again.

"Come on, Lialia, faster," Kuzia whispered, glancing at her watch. I knew that she was supposed to cook cabbage soup for the carpenters and forgot.

Last night Dad brought home meat, a head of cabbage, crushed tomatoes, and a bag of potatoes. "All you have to do is cook it," Dad said.

"And you?" Kuzia asked. She was already used to the fact that Dad often made dinner and honestly speaking, he made it tastier and more skillfully than she.

"I have a scientific conference," Dad said.

Kuzia promised, "O.K., I'll do everything." But first she went to the hairdresser's, then somewhere else, then with me to the bank to do homework.

To make a long story short, when we got back, Dad was already there. Either the conference ended early or he himself left early, not trusting Kuzia's promises. He was standing in the kitchen where the renovation had not yet

begun and pouring finely chopped cabbage into a pot of boiling water.

Two carpenters were sitting at the table - a husband and wife. She was robust, husky, and rosy-faced; as they say, a real tsar of a woman. And he was frail, emaciated, the effeminate weakling type, but with an unexpectedly trumpeting deep bass voice.

They were both eating herring with black bread. They ate with an enviable appetite. You should have seen how the wife was smacking and licking her red lips, how she sunk her white, close set teeth into the withered skin of the pickled in brine Pacific Herring. And the husband every so often tossed round, juicy ringlets of lilac onions into his mouth like a furnace.

I Immediately wanted herring covered with vinegar, onions, and black bread. I quietly tugged at Kuzia's arm, "Get me some herring."

She waved me aside, "Leave me alone. Later."

I went over to Dad on tiptoe, pecked him on the cheek, and asked, "Are you mad at me?"

"Not anymore," Dad answered, after turning up the gas under the pot.

Meanwhile, the husband and wife finished off the whole herring with onions and got up from the table.

"It's time to go, Misha," said the wife. "Let's mix the cement."

"Let's go, Ducia," boomed Misha.

Dad said, "I will call you in about forty minutes when the cabbage soup is ready."

Kuzia watched the carpenters leave and said, "She is the spitting image of the Last Female Mohican right out of Chekov's story, don't you think?"

"I think that we need to get Arkashka," Dad said.

"I'm very tired," Kuzia said. "Lialia and I sat at the stuffy bank and wrote and wrote...."

"Well, how did it go?" asked Dad.

"We finished the homework," I answered.

"Arkashka will need to go to kindergarten every day," Kuzia said.

"But won't you be bored?" asked Dad.

"I will try not to."

"All right," Dad said. "Stay here and watch that the cabbage soup doesn't run over, and I'll go get Arkashka."

I began to laugh. "Is it true that cabbage soup has legs?"

"It's just a figure of speech," Kuzia said, looking out the window, lost in thought.

Of course the cabbage soup ran over. It ran over although it didn't have any legs. Kuzia didn't notice until the whole stove in a flash was already covered with boiling water. Kuzia grabbed a rag and began to wipe the stove, but forgot to turn off the gas. She burned her finger, screamed, and almost tipped the pot of cabbage soup on herself.

However everything turned out all right. The carpenters each gobbled up a bowl of cabbage soup. Dad brought Arkashka home from kindergarden, and Kuzia left with him to spend the night at a neighbor's on the second floor. I went to a girlfriend's who lived next door, and only Dad stayed home. He set up a cot in the kitchen and spread a sheet and blanket over it. And I knew that he would get up very early, about five o'clock in the morning, boil a bucket of water and help the carpenters put up the wallpaper before work.

Why do I sometimes remember all kinds of nonsense which doesn't deserve to be kept in my memory? Why even now, as if it were quite recent, the white polka dots on the green wool apron which Dad tied around himself is visible to me. He is standing in the kitchen, near the stove, and the kerchief on the head of the Mohican, Ducia, has crimson zigzags along the dark blue background. The newspapers, "Moscow Truth" and "Soviet Culture" are covering the floor in the hallway, and the white and blue faucets are on the gas stove. That scent again wafted from the past of paint and perhaps even gas.

Arkashka arrived together with Shamrai. As usual, a loud, shrill ring was heard, then Arkashka himself appeared and was out of breath, pleased about something. Shamrai, passing him, threw himself at me and embraced my shoulders with both paws.

"Sit!" I ordered Shamrai more severely than I had wanted because my heart was heavy and I needed to vent this burden on someone. "Do you hear, sit!"

"Never yell at Shamrai," Arkashka announced, offended. "There's no way he deserves that."

In my heart I agreed with him, but not showing it, I said severely, "Where's your jacket?"

"My jacket?" he repeated.

"Specifically, your dark blue jacket with the stripes on the shoulders. It is terribly cold today and you're only in a shirt."

"First of all, it's not cold at all today," Arkashka objected. "Secondly, my jacket is the right goal post."

"What?" I asked. "What right goal post? What are you talking about?"

"I said the right goal post. I left it on the soccer field."

"Just on which soccer field?"

"The one that's right behind our house."

"It's just an empty lot."

"And what did I say?" Arkashka was surprised. "I didn't claim that it was a landing site for helicopters, covered with Issykul¹ poppy seeds."

"For every word, you have three for an answer." I grumbled.

"Five," he said.

"Five what?" I didn't understand.

"Five words for an answer," Arkashka said.

For a few more minutes we tried to aggravate each other as much as possible, and then we gradually started to calm down. This constant yelling at each other was already more a formality than a serious fight. But whatever you may think, these very insults did play their role. If only for a short time, they did manage to distract me from the thoughts which agitated me. And then I remembered Dad's words, "When there's real trouble, insignificant unpleasantness is necessary and useful." I once again thought about how Dad turned out to be right, as almost always.

"I want to eat," Arkashka said. "Where's Kuzia? She's probably sleeping."

"No," I answered. "Do you want Kasha with milk?"

"Yes," Arkashka said. "And is Kuzia better?"

"Yes, she's better," I said.

"I'll go see her," Arkashka said. "I'll just say a couple of words and leave, don't worry."

He would have started toward the door but I stopped him. "Kuzia's not there. Do you want your milk warmed or not?"

"No. And where did she go?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Arkashka was surprised. "You should know since you are the head of the house and main administrator."

"Go wash your hands," I said. "Enough chattering."

But Arkashka didn't let up. "Where did she decide to go? Please tell me. They gave her sick leave. The respiratory infection is in full swing, so she should lay down to her heart's content and recover, but no, she up and went, digging holes with her high-heels in the neighborhood sidewalks."

Last night in our family everything was still normal. And not only last night. Even this morning everything was the same as usual. Dad left for work, and Kuzia was lying in bed. The doctor put her on the sick list for two days and Kuzia promised us, "I will lay down for awhile, rest, and everything will be all right."

Yes, everything was all right.

Trying to make my voice sound stern, I said, "Don't you dare condemn mother! It's not your business."

"My business," said Arkashka. "Whose else then? I am the youngest son, and so the favorite child in the family. Everything is my business." Arkashka squinted his eyes and immediately started to look like Kuzia. "You love me too, don't you?" He smiled, his tiny teeth gleamed. There was a space in the middle, between the two front teeth. They say this is a sign of talent. It's true that he has no talents that I am aware of. But then, talent may appear later in the future.

"Why have you become so thin?" I said. "You are just skin and bones."

Arkashka swallowed a heaping spoonful of hot kasha, washed it down with milk and only then answered, "It's because I'm a growing boy. And you think that it's better to be fat?"

"It's better to be in the happy medium."

"I hate the happy medium," he said.

"Mr. skinnybones, " I said. "It seems that soon you will waste away once and for all. Then it will be possible to place you between the pages of a book, like a dry leaf as a keepsake!"

He laughed loudly and echoing him, Shamrai began to bark. "Boy, that's a good one! A dry leaf as a keepsake! And what book will you choose? The Three Musketeers or Anderson's Fairy Tales? Or something else?"

"Why am I speaking with such an idiot?" I answered.

He pushed the plate away that was licked spotlessly clean. Then leaned his cheek on his hand, watching me wash the plate and spoon in the sink. His cheek was fresh and smooth, but his hand was weathered and covered with warts.

"Why haven't you gotten rid of your warts?" I asked.

"There's plenty of time," he said. "Kuzia promised to get ahold of some kind of miracle cream. You just put it on once and there won't be a single wart left."

I thought to myself, should I tell him or not? Of course, I will have to tell him anyway. If not today, then

tomorrow, but maybe, it would still be better later than sooner.

But how will Dad take it? Kuzia's note is waiting for him but it's not enough. I must talk to him about everything, straight and to the point. And he should know everything as it is. From the beginning to the end.

"I'm going," Arkashka said, getting up from the table.

"Are you full?"

"Completely. Give something to Shamrai."

"And where are you going?"

"To get my jacket."

"You probably made that up. Did you do your homework?"

"Not all of it."

"What didn't you do?"

"I didn't get the geometry problems done."

"And when will you do them?"

"Later."

He slammed the door and I tossed Shamrai a big meat bone. Shamrai bounced up and down, and seized the bone with his big, bright white teeth.

Shortly after, Dad called from work. "Is it you?" he asked. "How's our Kuzia? You didn't forget to give her some broth, did you?"

"No, I didn't forget." I said.

"Tell her that I managed by pure chance to get ahold of some fresh tangerines straight from Georgia² for her," Dad happily continued.

"I'll tell her," I answered abruptly and hung up the phone.

