

In the evening Chaldonov took Lindt home with him to Ostozhenka, to his huge apartment: professorial, crepuscular, creaking, with its appetizing scent of books in expensive bindings and staid, home-cooked, four-course meals for five guests. At the door, Chaldonov hesitated inwardly, and at that very moment Lindt touched his sleeve.

“Are you sure it’s convenient, Sergei Aleksandrovich? I do have someplace else to spend the night.”

“Oh, come now, what nonsense. Why the scruples, colleague?” Chaldonov, taken by surprise, muttered as he pulled the bell. What on earth, is he a mindreader? he thought. But with talents like his, and taking into account the electromagnetic nature of radiation . . . Well, Marusya’s going to give me a piece of her mind, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. She’ll give me a piece of her mind, as sure as the sun comes up!

The door opened wide, without any questions asked or clanging of bolts and locks, completely justifiable in a city that had just witnessed the Great October Revolution. A woman appeared on the threshold, and accompanying her – a light so thick and bright that Lazarus Lindt winced. The light was too lively and intense to be coming from the ordinary kerosene lamp that Maria Nikitichna Chaldonova (called Marusya) held in her hand, so that Lindt long afterward, many years hence, associated this particular radiance with Chaldonov’s wife, and with the whole family.

Maria Nikitichna had a gentle, unusually animated face of the slightly unrefined and sometimes homely type that had gone out of fashion in the first decade of the twentieth century, and was now only found in prerevolutionary postcards. In her youth she had been, undoubtedly, pretty – in the now-forgotten sense of feminine beauty that was associated with an obscure charm. A girl from a good family was expected to shed tears over trifles, to have a complexion like peaches and cream, and to spend whole days confined to her bed during her time of the month, wearing a skirt fashioned especially for this purpose. In Chaldonov’s wife, all these tender imperatives and conventions receded, subdued by the light that she radiated, as though she herself were its source, and as if it somehow happened against her will. Throughout his whole life Lindt would seek similar shimmers and reflections in the faces of multitudes of women, whole multitudes. He was never able to understand that the woman does not in fact exist in her own right. She is the body and reflected light. And so you took my light into yourself and went away. And all my light is gone from me. End quote. 1938. Nabokov would claim that the attentive reader could place the quotation marks himself.

“Look, Marusya, look who I’ve brought with me,” Chaldonov said brightly and somewhat timidly – as if he were a little boy, and Lindt a trembling, flea-ridden, but already beloved puppy. And only Mama, who was unlikely to have forgotten yesterday’s “U (unsatisfactory)” for bad behavior, could decide whether they would be allowed to come home to live, or whether they would both be banished to the rubbish heap.

Maria Nikitichna looked at her husband with incomprehension. “This is Lazarus Iosofovich Lindt, my new colleague,” Chaldonov said in an attempt to account for his guest. The whim of bringing home a foundling seemed more and more foolish every second. Marusya, like all properly brought up people, possessed a restrained temperament, but would blow up all of a sudden when her patience was tried. Chaldonov knew this very well. He couldn’t have known better. Lindt tried to make a polite bow, and the stairs, the door, and the lamp spun around briefly, dizzily, on their own axis. He was starving. Marusya was silent for another long moment.

“Does he have lice?” she asked Lindt, as though sizing up something at the market. Lindt nodded gloomily. In fact, apart from his notebooks and lice, he had nothing at all. “Bear with me while I get you cleaned up, then. And then – and only then – we’ll eat, all right?” A little over an hour later, they were all seated around the dinner table, set in the proper fashion, according to rules that were rapidly becoming a relic of the old regime. Napkins crinkled, silver clattered, and from the collar of Chaldonov’s shirt, broad as a crack in the ice in spring, emerged Lindt’s bald-shaven head, gleaming triumphantly (Chaldonov had sacrificed an excellent razor from the Trading House of Aron Biber, Warsaw, pre-revolutionary luxury, just made for your impenetrable thicket, colleague), real carrot tea (with real saccharine) shone in Kuznetsov cups, and Maria Nikitichna placed a third potato (with melted butter!) on the guest’s plate, urging tenderly, “Eat up, Lesik, it pains me just to look at you! You’re like a head on two sticks, with nothing in between.”

“But what a head it is, Marusya!” said the satisfied Chaldonov, lifting his knife and fork toward the heavens. “This young man is a genius, believe me. And I don’t dispense such words liberally, you know.”

“He may be a genius, but he’s a malnourished one,” Marusya said, laughing.

