

The Arm

During the war, a colonel received a letter from his wife, that she missed him very much and would he please come visit because she's worried that she will die without having seen him. The colonel immediately applied for leave, and just before this he'd been awarded a medal, so he was granted leave for three days. He flew by plane, but just an hour before his arrival, his wife died. He wept, buried his wife, and got on a train back to his base--and then suddenly discovered that he had lost his Party card. He dug through all his things, returned to the train station--all of this with great difficulty--but couldn't find it. Finally he just went home. There he fell asleep and dreamed that he saw his wife, who said that his Party card was in her coffin, on the left side, it had fallen out when the colonel bent over to kiss her. The wife also told the colonel not to lift the veil from her face.

The colonel did as his wife directed: he dug up the coffin, opened it, and found the ticket next to his wife's shoulder. But then he couldn't restrain himself and lifted the covering from his wife's face. His wife lay there as if still alive, except for a little worm on her left cheek. The colonel wiped away the worm with his hand, covered up his wife's face again, and buried the coffin.

Now he had very little time, and he went directly to the airfield. The plane he needed wasn't there, but then a pilot in a charred jacket pulled him aside and said he was flying to the same place as the colonel and would drop him off. The colonel was surprised that the pilot knew where he was going, but then he saw that it was the same pilot as had flown him home.

"Are you all right?" asked the colonel.

"Yeah," said the pilot. "I had a little crash on the way back, but it's alright. I'll drop you off, I know where you're going and it's on my way."

They flew at night. The colonel sat on a metal bench running the length of the plane. He was surprised the plane could fly at all. It was in bad shape on the inside, clumps of material hung everywhere, some kind of charred stump kept rolling underneath the colonel's feet, and there was a strong smell of burned meat. They arrived very quickly, and the colonel even asked the pilot if he was sure this was the right place. The pilot said he was absolutely sure.

"Why is your plane in such bad shape?" the colonel asked, critically, but the pilot explained that his navigator usually cleaned up, but he'd just been killed. And right away he started lugging the charred

stump off the plane, saying, "There he is, my navigator."

The plane stood in a field, and all around it wandered wounded men. There was forest in every direction, a camp-fire burned in the distance, and among the burned-out cars and artillery, people were lying and sitting, others were standing, and others were milling about.

"Damn you!" the colonel yelled. "Where do you think you've brought me? You think this is my airbase?"

"This is your division now," said the pilot. "I've brought you where I picked you up."

The colonel realized that his division had been rounded up and defeated, everyone killed or wounded, and cursed everything on earth, including the pilot, who was still messing with his charred stump, which he insisted on calling his navigator, and kept pleading with it to get up and go.

"In that case, let's start the evacuation," ordered the colonel. "We'll begin with the classified files, then the division insignia and the heavily wounded."

"This plane won't fly anywhere anymore," the pilot noted.

The colonel took out his pistol and said he'd shoot the pilot right then and there for disobeying a direct order. But the pilot ignored him and went on trying to set the stump on the ground first one way, then another, and saying, "Come on, let's go."

The colonel fired his pistol, but he missed, apparently, because the pilot kept mumbling, "Come on, come on," to his navigator, and in the meantime the roar of vehicles could be heard and suddenly the field was filled with a column of German trucks and soldiers.

The colonel took cover in the grass behind a little mound, the trucks kept coming and coming, but there was neither shooting nor shouting of orders, nor did the motors stop running. Ten minutes later the column was gone, and the colonel raised his head--the pilot was still fussing over his charred stump, and over by the fire there were still people lying down, sitting, walking around. The colonel stood up and went over to the fire. He didn't recognize anyone, this wasn't his division at all: there was infantry here, and artillery, and God knows what else, all in torn uniforms, with open wounds on their arms, legs, stomachs--only their faces were clean. They talked quietly among themselves. Next to the fire, with her back to the colonel, there sat a woman in civilian dress and a kerchief on her head.

"Who's the senior officer here?" demanded the colonel. "I need a report on the situation immediately."

No one moved, no one paid any attention to the colonel when he started shooting, although when the pilot finally managed to roll his charred stump over to them, everyone helped him throw this so-called navigator on the flames and thereby put out the fire. It became completely dark.

The colonel was shivering from the cold and began cursing to the effect that now it would be impossible to get warm, you can't light a fire with a log like that.

And here the woman by the fire said, without turning around: "Oh why did you look at my face, why did you lift my veil, now your arm is going to wither."

It was the voice of his wife.

The colonel lost consciousness and when he awoke found himself in a hospital. He was told that they'd found him in the cemetery, next to his wife's grave, and that the arm on which he was lying had been seriously damaged, and now might completely wither.