It's obvious that Dad's in a good mood. What a shame. It's too bad because...because it would have been better if Dad had been in a bad mood. But he's rarely in a bad mood. Even if something isn't going well or if something unpleasant happens, he hides everything from us.

Aunt Valia once commented about him, "Vadim is a real man. No matter what happens, no matter how he feels, he always stays himself. For everything he has one answer, 'It's nothing, just a scratch.'"

"What does that mean, 'it's nothing, just a scratch'?" I asked.

"It means that he doesn't whine and eat up other people's lives like a lot of men do even more than women. On the surface, everything is inconsequential to him, but he suffers internally."

I often thought about how good it would have been if Aunt Valia had been Dad's wife. Of course, I loved Kuzia infinitely more than I did Aunt Valia. But, such is life.

But still, just what am I going to do with Dad? How am I going to prepare him? And what will happen to him when he knows everything?

As if answering my secret thoughts, Shamrai raised his big, heavy paw and hit me on the arm. Well, no matter what comes along, no matter what happens, life goes on. I need to make dinner, to study, to make sure that Arkashka does

all of his homework, to clean the house, and to take the dog out for a walk. How could it be otherwise?

"What?" I asked Shamrai, "Do you want to go out?"

He let out a hoarse bark. His eyes sparkled, and his hot mouth opened wide as if stretching into a smile.

Strange creature, our Shamrai! I think he is completely lacking in any canine instincts but thinks almost like a human. What kind of dog would be so nice to cats? What other dog would adore people so much and like to be with them as he does?

And besides, as Arkashka always said, he likes new places. He loves to go traveling, to see new roads, cities, and villages. It's true that he doesn't ride with us very often, but if we would take him somewhere by himself in the forest or on the bank of a river, his joy would be boundless.

I hooked his leash to his collar and we set out walking. Yes, no matter what happens, Shamrai must go for a walk. That's a rule which must never be broken.

It's true that he had just come home from being outside with Arkashka, but I know Arkashka's ways. He places Shamrai next to the bench, on which are flung the clothes of a bum, and orders him not to go anywhere, although he himself runs around playing. That's the way it probably always is. And our loyal, obedient Shamrai would try so hard to carry out Arkashka's orders, and wouldn't take one step away from the bench.

We went out onto the street and headed toward the public garden which was located opposite the subway. Shamrai especially loved to walk there.

The rain had stopped a long time ago and now it was chilly and dry. In some places some unexpected vegetation with rich leaves could be seen on the trees. Summer had been rainy which is why the vegetation remained a long time and didn't dry up. Probably everything in the world has its opposite side and something that seems bad can suddenly turn out good and vice versa. For example, what's so good about a rainy summer? But then the vegetation stays longer on the trees than in hot, dry weather.

My thoughts flowed listlessly and slowly like the gears of a watch which were about to stop any minute. But one thought secretly stayed with me all the time, not stopping for a minute. The thought about what had happened. Even if I had wanted to, I still would not have been able to get used to it. In any case, I would not have gotten used to it quickly, not quickly at all.

We walked under the trees in the public garden. Shamrai was running up ahead and I followed behind. And people in great numbers passed by. It was Friday, the last working day of the week. I looked at the people passing by, at their anxious, satisfied, animated, gloomy, indifferent faces and thought that here they are, walking by, opened to the view of others but inside, locked and sealed in tightly, each person has his separate world with his own personal

secrets, joys, and troubles. And it probably seems to each person that he is the main person in the world, that the earth revolves only around him alone.

Suddenly Shamrai yelped with joy and rushed over to meet someone. It turned out to be Dad and he was walking towards me quickly, gently pushing Shamrai aside.

"Wait a minute," he kept saying. "Wait, Shamrai."

But Shamrai didn't listen to him and flew at Dad with all his love, aiming to lick his nose.

"I knew where to track you down," Dad said.

I was looking at him and he returned my gaze with a smile. He still doesn't know anything, I felt inside. And what will happen when he finds out?

"Did you just get back now?" I asked.

"Yes," Dad answered. "About five minutes ago."

I asked with the most indifferent tone possible, as if in passing, "Have you been home yet?"

He shook his head, "Not yet. I haven't had time." Dad was holding a basket in his hand which he usually took with him when he left the house. In it I saw some solid, orange balls. Apparently, these were the very same tangerines he had told me about earlier.

We walked along slowly next to each other, and Shamrai ran up ahead. From time to time we stopped, waiting for Shamrai, but he was busy sniffing all the bushes, one after another, and was lifting his hind leg next to all the trees which came across on the road.

"Why don't we sit for awhile," Dad suggested.

"But don't you want to eat perhaps?" I asked.

"There's plenty of time."

We sat down on the bench. Shamrai, who was tired of running around, had settled down by our feet. Dad took a tangerine from the basket.

"Do you want it?"

"Yes, of course."

I peeled the tangerine and tossed a long cool piece into my mouth. "I have to make a wish," I said. "When you eat something for the first time, you have to make a wish."

"Why?" Dad asked. "Then it will come true?"

"Absolutely."

"But you already had some tangerines at New Year's, remember?"

"It was a long time ago and doesn't count anymore," I said.

He didn't ask me what I wished for and I didn't volunteer any information. But I had one wish - that we would go home now, Kuzia would be home, and everything would be just as it was.

"Aren't you cold?" Dad asked.

"No, not at all. The tangerines are great."

"Would you like another?" Dad asked.

"Sure. I never ate any like these. They are even better than the ones we had at New Year's," I said.

We celebrated New Year's with the whole family as usual. There were five of us - Dad, Kuzia, Arkashka, and I and of course, Shamrai. At midnight Dad poured champagne for all of us, and Arkashka clinked glasses with Shamrai.

He put a glass of wine up to his nose and said, "Cheers, boy!" And Shamrai barked, as if thanking him for the congratulations.

We looked at our 'blue corner.'³ The lights were shining on the Christmas Tree which Dad had set up in the corner every year for as long as I could remember. It was warm and cozy, and the snow was falling outside the window. Suddenly, someone rang the doorbell.

It was Rubber Plant. He came right into the room without taking off his coat which was covered with snow. He was holding a bottle of champagne and loudly exclaimed, "Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" Then he pulled the cork out of the bottle and champagne started to shoot up from the top. We barely had enough time to put the wine glasses underneath.

Dad said, "Samson, try the aspic, it's our own creation."

"Whose?" asked Rubber Plant, looking at Kuzia. "Did you really make it, auntie dear?"

"No," Kuzia answered. "It's Vadim and Lialia's concoction. I'm no culinary chef."

"Read my advice on how to bake pastry sticks in five minutes in the next issue of 'The Journal For Women,'" said

Rubber Plant. "Believe me, you can do it without any difficulty. You need to take just a little bit of flour, half a spoon of soda,..."

Just then Kuzia started to wave both hands, "No, Samson, spare me...."

"All right," Rubber Plant said. "I'll be quiet, but believe me, I would just love to go right to the kitchen and, for the edification of everyone, make you this very same five minute pastry."

"Please, don't," Kuzia drawled in a pleading tone.

"No, no, I won't," Rubber Plant soothed her. "I already don't even want to myself. And in general," he added, smiling broadly, "one must always fear the first impulse because it is as a rule, noble."

"That's a mean thing to say," I commented.

"I'm not the one who made it up," Rubber Plant said. "These words belong to Machiavelli."

Arkashka and I looked at each other. We didn't know who this Machiavelli was, but for some reason, I didn't want to ask Rubber Plant.

I felt that Arkashka, as was I, was unhappy, not that's not the word, - was angry at the arrival of Rubber Plant. And really so. He arrived and somehow spoiled everything immediately. And I didn't want to sit and watch television, looking from time to time at the lights on our Christmas Tree anymore. I didn't want to, and that's it in a nutshell.

Without saying a word, Arkashka and I got up at the same time and left to go to sleep. But Kuzia and Dad were still sitting at the table with Rubber Plant for a long time....

"Did Arkashka come home from school?" Dad asked after I had already finished off my third tangerine.

"Yes, he came home and ran out to play soccer. If you want, we can go there and see him. It's an empty lot behind our house...."

"Later," Dad said.

Why didn't he ask about Kuzia? I thought. That is somehow not like him, not one word about her....

Still, maybe he had been home and read Kuzia's letter. But no, he could not have been home, otherwise he wouldn't have asked about Arkashka. And besides, if he had been home he would have left the tangerines there.

Dad put one arm around my shoulders and said quietly, "Don't look for words, don't try to make up something."

"What?" I asked.

"Don't try to prepare me," Dad said. "The thing is that I know everything."

"You know? How did you find out?" Even to me my voice sounded confused as if it didn't belong to me.

"I know everything," Dad said. "You kept looking for the right words, you wanted to begin but couldn't...."

"It's good that you know everything," I said after a pause.

"Yes, I had a talk with him."

"With whom?" I exclaimed. "With Rubber Plant?"

"With Samson," Dad answered and looked at me meaningfully. "Please don't give him any nicknames. His name is Samson and that says it all. And besides, he's older than you."

"When did you talk to him?" I asked.

"Not long ago. I talked with you on the phone and then he called me...."

"What?" I was surprised. "He called? He didn't even come over, but just called?"

"What difference does it make?" Dad asked.

"He was afraid to see you," I said. "I assure you he was afraid, and that is why he called and didn't show up himself."