Lindt frowned, abashed and satiated, trying with all his might not to doze off. A genius – he had heard that before, more than once. But no one had ever before called him Lesik – not before, not after. Never.

He bravely refused a fourth potato: I’ll get my ration cards, Maria Nikitichna, and return the potatoes to you immediately. The Chaldonovs waved away this offer with protesting gestures. He had chanced upon a lucky ticket, of course. Unexpected, undeserved. He had been walking down the street, when all of a sudden he bent down to pick up the golden key that released his hidden fate. Lindt knew very well that such things did not happen. And yet, who would have thought! His eyelids were sticking together, everything was trembling and melting in the moist radiance of simple human happiness. Maria Nikitichna got up to clear the dishes from the table, and Chaldonov jumped up to help her – though he was as sleepy as could be, naturally, but – Marusya, lord help me, sit down, I’ll do it, I’ll do it myself. And judging by the greedy adoration with which he looked at his wife, by how she stroked in passing the unattractive whitish curls on his forehead, it was clear that even thirty years of marriage could somehow be necessary to God, especially if you believed that He truly existed. Lindt swallowed a bitter lump that had risen in his throat out of nowhere. I’ll have the same thing someday, he swore to himself. Exactly like this – and not otherwise. Exactly this kind of love, exactly this kind of Marusya, exactly this

kind of family.

Maria Nikitichna Chaldonova was Chaldonov's greatest living success, and the fact that they both knew this very well lent their whole way of life that indispensable frisson of marvelous adventure, without which a marriage quickly becomes a boring and hardly digestible dish, like thrice warmed over fried potatoes. Marusya was stronger and more intelligent than Chaldonov. She was also morally superior; but the main thing was that she was of a completely different, better human breed. And her whole family was remarkable – ancient, priestly, with roots going back as far as the early Christian times of the first apostles, so that it was immediately clear why their home was so good for grownups and children, and cats, and canaries in their cages, and all the poor, eccentric, itinerant folk who wandered through their lives, and without whom it was impossible to imagine Russian existence or serving the Russian God.

### *The Women of Lazarus Pt. II*

Immediately after the wedding, the young couple left on a trip down the Volga for their honeymoon. This was Marusya's fancy, which turned out (like all her fancies) to be the only truly possible and happy choice – there could be nothing better. The wedding commotion and the travel to Nizhny Novgorod by rail postponed for several days the very important matter which Chaldonov so feared, and which he so naively and passionately desired. The whole weight of his undeserved and impossible happiness he experienced only in the creaking cabin of the steamship – the first evening that he and Marusya were finally left to themselves. The cabin smelled of soft river dampness, and on the ceiling floated long, sweeping, lulling shadows. The whole surrounding world fell at last into the lulling rhythm: the rocking light from the lamp, and the gentle, weak plashing of the river, and Marusya's answering motions, from which Chaldonov's heart stopped suddenly, then started up again peremptorily.

It was the most honeyed of all possible moons and months – as long and unhurried as their steamship *The Tsarevich Nikolay*, rebuilt especially for navigation in 1890 by the Caucasus and Mercury company. Refitted as a two-decker and equipped with the newest American Compound engine, the *Tsarevich* had not lost its charming provincial sluggishness. Along the way there were slow breakfasts on deck under canvas tents, with grayish caviar that it was customary to spread on the porous flesh of a *kalatch* loaf with a special bone knife, and with endless tea-drinking from a small pot-bellied samovar, about which Marusya said on the first morning that it looked like the bishop, just as self-important, belching out steam. Chaldonov looked at the fast-flowing sunny water in the wake of the boat, at the screeching gulls that the venerable public plied with generous pieces of still warm rolls, at Marusya's visibly swollen lips, at the tender, barely

discernible bruise on her young neck, golden from the sun, and his eyes grew moist with unbidden tears. Did you say something, sweetheart? I'm sorry, I didn't catch what you said. I said that you look like an Alpine St. Bernard. Just as shaggy and sentimental. I had no idea I was marrying a crybaby.

Marusya got up from the table and dexterously smoothed out her first really grownup woman's frock (with an uncomfortable bustle that she couldn't seem to get used to), and, after sticking out her tongue at Chaldonov, went to walk on the deck. Chaldonov, looking through the rainbows still dancing on his eyelashes, watched her walk along the boards, scrubbed white: quick, smiling, made up solely of smooth lines and silky shadows. He was afraid of just one thing – that he would die of happiness without living to see the next evening.