"What difference does it make?" Dad repeated.

"Just what did he tell you?"

Dad answered after a pause, "The same thing that you seem to know. They love each other...."

"And what about you?" I didn't let up.

"I said that I would not interfere. Of course I won't...."

"You certainly are an angel," I said. "Yes, Dad, you are the most genuine, typical, common angel, without a single little flaw."

"Really?" Dad asked seriously.

I was looking at him from the corner of my eye. He was sitting half-turned toward me. I saw his short, thin eyebrows, his strongly molded forehead, his straight, prominent nose. I had never looked closely at Dad this way before. It was as if this were the first time I was looking carefully at his face - the dimple on his chin, the small mole on his temple, thick, slightly curled eyelashes which faded out at the ends. Why he is good-looking, I thought.

"I am definitely not an angel," Dad said. "Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Because you are," I answered.

He said pensively, "I don't think that it is very useful be an angel."

"Then don't be," I advised.

"But I am definitely not an angel," Dad said. "Not even that much."

"An angel," I repeated. "Sincerely genuine, only without wings...."

"Ok," Dad meekly agreed. "So be it."

I didn't want to ask but did anyway, "Did all of this come as a surprise to you? Or did you already guess?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "I swear, I didn't suspect anything! Not for a minute!"

His usual self-control deserted him. I was startled by the sudden change which transformed his face. He seemed to age before my eyes. The heavy wrinkles on his cheeks

distorted his mouth, giving him a somewhat fastidious expression and his brows drew together. He could have easily been mistaken for being twenty years older.

I felt so sorry for him that I involuntarily grabbed his hand, but he abruptly jerked it away, as if afraid of my pity. He couldn't stand anyone feeling sorry for him because a real man looks at everything indifferently on the surface, no matter what happens, and says with his usual smile, "It's nothing, just a scratch."

We sat for a little longer on the bench, then I said, "We have to tell Arkashka everything today."

Dad agreed with me, "You're probably right."

He didn't say anything for awhile.

"Too bad I quit smoking."

"Only don't you dare start," I said.

"I won't," Dad answered. "But of course it is too bad that I don't smoke anymore."

"Why is it too bad? What does smoking have to do with it?"

"When you smoke, it's easier to think."

"That's self-deception," I objected. "They say it's just the opposite, that tobacco clouds your mind."

"People who don't smoke say that," commented Dad. "But people who smoke know that when you smoke, especially if you have been smoking for many years, it's just the opposite. Tobacco clears your mind and even helps you think."

I knew that he had quit smoking at Kuzia's insistence. Kuzia said, "Please, for my sake...."

The year before last Dad had a serious bout of angina. An ambulance came and the doctor was young but very serious and angry-looking. He sternly warned, "If you don't stop smoking, I can guarantee that you will have a heart attack in the future."

Kuzia asked, "And you can assure us that it isn't a heart attack this time?"

"Almost 100%," the doctor answered. "But the next time I can't guarantee anything!"

And although all of us, including the doctor, didn't feel like smiling at all, he did smile. I had already noticed a long time ago that few people could help smiling at Kuzia. She somehow made people like her right away.

It was for this reason her mother, our grandmother once said, "You can blame Kuzia, but it's almost impossible not to like her."

The doctor left and Kuzia immediately started to beg Dad to quit smoking. "For my sake," Kuzia asked. "Just try it for my sake."

Didn't she love Dad? Of course she did! And cared for him as much as she was capable. And worried if he didn't immediately send a telegram when he went on a business trip. And she often said that our Dad was better than anyone else, that he was a wonderful, remarkable man.

I got up from the bench. "Do you want to go?"

"O.K., let's go," Dad said.

We stood at the intersection for a little bit. The cars flew past and the trolley buses swayed heavily from side to side. Shamrai followed each car with his eyes, then the green light came on and the cars stopped.

Dad said, "Let's go, kids," and the three of us quickly ran across the street.

ENDNOTES

¹Lake in Central Asia.

²Republic in the southern part of the Soviet Union.

³By Russian tradition, the Christmas Tree is set up in a special corner with blue and red lights.

CHAPTER THREE

Kuzia didn't even call once, but almost every evening the telephone would ring, and when I picked up the phone, no one would answer. I could clearly hear someone breathing into the receiver but not talking, listening to my voice. It must have been Kuzia, and no one else.

Maybe she couldn't speak because Rubber Plant was somewhere nearby. In any case, I wanted to think that it was her, that she missed us, was suffering, and wanted to be with us....Sure she does! If that were really true, she would never have left in the first place, but would have stayed here with the family no matter how much it cost her.

I didn't want to blame her but just the same I couldn't accept it. I mentally ran through all of my girlfriends. I had been at their homes and knew their parents. No, their parents would never have acted like Kuzia did.

That evening when we were first left without Kuzia, Dad told Arkashka everything.

At first Arkashka thought that Dad was teasing. "O.K., enough!" Arkashka said. "You think that I'm that gullible? So just tell me where you hid Kuzia."

Dad and I exchanged glances. So here's one more problem - to explain everything, the way it is and to whom? To Arkashka....

"Try to understand," Dad patiently began. "It has happened that Kuzia has fallen in love with another man. Do you understand? She has fallen in love."

"So she loves him. I love lots of people. So Dad, tell me when she's coming back."

"She's not coming back," Dad said.

"Why not?" Arkashka kept trying to find out.

"She loves another man and has gone to live with him," Dad was speaking patiently without raising his voice, and I wondered how hard it must be for him to say the words, "she loves someone else" and "she went to live with him...."

Finally Arkashka understood everything. He was quiet for a long time, frowning. He pressed his full, unsmiling lips tightly together.

"I understand," he said.

"What is it you understand?" Dad asked.

"Generally, lots of things."

"But you must keep in mind, once and for all," Dad sternly said, "Kuzia was and still is your mother, and you must love and respect her as before."

"Who is she in love with?" Arkashka asked.

I beat Dad to it. "Just don't be surprised. It's Rubber Plant."

I expected Arkashka, in expressing his hatred of Rubber Plant, to explode into an attack on him, but he confined himself to only one brief word.

"Oh." Then after some hesitation, he added, "He got an apartment not long ago."

"It's a one-room," I said.

"Only somewhere far away," Arkashka said. "I don't remember where."

"It's in Chertanov," Dad said. "Let's drink some tea, kids. O.K.?"

"O.K.," I answered and nodded to Arkashka so that he would go to the kitchen and put on the tea kettle. It was his responsibility to put on the tea kettle and bring it out from the kitchen when it boils.

We drank tea with cherry jam that I had made myself last summer. Then we watched Canadian Figure Skating on T.V., but after glancing at my watch, I turned off the T.V. Arkashka still had to solve a few geometry problems. No matter what happened, no matter what occurred, we both had to go to school.

"I'm going to walk Shamrai," I said to Arkashka. "And you stay here and do your problems."

"I'll walk Shamrai myself," Dad suggested and started to hook Shamrai's leash to his collar.

I washed the dishes, then turned around and said to Arkashka, "Don't forget. Solve those problems right without faking it. I'm going to check it over carefully anyway."

Arkashka didn't answer at all. He went into the other room and sat down at the desk. Through the opened door, I could see him sitting at the desk with his cheek on his palm, thoughtfully looking out the window.

I carried the dishes into the kitchen, and when I returned, saw Arkashka there, his head bent to one side, diligently writing something in his notebook.

"Keep your chin up," I said and went over to Arkashka to pat him on the head although he couldn't stand this. Arkashka didn't have time to hide his notebook from me and instead of the geometry problems, I saw some neatly underlined words, "I never expected this and never could have expected it."

"Wonderful," I drawled. "Simply remarkable."

Arkashka quickly covered up his notebook with his hand. He said gloomily, "And is this good?"

"What do you mean?"

"Reading other people's diaries."

I was ashamed. Really, to read someone's diary was like reading someone else's letter.

I didn't know that you kept a diary."

"Since the fourth grade," Arkashka said. He picked up his notebook and thrust it into his desk. "I already have six notebooks."

"That's great," I said. "that you keep a diary, but don't you need to solve your geometry problems if I'm not mistaken?"

"No, you're right," Arkashka said with a sigh. He opened another notebook which was lying in front of him and dipped his pen in an ink well. He didn't believe in ball-point pens and wrote with a dipped pen, dipping it into the ink well like Kuzia and Dad used to when they went to school.

"Be careful. I'm going to check it over later," I said more as a warning because I had already decided to go to bed although I wasn't sleepy at all.

"Go ahead," Arkashka answered.

Dad came in with Shamrai. He took off his leash, then sat down in the kitchen and unfolded the newspaper.

"Aren't you going to bed?" I asked Dad.

"First I'm going to read the evening paper," Dad answered.

I swept the floor and poured some fresh water into Shamrai's bowl. Passing by my Dad, I glanced over his shoulder. It seemed that he was looking at the newspaper without reading it, but thinking his own thoughts instead. I didn't say anything to him. After all, I shouldn't keep reminding him about the same thing over and over.

In the middle of the night I suddenly woke up as if someone had pushed me. Sobbing could be heard from the small room where Arkashka slept. Maybe I'm just imagining it, I thought. Can it really be Arkashka? Even when he was very little he almost never cried and then it was impossible to make him cry. He would fall and hurt his nose and knees.

One day he ran his hand through a rusty nail, and even then he didn't cry.