At the ports of call, elegant and clamorous women hawked untidy sprays of lilac and the first wild strawberries. Marusya, staring from the deck at the crush on the wooden pier and the many layers of garments of the provincial ladies, explained gaily to Chaldonov why the Wanderers made not art, but a poor imitation of that which it was a sin to imitate. You know? A sin, that's all. Look, look over there at that woman selling pies, it's simply charming, isn't it? Her forehead – it's as hard as cast iron. And those huge eyes, they're enormous! Amazing! Is it really possible to express what they look like, using paint, or even words? Marusya thought for a second. It might just be possible to play them – as a fugue? I think this woman is far grander than a fugue. And Marusya, musical like all the Pitovranovs were, began to hum something thick and titanic that really did resemble the hawker on the landing stage, who carried without any apparent effort, hanging from her neck, an enormous basket with flame-colored, freshly baked pies wrapped up in clean cloths. The pies were fat and filling, and filled with liver, onion, and buckwheat – horrible! – Marusya laughed, sitting on her haunches and sharing the simple folk delicacy with a stray dog, teats hanging, that circled around her feet whimpering and whining. Here mommie, help yourself. Do you have a lot of puppies? Tell me, how many?

The stray greedily snatched the aromatic dough, not forgetting at the same time to signal with her entire back end her most ardent goodwill toward the newly fledged Mrs. Chaldonov. The stray had seven puppies, and a few hours before a shopkeeper had dropped them into a cesspool. The shopkeeper was not evil, not even greedy, but simply sensible and reasonable, as behoves a real samaritan. He could easily have fed the bitch and her brood, but he simply didn't need eight dogs, and the stray had still to learn of this. For the time being, everything was fine and good: the sun, and the pie filling with overdone onions, and the gentle hand in the white glove that scratched her behind the ear, or on the ruff of her neck, and every breath praised God, and it even seemed that God was not indifferent to this.

Melting from happiness Marusya patted the stray one last time on her withers and led her husband away to walk through the doll-like town of Plyos, diminutive, charming, resembling a pearl that had fallen off someone's pin in the grass – a slightly dusty pearl, not ideally smooth, but all the same, a real one. In the rows of hawkers stalls people shouted, the harmonica wailed; hanging bread-rings, odorous manufactures, and the

famous local yarn were thrust into the faces of the gapers, and both of them, Chaldonov and Marusya, realized that neither of them had made a mistake, and that this was only the beginning of a long, marvelous journey. Everything would truly be as promised, and a peaceful life, longevity, mutual love in harmony with the World awaited them, and they would receive heavenly nectar from on high, and the fruits of the soil, and their grain and wine and balm and every blessing would be fulfilled at home so that they could share the bounty with the needy. And since this was so, it would not be frightening someday to die, both of them on the same day. And all the promises came true to the letter. Except one. For the first year of married life Marusya laughed off the questions of probing relatives who were determined at all costs to dandle grandchildren on their knees. After another year, she began to feel uneasy herself. Another several years, undoubtedly the worst in the life of the Chaldonovs, passed in a desperate struggle, invisible to the outside world. It was particularly difficult for Marusya – very sensitive, and for that reason somewhat chaste – to endure the doctors. Go behind the screen and take your clothes off, please – self-assured male hands, instruments of torture, a handkerchief, gripped in a sweaty fist, not a whisper of sound, humiliation, horror, diminishing hope, time after time, time after time, always the same. Each circle of hell had been traversed once and for all – trips to mineral water and mud resorts, university luminaries with many diplomas, expensive private doctors, back-alley quacks, who had “performed a miracle, a true miracle, on Anna Nikeevna over there,” while the same Anna Nikeevna, the friend of an acquaintance of an acquaintance, was already as featureless and anonymous as a banknote, only, in contrast to a banknote, one couldn’t even purchase an ounce of happiness with her. She even resorted to the homeopaths who had recently come into vogue; and only her inherent emotional fastidiousness prevented her from making the rounds of old wise women, seers, and witches. It wasn’t so much a matter of sinfulness as it was that the shrewd metaphysical stooges (many of whom, by the way, charged so much for a consultation that the most grasping quack would have been ashamed) promised by their hurried incantations, their sheets sewn crosswise, and their broken candles to change the will of God himself. Marusya, like no one else, felt with all her soul that it was His will not to bless her and Seriozha with any children. To oppose this will was pointless – you could only beg, as you would beg your parents for a Simon & Halbig doll for your birthday, but you risked getting a one-kopeck book about bears, and a box on the ears from your father to boot, instead of a poured wax beauty in a fashionable silk dress. Marusya didn’t fear the box on the ears. She simply wanted to know why she was refused. Why – and why her?