It's true that once I did catch him crying a couple of years ago. He was walking home from school and crying. It was winter-time, and Snow fell profusely from the sky. The tears on Arkashka's face froze quickly and his eyelashes were covered with snow and sticking together from tears.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

He was surprised and immediately stopped crying.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"I came out the door, but you didn't notice me."

At first he didn't want to talk about it but then he admitted that it was all because of his best friend, Valerka. Valerka wouldn't let him copy his dictation. He even said in so many words to do his own work.

I cautiously commented, "Of course he is right...."

Arkashka almost yelled at me, "What do you mean he is right?"

"He wants you to write the dictation yourself, without anyone else's help."

"So then why did he copy my math?" Arkashka screamed.

"He can copy my work but I can't copy his...."

I tried to argue with him, but felt he was right, 100%. Especially since I didn't like this Valerka at all. I immediately saw through him as soon as I met him. He was very self-centered, two-faced, and insincere, not like Arkashka, who was an open book. You could read everything

in his face. Arkashka got carried away easily, was spontaneous, and inconsistent - the very image of Kuzia, and just as trusting as she was.

How many different friends he had over these years! And at first, each one seemed to be the best, not like the one before and then he became disillusioned with almost each one.

I listened and he sobbed again, and then he was quiet and then another sob and another. I got up, put on my slippers, and quietly walked over to his door and opened it.

"Arkashka," I called to him, my voice barely audible. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer. I bent over him. He was breathing evenly, very lightly. The faint light from a street lamp illuminated his eyelashes, full lips, and his hand which had limply fallen beside him.

Maybe I really did just imagine it or maybe he was crying in his sleep, I thought and went back to bed. Sleep was now impossible, but no matter how much I listened, I didn't hear another sob. And I became completely convinced that I just imagined it or he was crying in his sleep....

Arkashka was three and a half years younger than I was, but sometimes he seemed to be my own age. It was probably because of his decisively firm character and constant sense of humor. He looked like Kuzia - good-looking with a delicate flush, long eyelashes, and full lips.

My girlfriends tormented him. "Arkashka, why are you so pretty?"

"Arkashka, give us your eyelashes. What do you need them for? You're a boy!"

"Arkashka, do you wear lipstick by chance?"

He would get angry and try to seem meaner and rougher than he actually was. Occasionally he would say to me, "When I grown up, I'm going to definitely grow a beard."

"It wouldn't look good on you," I answered.

"I don't give a damn!" He disdainfully twisted his fresh, pink mouth. I knew that he desperately wanted to look masculine, completely unfeminine like the Jack London heroes. And that's why he would occasionally smoke. Several times I caught him with a cigarette which he would cleverly hide in his sleeve, but I would find it anyway. And although he swore that he would never smoke again, not one cigarette ever, not a single puff, I didn't believe him.

Over a week had passed and during this time Kuzia called twice, one time in the morning before I left for school, and another time on Sunday when only Arkashka and I were home.

The first time she asked me if everyone was well and then very quickly hung up the phone as if someone prevented her from speaking. But the second time, we had a more detailed conversation. She asked how Arkashka and I were doing in school, how Dad was, if he was sleeping well, if I

was coping with housework, if the windows had been sealed up for winter, if we were stocked up on potatoes and onions.

I answered all her questions in detail. I wanted to tell her that I missed her and thought about her all the time, that Arkashka also missed her, although he would never admit it. And Dad was very lonesome but he would never admit it either for anything because he is proud and he doesn't want to depress me.

One evening the phone rang and Dad picked up the receiver. "Hello," he said and fell silent. Then again, "Hello, hello...."

Suddenly my heart started to pound quickly. I was sure that it was Kuzia. And Dad also, as I understood it, was sure that it was her.

"Hello," he said again and even more softly, barely moving his lips, "Why won't you say something?"

I said, "Dad, give me the phone." He shook his head. "We're all fine," he said. "Don't worry, everything's fine. Do you hear?"

Again no one answered, and he continued, "Say something won't you? We're all fine, and how are you?" He slowly replaced the receiver.

"What?" I asked.

"There wasn't any answer...."

"Was it her?" I said, half asking, half confirming.

"It's possible," Dad said.

"It was her for sure," I said.

He walked over to the window and stood there for a long time. He peered into the darkness of the dreary fall evening. And I didn't ask him anything.

Dad and I never talked about the one-sided phone conversation anymore, but I know that we were both sure that it was Kuzia who called.

"Is Arkashka home?" Kuzia asked.

"Yes, he's home," I answered. "He's doing his homework."

"How's he doing in school?"

"Oh, all right. Only he got an F for dictation," I said.

"Really?" Kuzia was startled. "How could that be?"

"He's much too lazy," I said.

"But don't worry. Now every night we write dictation. That is, I dictate and he writes...."

"And how is it going?"

"So far it seems to be all right. We're managing."

"It's all because of soccer, probably," Kuzia said.

"I won't let him play soccer anymore," I said. "I told him to completely forget about soccer until he gets a B."

"Call him to the phone," Kuzia asked.

I called, "Arkashka, telephone...."

He asked from a distance, "Who is it?"

"You'll find out...."

He walked over to me, grabbed the receiver, but suddenly laid it back down on the small table. "Who is it? Is it her?"

"Yes," I said.

"Tell her that I'm not home...." He turned around and started off to his room.

"Wait a minute," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders and without turning around, slammed the door behind him.

I picked up the receiver and said, "You know, it turns out that he already left...."

"I understand," Kuzia said and didn't say anything else. She was silent for so long that I thought that we had been disconnected.

"Kuzia," I called. "Are you there? Hello?"

"Yes," Kuzia said. "I can hear you. Well, give my regards to Dad and Arkashka...."

"I will," I promised.

"How is Shamrai?" Kuzia asked.

"Fine," I answered. Why should I tell her that Shamrai also misses her....After all, everyone knows that dogs like having the whole family together.

"I will call in a few days," Kuzia said.

"Good-bye," I said and hung up the phone.

Then I went over to Arkashka and asked, "Why didn't you want to talk to Kuzia?"

He didn't answer and I continued, "Remember what Dad said? Kuzia was and is our mother. We must love and respect her...."

Arkashka raised his head and looked at me. He stretched out his lips like a tube and looked so much like Kuzia....When she was trying to think, she would also sometimes stretch out her lips like a tube and knit her eyebrows which were just as bushy and slightly arched as his.

I looked at Arkashka and thought how much they looked like each other, mother and son. And he was still silent, frowning, tapping a pen against his teeth. Then he stood up from the desk and pressed his nose against mine. This was the highest degree of tenderness he could show. Ever since he was little, he loved to rub noses either with me or Kuzia or Dad. It always meant that he was feeling affectionate.

One day, a little after four o'clock, when neither Dad nor Arkashka were home, Shamrai began to whine affectionately and obsequiously. He beat his tail against the floor and then rushed to the door.

That's Kuzia, I decided and ran to open the door before the elevator reached our floor. It was Aunt Valia who came out of the elevator. Shamrai rushed over to her, put his paws on her shoulders, and licked her face, neck and hands all over with his hot, pink tongue. She said, laughing, "Well now all my beauty that I so carefully applied has vanished in one fell swoop."

I think that Shamrai loved Aunt Valia more than anyone else in the world. Dad swore that Shamrai and Aunt Valia understood each other as if they were both people....

"Or both dogs," Aunt Valia corrected Dad. She seriously believed that all people went through a series of reincarnations. In their previous lives some had been cats, camels, crows, or even lions and zebras....

"And I was a dog," Aunt Valia assured us. "I'm sure I was a real mutt at that. It's no wonder that as soon as I look at any dog, I immediately understand what he wants, what he's thinking about, and how he feels about me...."

No dog had ever bitten Aunt Valia in her life. She would fearlessly approach any big wolfhound and hold out her hand to him. How many times I had seen the wolfhound obediently and affectionately place his head under her hand.

Aunt Valia was Kuzia's younger sister. There is a little more than two years' difference between them. They were very different and weren't at all alike, either in appearance or character.... Kuzia was passive, agreeable on the surface, and rather quiet, but Aunt Valia seemed to be a stubborn, bullheaded extrovert. And she really was bullheaded, especially when she had to finagle a free vacation reservation or put someone who really needs an apartment on the waiting list. Every year Aunt Valia was elected chairman of the local trade union committee at the long distance telephone station where she had worked for a long time.

"You are just so sarcastic and uncompromising," Kuzia quite often would say to her. "You bicker with the boss, you argue with everyone at work until you're hoarse, and for what? So that some Joe can get his vacation in July instead of August!"

"First of all," Aunt Valia would answer, "it's not just some Joe but my co-worker. Secondly, if he needs a vacation in July, then that's when he's going to get his vacation!"

The nostrils of her slightly turned-up nose would flare, and her bright eyes would become dark and intense. She knew how to firmly stand her ground, and she was as unselfish as Kuzia herself said, as a musketeer, if not more so....

Once I heard Kuzia reproachfully criticize Aunt Valia. Once more she had had a huge argument with her boss. "You will never know how to manage your life...."

"That's just great," Aunt Valia answered. "I can't stand trying to manage my life!"

"Then what do you want?" Kuzia asked.

"To live the way I want, period!"

I think that she did live just the way she wanted. And what's most important - independent and free.

Kuzia was always trying to marry Aunt Valia off and get her a good marriage so that both Aunt Valia and her husband would be happy. But Aunt Valia was probably not cut out for family life. One time a man proposed to her. Everyone

agreed that he was stable and as Kuzia claimed, (she had introduced him to her sister), he had a good future.

It seemed that they liked each other and that soon there would be a wedding when one Saturday afternoon, Aunt Valia unexpectedly came over to our house, and while she was still just in the doorway, she announced categorically, "That's it! It's over!"

Dad and I stared at her in puzzlement, but Kuzia understood right away. She was amazingly quick on the uptake. She would immediately take in the most insignificant details as well as important facts.

"Why?" Kuzia asked. "Why - you yourself have been saying that he isn't bad at all."

"I was wrong," Aunt Valia answered.

She sat down at the table and told us about it. He would speak in a flowery way and so pompously that she felt sick to her stomach as if she were seasick, as she put it. He would suddenly say, "Oh, you are a charming maiden!" He would say this with a "meaningful look". Or he would pick up an apple and examine it intently and say, "What succulent fruit!"

"He was obviously 120% pleased with himself," Aunt Valia said. "And believe me, I was ready to bite him with rage."

And she went on, "Once we were walking in the Sokol'nikii Park and he said, 'what wonderful forestation!'

Can you believe it?" Aunt Valia said. "What wonderful forestation!"

"So what?" Kuzia was surprised. "So he said it. Just ignore it as if you didn't hear or say, 'yes, really, that's the truth,' and think about what you want without listening to him...."

"I can't do that," Aunt Valia said.

"But you should try," Kuzia advised.

"Do you know what he thought up today?" Aunt Valia asked. "We decided to go to the movies. He got tickets for a French detective film at the October Theater. We were walking next to each other when he stopped and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He struck the match but it went out from the wind. He tried to light it for a couple of minutes. Then he said, 'the fire of your eyes put out the match.'"

"The fire of your eyes?" repeated Dad who had been silent up until now. "Really, it sounds like one of those Harlequin romances and strictly speaking, somewhat illiterate from the point of view of elementary laws of physics."

"But I don't see anything terrible about it," Kuzia said. "So the fire, the eyes, big deal. You are acting as if it were a new Moscow Theater!"

This was Kuzia's favorite saying. She used it both appropriately and inappropriately. Sometimes she added a few words, "on the Tverski Boulevard."

"Just look at her," Aunt Valia implored and clasped her large, strong hands together. "How do you like this, 'I can't see any fire,' After all, what can you see there?"

Kuzia didn't have a chance to answer. I stepped in, "I don't like it either when people talk like that. I would have been very annoyed too. 'Ah! The forestation! Ah! The fire in your eyes!.' That's terribly disgusting!"

"There," Aunt Valia said triumphantly. "There, you see! Did you hear what your daughter is saying? Truth from the mouths of babes!"

"And so what happened next?" Dad asked Aunt Valia.

"Nothing. I said nothing and pretended not to hear, and as soon as we started crossing the street I just ran off!"

Dad and Kuzia exclaimed simultaneously, "How could you have just run off?"

"Very simply. How people usually run. He dawdled in the middle of the road because the light changed suddenly, and I quickly dashed off and ran away. And that's it!"

"That's it!" Dad repeated and roared with laughter. Kuzia laughed after him. I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing as hard as I could.

"That's you exactly," Kuzia said, exhausted from laughing, "right down to a tee."

Aunt Valia had been married twice before, both times unsuccessfully. I hadn't liked either of her husbands. One was young, seven years younger than Aunt Valia. He was

cheerful and loved to tell jokes and horse around, but as it turned out later on, he was a hopeless drunk. The other was older, polite, and very delicate. In just a single hour he would say, "please" and "thank you" almost twenty times. But she once happened to catch him kicking a dog on the street. That was it. She packed his suitcase right away and sent him on his way.

"If you're going to be so picky, you will be alone forever," Kuzia warned her.

But Aunt Valia reasonably objected, "I myself am not forever, so why are we talking about this?"

Completely rejecting any personal life, she devoted her time entirely to community activities. She organized amateur performances at work, managed to get apartments for people, and recorded all of the workers' birthdays and other important dates.

In this she had no equal. No one was better than her at finding such warm, emotional words which brought tears to everyone's eyes, including the workers from the personnel department, the very ones who, according to popular opinion, were hardened and callous from the battles of the rat race.

"Here," Aunt Valia said. "I brought you a pie I made myself with almost no dough, a lot of apples, and eggplant which I also made."

I said, "Aunt Valia, you must think that we are dying of hunger here."

"What an idea!" Aunt Valia ardently protested. "Just where are you getting ideas like that?"

Her face showed such genuine indignation that it became clear to me at once that I wasn't mistaken. She really did think that after being abandoned by Kuzia we would completely fall apart. We wouldn't eat anything and almost die of hunger....

I put the eggplant in the refrigerator. When Arkashka gets back from school lunch will be ready for him and a glass of milk besides. I put the pie on a round dish and placed it on the table.

Aunt Valia sat down across from me and started smoking. "How are things?" She asked "Tell me."

"Everything is fine," I answered cheerfully.

"Well, well," she said. "Everything is fine! Of course! Why shouldn't it be?" She probably wasn't fooled by my excessively happy tone.

Kuzia and Aunt Valia had the same mother but different fathers. Kuzia's father was an Abkhazian¹. She inherited his skin which was dull with a barely visible golden hue. She also had his wide-open eyes with heavy eyelids and long, thick eyebrows which were much darker than her hair.

I vaguely remembered my grandfather, Kuzia's father. He died when I was about eight years old. Kuzia would take me with her to visit Grandfather. He lived separately, completely alone in a big, densely populated communal apartment. I remember that he constantly smoked a pipe and

stood in front of the window which overlooked the Zubovski public garden, looking somewhere above the roofs.

Once I tried to catch the expression in his eyes, but I wasn't successful. His eyes persistently refused to meet my gaze. They seemed melancholy like the eyes of a Condor I once saw in a zoo. His sad eyes were completely dark gray without any whites, and blankly looked somewhere far, far away....

But Aunt Valia looked like her Ukrainian mother. She had a big, slightly awkward figure, big hands and feet, white skin, gray eyes, and high cheek bones with luxuriant light brown hair.

Aunt Valia leisurely put out her cigarette and threw her head back, half closing her eyes. My heart suddenly skipped a beat. Just then she looked so much like Kuzia, from her graceful hand gesture to the sullen look, to the slow smile, and not putting out the cigarette right away.

"Everything is fine," I wouldn't give in. "Dad is working, Arkashka and I are going to school, and I am taking care of the housework...."

"I think you were already used to taking care of the housework," Aunt Valia said.

"It happens, I agreed. "And what of it? Since I'm used to it, it's fine."

"It's fine," Aunt Valia repeated. "And don't you get a little tired?"

"Why should I?"

"Because taking care of two men is not an easy task. Besides, you are still only in the ninth grade."

"I already told you that I was used to it."

"I believe you," Aunt Valia agreed. "I believe you because Kuzia always shifted her responsibilities either onto you or your father."

"What was is in the past," I said.

"You can say that again," Aunt Valia smirked. And then she became absolutely quiet. She lit up a cigarette and from time to time would shake the ashes into an ashtray which was in the form of a ceramic flower pot.

I set the table in the meantime. I put out the cups and took butter, sausage, and cheese out of the refrigerator. Then I brought in the tea kettle from the kitchen and poured tea into the cups.

"Keep trying, keep trying to convince me," Aunt Valia said. "And maybe I won't think that you guys are having a hard time."

"And don't you dare think that," I said.

She picked up a cup and squinting her eyes, looked into it intently.

"Why are you looking at that, Aunt Valia?" I was alarmed. "Is the cup dirty?"

"Oh, no. It's spotless," Aunt Valia assured me. "It's just that it looks like the cup from the set I gave Kuzia and Vadim for their wedding."

"Really?" I asked. "I didn't know that! We only have this cup left. All the rest are broken. Last Thursday Arkashka completely destroyed the sugar bowl."

"All the sets in the world usually break," Aunt Valia proclaimed solemnly as if citing some wise proverb.

"But I think," I said, "that it's good luck to break dishes."

Aunt Valia narrowed her eyes. Her lips quivered as if she wanted to say something, but through sheer will power, made herself to keep silent. But then she couldn't help herself just the same. "Well I can see that you have more luck than you know what to do with."

I laughed artificially, "It depends on one's taste." I had always wanted to ask Aunt Valia about one thing a long time ago, but there was never a good time. No one ever told me anything; I just thought of it myself. I guessed how the situation had been a long time ago.

"Aunt Valia, is it true that you loved our Dad?"

She seemed to jump but then managed to compose herself, and asked almost without agitation, "Who? Me? Yes, and I still do."

"No, that's not what I mean. You know what I'm talking about."

Aunt Valia started to laugh but then quickly stopped herself. Maybe she was mentally contemplating if she should say anything. Then she did make up her mind. She said

seriously even rather gloomily, "I loved him. I loved him very much."

"And he loved you?"

"Yes, he loved me too."

"Why didn't anything come of it?" I asked. "Was it because of Kuzia?"

Aunt Valia nodded silently.

"Did she steal Dad away?"

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

"And you forgave her?"

"Yes, I forgave her," Aunt Valia answered.

I looked at her and believed it. Yes, I believed it although I probably would never have forgiven, no matter who it was, even if it were my sister or my own mother. But Aunt Valia forgave her.

"I met him at a skating rink," began Aunt Valia again. "There was a skating rink like that in those days at Petrovka. Petrovka, 26. It was downtown, and the prettiest girls and most interesting guys would hang out there. In short, if you were to phrase it in contemporary language, it was considered prestigious to hang around this rink. Do you know that word?"

I nodded. How could I not know! I am not just a first grader, but a ninth grader from an educated family.

"And everyone showed off there. They traced pretzel shapes in the ice," continued Aunt Valia. "figure eights,

and skated around the rink to the music. The loudspeakers broadcasted all kinds of Tangos and Fox Trots."

"Did you skate well?" I asked.

"Well enough. In any case, I rarely fell down. I had a short, pleated skirt, a white sweater, and white knitted hat with a pompom on top. I wore a long scarf around my neck."

"And how was Dad?"

"Funny," said Aunt Valia, "I think he skated worse than anyone else. He fell every now and then, got up, walked a few steps, and then fell again. One time when he fell like this, he couldn't get up for awhile. I felt so sorry for him that I skated over to him, stretched out my hand and said, 'well, get up.'"

"That sounds like something you would do," I said.

"Maybe."

"And you started skating together?"

"Not at that time. He had seriously hurt his head, and I took him home. He even stayed in bed for two days, then went back to the ice skating rink. We met there again...."

"And then you started skating together?" I continued.

She said reflectively, "Yes, of course, that's when everything started...."

"Was Dad handsome?" I asked.

Not bad. Arkashka's gestures and way of walking are a lot like your Dad's, quick and energetic.

"Who?" I was surprised. "Our Dad was energetic? Quick?"

Dad was rather heavy and broad-shouldered. He already had quite a shining bald spot on his head. His movements were slow and everything about him seemed heavy and flabby although he was not yet forty....

"Yes, he was energetic," Aunt Valia repeated. "He couldn't sit still for even one minute."

"I just can't imagine it," I said. "Our Dad! That's some miracle."

She pushed the cup of cold tea away from her. "You know," she began again, "I was never pretty. I think Kuzia was better, or in any case, brighter and more noticeable than I was. But I had pretty hair, and a soft flush. I penciled in my eyebrows with dye at the hairdresser's and they taught me how to lengthen my eyelashes. It was an extremely tedious process, and took tons of time. I had to put on mascara and before it dried, I would brush it off with a cotton ball. The fine threads of the cotton ball would cling to my eyelashes. Then I would put on more mascara and my eyelashes turned out longer and curled up, if you can imagine."

"That's great," I said. "I'll have to try it sometime."

"You don't have enough patience," Aunt Valia said. "And Kuzia didn't used to."

"That's also true," I agreed. "Maybe I don't have enough patience, but then now it isn't necessary. Once can simply glue on fake eyelashes."

"Yes, you can't tell them apart from the real ones."

"Let's assume," I objected, "that the trained eye can always tell the difference."

"Kuzia and I were different; we didn't look like sisters at all," continued Aunt Valia. "But we both looked good in our own ways. I was what they call 'the very picture of health', but she was frail, pale, and her eyes were slightly sunken, but these features together looked very endearing. In general there was nothing special about her, but now I understand why she had sex appeal. At that time we still didn't know that word; it appeared fairly recently. But the fact that she had sex appeal was precisely the reason why she could win the heart of any man. And that's why it wasn't surprising that your Dad fell in love with her."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

Aunt Valia thought about it for a minute. "I don't know, somehow...At first he didn't even look in her direction, and then she made him notice her."

"How did she make him?" I didn't leave it alone.

"She tried all kinds of ways. It's true," added Aunt Valia with certainty, "I have no doubts that not even for a minute, would he have left me for anything, and never would have told me that he didn't love me anymore and loved

someone else instead. And if I had been insensitive everything would have turned out. The new love in him would died out and we would have still stayed together. But I was not like that. I started to feel really sorry for him, and I wanted to help him. I thought about what to do, and thought of something. I told him that I didn't love him, that I didn't like him anymore. I remember, he asked me who I liked. Who did I find better than him? And I answered with a mysterious look that some say there is one who I like very much, and I can't live without him, and so on...."

The door slammed and Arkashka came in. Shamrai immediately rushed over to him, and then went back to sit down near Valia's legs.

Arkashka sat down next to Aunt Valia and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Do you want some pie? I made it myself," she asked.

"Boy do I!" Arkashka answered.

He took a piece of pie and stuffed a good half of it into his mouth, while looking sideways at Aunt Valia with round, laughing eyes. At this moment, he not only looked like Kuzia, but also like Aunt Valia. And how he could do this, I myself don't understand since Aunt Valia and Kuzia were so different and didn't look anything like each other. And suddenly for the first time I unexpectedly thought that our Aunt Valia could have had her own son.

"Well," she said. "I have to go. I have a lot of things to do...."

"What kind of things? Arkashka asked.

"A thousand and one."

"For example?"

"For example, I have to visit two people who are sick, then organize a trip to check up on a kindergarten. They say that there are serious deficiencies there. Then I have to try to get a trip to a health resort for one of our technicians, then..."

"Do you think maybe that's enough?" I interrupted Aunt Valia. It was already too much. To always boil on the fire of other people's passions, was how Dad expressed it. Why do all this? What for? Just when is she going to think about herself, her affairs, and her health? I didn't want to say it but it seemed to me that she looked terrible. She had lost weight and was coughing, and after all, I somehow knew that she had not taken a vacation for three years. She never had time and always had new problems and worries swimming to her shore, and she would completely forget about herself....

She stared at me in puzzlement. "Why is that enough?"

"Because. Why try to get sick leave for someone else. It would be better to get ahold of a good one for yourself."

"In time," Aunt Valia said.

I sighed.

"Well what am I going to do with you, Aunt Valia? Tie you up, maybe?"

She said, "Believe it or not, once Vadim said those very same words, 'tie you up, maybe?'"

"And why did he say it?"

"When I kept picking up all the homeless dogs, cats, and pigeons. He put up with it at first, but then he got tired of it."

"Dad loves animals," I said.

"But not to that extent," Arkashka interjected. "He is still a normal person."

We both started to laugh at the same time.

"Did I hurt your feelings?" Arkashka asked her.

She shook her head. "No, of course not."

"Don't go," Arkashka said. "Dad will be home soon."

"I want to leave before he gets here."

"Why?" I asked.

"I have a message for you from Kuzia, but she doesn't want Vadim to know about it."

"Just what does she want?" I asked.

"For you to go see her."

"Where? To Rubber Plant's house?" Arkashka asked.

"Yes," Aunt Valia answered. "To the place where she now lives." And she looked at me, probably waiting for me to say something. "I think that she misses you guys."

"We have to think about it." Arkashka didn't stop himself.

I asked, "And she doesn't want to come see us?"

"Yes, she does," Aunt Valia said. "But first go to her."

"No," Arkashka said and even stood up from the table. "No, we will not go to see her, but if she wants to see us, let her come here, to our place."

Even if I had not agreed with him in this case, I still would not have challenged his words. I was used to telling him what to do. He was younger and granted didn't always do it willingly, but nevertheless, he obeyed me. But now he suddenly seemed unexpectedly grown-up, much older than I. I wanted to yield to him and not argue at all. Why did I want to? I myself don't even know...."

And I repeated what he said, "so let her come here first."

And that night I had a dream that I hadn't dreamt in a long time - I was flying again. It was like this: I was standing on the window-sill of some house, and the sky was light, a tranquil blue color. People were swarming somewhere far below. They were very small, not any bigger than the head of a pin. I waved my arms and pulled myself upward and started to fly. The feeling was extraordinary; I can't compare it with anything else. I felt so happy that I wanted to sing. I flew over the roofs of completely unfamiliar buildings, and I suddenly started to sing, but quickly cut my song short because even in my dream I realized that I didn't have an ear for music. I was flying, waving my arms, and was turning my head in different

directions. I looked first upward toward the sky, then looked down at the earth, and the whole time a feeling of happiness stayed within me. So when I woke up I felt happy. I caught myself still smiling from the dream....

Then when I was completely awake, I didn't want to smile anymore. As before, the burden which I had gotten used to, again fell on my heart....

We hadn't seen Kuzia for over two months, but now she was going to come to us. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, in two days - she will come.

I wanted to see her and at the same time for some reason, I was afraid to meet her. Why - I myself couldn't explain.

Arkashka walked over to me and asked, "Why aren't you getting ready to get up now?"

"And what day is today?" I asked.

He slapped himself on the forehead. "Oh, I am such a dummy, or an idiot more likely. Today is Sunday!"

"Of course," I said.

"Then I'll take Shamrai for a walk," Arkashka said.

Shamrai, our wonderful, remarkable, patient friend, yelped gleefully when he heard what Arkashka said. He had been sitting so quietly in the hallway, afraid of disturbing us. And I again thought about how he had already stopped being a dog a long time ago, and has simply become a real person.

Then I remembered my dream. "I was flying all night," I said to Arkashka.

He looked at me in surprise, but just then understood what I meant and said, "And I fly almost every night."

"Dad said that to fly means to grow."

Arkashka went to the door which had a line drawn on it in red pencil. He solemnly raised his finger. "Look, this is how much I have already grown!"

"You are growing not by days, but by hours," I gaped. "Just like Prince Gvidon."

"And the peep-hole is already up to my shoulders," Arkashka commented proudly.

Once when Arkashka had just gone into the first grade, Kuzia got ahold of a nice peep-hole somewhere. Dad put it into the entrance door at the level of Arkashka's head so that Arkashka could tell who was at the door, and the rest of us just stooped down. And then the years went by - quite a few years, and Arkashka already outgrew this very same peep-hole a long time ago.

Without turning around, Arkashka asked, "Do you know when Kuzia is coming?"

"No, I don't," I answered. "Why?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering."

His voice sounded indifferent, too indifferent....

"She will call," I said.

But he didn't wait to hear me and quickly ran out the door with Shamrai.

ENDNOTES

¹people who inhabit one of the regions in the Caucasus.

CHAPTER FOUR

She called the next day, as soon as I got home from school. I barely had time to open the door when the telephone rang.

Kuzia's voice said into the receiver, "Lialik, hello, dear...."

"Hello," I answered.

"Are you at home alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone."

"And where is Arkashka?"

"I think that he is at the Pioneer's Palace on Leninski Prospect."

"Is he well?"

"Everything is fine," I said. "How are you, Kuzia?"

"Everything here is fine too," she said. "I would like to come over to see you. When is a good time?"

"Whenever you want. It's your home and you can come whenever you want."

I pronounced these words as I think Dad would have, but Kuzia's voice sounded sad when she answered, "No, Lialia. It's not my home anymore...."

"It is too," I said.

She was silent for awhile, and I also didn't say anything.

"How's Dad?" She asked.

"Fine," I answered.

"Is he sleeping at night or only with sleeping pills again?"

"I don't know," I confessed.

"Most likely with sleeping pills," said Kuzia. "At one time his sleep was normal, and he didn't need to think about all of those sleeping remedies, but now, probably again...."

"Probably," I agreed. I really didn't want to say that because I felt sorry for Kuzia but I felt even more sorry for Dad. And really, who knew better than I did that every night he didn't go to sleep for a long time. He would read or simply think about something, and the light in his room wouldn't go out until the crack of dawn.

"I want to come over," Kuzia began again. "The day after tomorrow, O.K.? You and Arkashka are just starting vacation. So I will come now. By the way, aren't you planning to go somewhere during vacation?"

"No," I answered. "We're not going anywhere."

Could she really forget that I couldn't leave Dad and Arkashka behind? Even if I had wanted to go somewhere, I couldn't have left them. Last year when the family was still together, Arkashka and I went away for vacation. I went to Leningrad with my class, and he went to The Birch Resort Hotel. He was really bored to death there. Instead of a week, he stayed at the hotel for two days and then

left. And this year he didn't want to go anywhere, and neither I nor Dad forced him.

"You could go somewhere, and Aunt Valia would come by to make dinner for Dad," Kuzia said.

"Just the same, I am not going anywhere," I said. "And neither is Arkashka...."

"You know best," Kuzia said. "So I will come by the day after tomorrow at four o'clock."

She came two days later, not at four o'clock as she had promised, but an hour earlier.

Shamrai, who was lying on his bed in the hallway, suddenly started to bark frantically. I realized that it was her, Kuzia. And as soon as I opened the door, Shamrai passed me instantly and rushed over to Kuzia. And suddenly, you should have seen it, he turned around abruptly and trudged back to his bed.

"What's the matter with you, Shamrai?" I asked. "Why didn't you say hello to Kuzia?"

He closed his eyes and buried his face in his paws just like a person whose feelings have been hurt and who doesn't want to see or talk to the person who hurt him.

"Leave him alone," Kuzia calmly said. Probably during this time she managed to forget about Shamrai. "Let him do what he wants."

She was holding a big, round box with a cake in her hand. After taking off her coat, she put the box on the

coffee table in the hallway and said, "First, I wanted to talk to you one-on-one."

As I had thought, she had changed a little. Something about her was new which hadn't been there before, or it seemed that way because she had cut her hair short. She had curly bangs on her forehead. I remembered that previously, Kuzia couldn't stand bangs; she considered them vulgar. Then she had put on bright red lipstick. Her mouth seemed more defined, maybe even prettier, but at the same time bright, thick-lined lipstick did not go well at all with her thin, sharp chin, and slightly sunken eyes.

It must be that our Kuzia looked younger, I thought, and cut her hair short, and wore bright lipstick because now she has a young husband, eight years younger. She has to try to keep up with him.

I was ashamed of these thoughts. How could I think like that about our Kuzia? But just then I mentally answered myself, and how could she have treated us the way she did?

Kuzia sat down next to me on the couch with one arm around my shoulder. Her hair had a sugary smell of the German shampoo "Melinda." The collar of the familiar turquoise blouse was pinned with a brooch that I had never seen before. It had five pink pearls in a delicate silver setting. It is obviously a present from Rubber Plant I guessed.

She took a cigarette from her purse. Then and there I got up and gave her an ashtray.

"Samson doesn't let me smoke," Kuzia said. "But this time I'm not going to obey him."

"As you like," I said.

She threw her head back, following the thin wisp of smoke with her eyes.

"Don't be angry with me, Lialik. Believe me, I have never been so happy."

I answered, "Of course not. I'm not mad at you in the least."

"And you shouldn't be." Kuzia inhaled deeply. "You should be happy for me, Lialik."

"I can't do what I am unable to do," I objected. "And please don't ask me."

She stared at me in amazement like a child looking at the world for the first time. "Why, Lialik?"

"You are really still a child," I said. "How could you even ask?"

"I can," she answered and put the cigarette on the arm of the couch. "You are my daughter, the closest being in the world to me. You should be happy that things are going well for me."

"You now have someone else in the world to be closest to you," I commented bleakly after taking her cigarette stub and placing it into the ashtray.

"And what difference does that make?" Kuzia asked calmly. "You are all very dear and close to me, you, and Arkashka, and Dad, and Samson Georgievich. I love Samson Georgievich. Just understand that I would have never left you otherwise."

"Watch that your Samson Georgievich himself doesn't leave you," I said.

I realized that I was speaking with malice, and that she probably was hurt by my words, but I couldn't help myself. And she started to cry. Her tears ran down her cheeks, and from time to time she licked the tears, which were falling on her lips, smeared with thick lipstick.

In a flash she looked older and somewhat confused, and then I was suddenly convinced that the time will soon come when Rubber Plant would really leave her. And he won't ever look back, as if he had never known her.

And then I rushed over and hugged her, and started kissing her wet eyes, cheeks, and short, curly bangs. I held her thin, frail body tightly, breathing in the familiar smell which was a bit bitter like fresh, young leaves. I don't remember what I said to her; something like "forgive me, Kuzia, don't, don't cry."

But she kept crying, sniffing just like a child, and my heart was bursting out of pity for her, out of my inability to comfort her, and from the realization that I couldn't change anything or help anyone in any way.

Then she calmed down a little. She took a mirror from her purse, patted her powder puff on her cheeks and under her eyes, and then put lipstick on again. She had once more become not so much a stranger as somehow removed from the situation.

She examined her face closely in the mirror and asked, "Did Arkashka know that I was coming?"

"Yes, he did," I lied.

"So he'll be here soon?"

"I think so."

He should show up at any minute, if, of course, he doesn't go off to the Pioneers' Palace where he has been active in the radio club for over two years.

And then the lock to the entrance door clicked. Kuzia and I looked at each other. For some reason Kuzia whispered, "It's him."

Yes it really was him, without his hat, his jacket thrown off his shoulders, and the sleeves were tied around his waist.

"I am just starving," Arkashka articulated clearly and stopped short as if he had stumbled.

Kuzia quickly jumped up from the couch. He stepped back but she grabbed his shoulders, and pulled him over to her. I watched them from a distance. They look so much like each other!

"Arkashka," Kuzia said, "my child...."

She pulled away a strand of his light hair which was a similar color to hers from his forehead and pressed her cheek to his. He stood as motionless as a post, carefully looking to the side, but she didn't let him go and kept cooing and saying something, quickly, affectionately, almost panting from the tender feelings which overwhelmed her. She was probably waiting for him to say something. But he was stubbornly silent the whole time.

I said, "Arkashka, stop showing off."

He moved his gaze over to me. His eyes seemed angry, even mean.

"I am not showing off," he said with great difficulty.

"Arkashen'ka," Kuzia gently drawled. "Look at me, please, my child...."

He looked over at me first as if asking for permission to look at her, and then looked over at her. His cheeks slowly turned pink.

"You are so big and smart," Kuzia said, tossing back her head and holding Arkashka by both hands. "You must understand me. I couldn't help myself and gave in to my feelings. Who could blame me?"

Once during the winter when Arkashka was still in kindergarten, he got sick. Dad brought him home and it seems that I was the first one to notice how his tightly swollen cheeks were flaming.

I said, "Dad, look how red he is!"

Dad looked, placed his palm against Arkashka's cheek, and was immediately alarmed. "He is burning up like a fire."

Kuzia ran out from the kitchen, took one look at Arkashka, and clasped her hands together. "Vadim, what's the matter with him?"

"Calm down," Dad said.

But Kuzia didn't listen to him. "Vadim, he is going to die, I beg of you, look, he is going to die before our eyes."

And then Dad harshly ordered her, "Shut up!"

I admit that I was surprised. He was always kind and gentle toward Kuzia and then suddenly he yelled at her so harshly.

Kuzia started to cry. Generally she could easily burst into tears even at the most insignificant nonsense, but I knew that Dad couldn't handle her tears. He rushed over to her at once, carefully wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Well, O.K., forgive me, really, I won't do it again," Dad mumbled, but Kuzia didn't stop crying and then Arkashka started howling, and I began to undress him, but he screamed even louder, more bitterly. Then Dad put Arkashka to bed and told Kuzia to sit next to him and make sure that he didn't walk around the floor with bare feet.

He went to call the doctor. We were listening, hearing Dad's rather muffled voice from the hallway, "Our Arkashka is a bit under the weather." Then Dad was silent

and started to speak again, "No, we haven't measured it yet, but he is as hot as an iron."

Kuzia looked at me in terror and repeated, "like an iron..." and started to cry again. After her, Arkashka began to howl at the top of his lungs.

Why does all of this which happened so long ago and vanished without a trace, suddenly come to life again in my memory? Why do I again mentally see Kuzia next to Arkashka's bed? Why from somewhere very far off could I hear Kuzia's sobbing, frightened voice?

Arkashka slowly freed his hands from Kuzias'. "Sit down," he said to her.

She obediently sat on the couch but he didn't. He stood near the table, frowning and biting his lips.

"Do you want to eat?" I asked him.

"And what do you have?" he asked.

Kuzia intervened at that point and quickly jumped up from the couch. "Kids, I brought you a cake and completely forgot." She dashed out to the hallway and again returned to the room with both hands holding the same, big box with the cake. "There," Kuzia pronounced triumphantly. "It's a lonely rabbit."

"Who?" I asked.

"The cake," Kuzia explained. "They call it the lonely rabbit. Samson and I went to Leningrad for a business trip of his. He took me with him, and almost every day I went to the cafe 'North' there. They had cakes like this."

Arkashka and I knew that Kuzia always had a sweet tooth. But I think that she mentioned going to Leningrad specifically so that we would not resent her for not calling us for some time.

Arkashka asked, "And he didn't advise you there in that very cafe how to bake a cake?"

Kuzia shook her shoulders. "Who is 'he'? Who are you talking about, Arkashka?"

"That guy, him, your husband," Arkashka managed to say.

Kuzia said with a forced laugh, "my dear, Samson Georgievich cannot give advice on every single question."

"But I thought, maybe," retorted Arkashka, "that such a 'girl's best friend' could do everything, and bake, and knit, and something else too."

I stopped him with a look. Kuzia patted my cheek gratefully. "Well, Lialik, let's untie the string."

I untied the string, and took the lid off the box. One ear of the big, chocolate rabbit dangled to the side and looked melancholy. He was holding a red marzipan carrot in both paws.

"Isn't it nice?" Kuzia asked.

"That's not quite the word," Arkashka answered, looking over at me.

She was like this even before. There would be nothing to eat at home, not even a crumb of bread, no butter or meat, and she would go to the store and bring home a few packages of vanilla ice cream.

"Go ahead," she would say, "attack."

So the three of us would eat ice cream for dinner, and in the evening Dad would come home and wouldn't eat a thing because he doesn't like ice cream. So I would run to the grocery store and buy pelmeni and eggs. Dad scrambled the eggs for himself and boiled the pelmeni.

And still, no matter what happened, we lived well. Amicably and cheerfully. If Arkashka and I yelled at each other, it was from a sudden burst of temper, sincerely as they say, from the heart. And just as suddenly and naturally, we would make up at once.

"I have a request," Arkashka said to Kuzia.

I noticed that he didn't say her name, but simply addressed her impersonally.

"What kind of request?" Kuzia quickly responded.

"When you call, don't keep quiet, but say who you are right away."

"I don't do that," Kuzia said, frowning. "Honest, I don't do that."

"You do," Arkashka said. "I just know that it's you!"

Kuzia gave in immediately, "O.K. so it is me. So what's the big deal? I just want to hear your voice, yours or Lialia's, or Dad's. It doesn't matter whose, but then I get calmed down right away."

That is another example of her selfishness, I thought. She wasn't used to caring about any of us, but it's enough for her to know that we're alive, healthy, and that

everything is going well. That is the main thing. But what happens after that is no longer her concern. She just wants to know that she doesn't have to worry about us and that we're doing well, and then she will feel at peace.

In my opinion, she was unquestionably sincere in her own way so we should accept her the way she is.

The three of us were silent for a long time; so long in fact, that I realized that in about another minute I won't be able to control myself, and will either burst out laughing or crying, or I'll hit Arkashka, or leap up and run away somewhere, as far away from here as possible.

I realized that I needed to get rid of the tension because I just couldn't cope otherwise. And just at that very minute, Kuzia started to speak first, "I would like Dad to marry Valia."

"Who?" Arkashka asked.

"Aunt Valia. She is a good person, and she loves Dad. She has loved him for a long time."

I also thought that Aunt Valia probably has loved Dad all of her life and won't stop loving him, despite all of her unsuccessful marriages, which ended, as Kuzia herself expressed, on shaky ground.

But Dad doesn't love her. Dad was doomed to the very end to love Kuzia. He saw all of her shortcomings, and although he realized that Aunt Valia would have suited him better, he could only love Kuzia and no one else.

Arkashka and I silently looked at each other. Probably he also felt much older than Kuzia at this moment.

"I'm going to my room," he said. "I was just given a book and I have to finish it by tomorrow. We have a waiting list for it in class."

"What book is it?" Kuzia asked.

"I can't remember-" Arkashka answered, stumbling over his words. "Well, in general, it's about a detective."

"Go on," Kuzia absently gave her good-natured permission. "Go on, my dear, read about your detectives."

We were left alone.

"It's probably time to go," Kuzia said, looking at her watch.

I said with intentional indifference, "If it's time to go, it's time to go..."

In my heart I had hoped that Kuzia would notice my indifferent tone, that she would become somewhat alarmed and taken aback, but no, she calmly got up from the couch, took a comb from her purse and combed her bangs.

I didn't take my eyes off her. Maybe she will look around the room and suddenly see the customary things which had surrounded her all these years in a new light.

She had spent her life here, granted not all of it, but still she spent many years in this apartment and everything here is filled with different memories for her. There's the tulle curtains on the window. We bought the tulle together in the Dobruninski Department Store, and Kuzia decided

everything, how much to buy, four and a half or five meters, when we had a non-standard width of one meter and thirty-five centimeters. There were slip covers on the chairs made from unbleached linen which was sent by Dad's brother from Ivanovo. And there was the picture hanging on the wall between the windows with a dark blue pitcher on a red tablecloth. Arkashka had given it to Kuzia for her birthday two years ago. And over the table hung the Czech crystal chandelier, which Dad had bought with his yearly bonus. On the way from the institute, he had stopped in the "Light" store on the Preobrazhenka and bought it on the run.

Kuzia said, "I'll call in a few days...."

"Good," I said.

"Give my regards to Dad," Kuzia added.

"I will," I said.

She kissed me on the cheek. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks had a touch of rouge on them, and not a trace was left of her recent bitter tears.

You really are a klutz, I thought, watching her put on her coat. There was no way for her to put her arm in the sleeve because the lining was ripped. Kuzia frowned angrily and again tried to get into the sleeve. And until I got up, took her arm and pushed it into the sleeve, nothing worked.

"Arkashka," Kuzia called from the hallway, "come here. I am leaving."

Arkashka did not answer.

"Maybe he fell asleep." Kuzia suggested. She quietly opened the door and looked into the room. Arkashka was lying on the Ottoman with his face toward the wall. Shamrai had comfortably arranged himself at Arkashka's feet. When he saw Kuzia, Shamrai opened one eye and then closed it. And Arkashka didn't move a muscle.

I glanced at the back of his head and realized immediately that he was not sleeping, but was faking it. How I knew, I don't know, but it was the truth.

"I'm not going to wake him," Kuzia whispered and quietly closed the door behind her. "Let him sleep. He gets tired enough at school."

Smiling, she nodded to me, "Good-bye, Lialik, see you soon."

I was expecting her to ask if Arkashka and I would agree to go see her, but she didn't ask. Probably Aunt Valia told her, "Don't ask and don't offer, they won't go anyway."

The elevator began to hum and the doors slammed shut. Then the elevator went down to the next floor and finally, completely stopped.

Through the window I saw Kuzia walk out from the entrance and cross the street.

Someone came up and stood beside me. It was Arkashka. And next to him was Shamrai. He pushed me slightly and placed his paws on the window-sill. He also started looking through the window. The look on Shamrai's face was not like

a dog's. He was looking thoughtfully and intently as if trying to solve a certain difficult problem. Probably if someone were looking at us from the street, the three of us would seem rather funny.

For as long as I can remember, we were used to standing by the window like this. We would see Dad and Kuzia off when they left earlier than us. They would usually turn around and wave to us, and we would wave back to them. This was a ritual which had gone on for quite a few years now.

Without saying anything, Arkashka and I were thinking about the same thing. Will Kuzia turn around? Will she figure out that we are standing and watching her leave? The same way we always used to watch her leave? Or has she already forgotten to think about us and is hurrying to get to her new home?

At the same moment, a big truck with a trailer emerged onto the roadway and swayed heavily, blocking the view of Kuzia from us.

And when it had driven past, Kuzia had disappeared around the corner and could not be seen anymore. So we never did learn whether she turned around or not.

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