Hygiene

One time, at the apartment of the family R., the doorbell rang, and the little girl ran to answer it. A young man stood in the landing. In the light he appeared to be sick, with an extremely delicate, pink and shiny skin. He said he'd come to warn the family of an approaching danger. There was, he said, an epidemic in the town, an illness that killed in three days, during which time people swelled up and so on. The chief symptom was the appearance of blisters, or simply bumps. There was some hope of surviving if one observed strict personal hygiene, stayed inside the apartment, and made sure there were no mice around--since mice, as always, were the main carriers of the disease.

The girl's grandfather and grandmother listened to the young man, as did her father and the girl herself. Her mother was in the bath.

"I survived the disease," the young man said, and took off his hat to reveal a completely bald scalp, covered with the thinnest layer of pink skin, like the foam atop boiling milk. "I survived, and because of this I cannot contract the disease again. I'm going door to door to deliver bread and other supplies to people who don't have them. Do you? If you give me money, I'll go to the store--and a bag, too, if you have one, or better still a shopping cart. There are long lines now in front of the stores, but I'm not afraid of the infection."

"Thank you," said the grandfather, "but we don't need any."

"If all the members of the family get sick, please leave your doors open. I've picked out four sixteen-story buildings--that's what I can handle. If any of you survive, as I did, you can help me rescue others, also to lower corpses out of the building, and so on."

"What do you mean, lower corpses out?" asked the grandfather.

"I've worked out a system for evacuating the bodies by way of throwing them out into the street. We'll need large polyethylene bags, though I don't know where to get them. The factories have been putting out double-layered plastic sheets, we could use those, but I don't have the money, it really is a question of money. It's possible to cut those sheets with a hot knife, and the material will seal automatically to form a bag of whatever length. All you need is a hot knife and double-layered plastic."

"Thank you, but we don't need any," said the grandfather.

The young man went along to the other apartments, like a beggar, asking for money; even as the R. family closed the door behind him, he was already ringing their neighbors' bell. Their door opened slightly, on its chain, so the young man was forced to tell his story and lift his hat while standing on the stairs. The R. family heard the neighbor's curt reply but the young man didn't leave, apparently, for there were no footsteps. Then another door again opened slightly: someone else wanted to hear his story. Finally they heard the neighbor's voice: "If you have some money already, run and get me ten bottles of vodka, I'll pay you back."

Then they heard footsteps, and then everything was quiet.

"When he comes back," said the grandmother, "he should bring us some bread and condensed milk, and some eggs. Then we'll need more cabbage and potatoes."

"A charlatan, that's what he is," said the grandfather. "But those aren't burns, they look like something else."

Finally the father came out of his reverie and led the little girl away from the door. These weren't his parents, but his wife's, and he rarely agreed with what they said. Nor did they exactly ask him for advice. In his opinion, something really was happening, it couldn't help but happen, he'd been feeling this way for a long time now and waiting. At that moment he was experiencing a temporary stupor. He took the girl by the hand and walked her out of the foyer—she shouldn't be hanging around there when the mysterious guest knocked on the next door; the father needed to have a serious talk with him, man to man--about his treatment strategy, the overall circumstances, and so on.

The grandmother and grandfather stayed at the door, however, since they could tell that the elevator hadn't been called up, and so the young man must still be on their floor; he was probably asking for all the money and shopping bags at once, so as not to keep running back and forth. Either that, or no one had given him any money or shopping bags at all, since by now, on the sixth floor, he'd have enough orders to justify a trip. Or else he really was a charlatan and a crook and was collecting the money for himself, something the grandmother had once experienced when a woman, just like that, through a slightly cracked open door, had said that she lived in the next entryway over, and that an old lady, Baba Niura, had died there, she was sixty-nine, and now the woman was collecting money for the funeral, and had a list of people who'd given money--and she held out the list, which had signatures on it and sums, thirty kopeks, a ruble, two rubles. The grandmother gave the woman a ruble, though she couldn't actually

recall anyone named Niura--and no wonder, because five minutes later one of their nice neighbors rang the doorbell and said that some woman no one knew, who was apparently a crook of some sort, was ringing doorbells, and she had two men with her who were waiting on the second floor, and they'd just taken off with the money, dropping the list of names and sums to the floor.

The grandmother and grandfather stood at the door listening, and then they were joined by the girl's father, Nikolai, who also began waiting to hear something, and finally his wife, Elena, came out of the bath and started asking loudly what they were all doing, but they hushed her up.

Yet they heard no more doorbells. That is to say, the elevator kept going up and down, people even got out on their floor, but then they made all sorts of noises with their keys and their door-slamming. Which means it couldn't have been the young man with the hat: he'd have rung the doorbell, since he didn't have keys to the apartments.

Nikolai, Kolya, turned on the television, they had supper, during which Nikolai ate a great deal, including a lot of bread, so the grandfather felt compelled to make a comment, saying, "Share dinner with your enemy," meaning that it wasn't healthy to eat so much before bedtime, after which Elena began to defend her husband, and then the little girl said, "What are you all yelling about?"--and life went on its way.

That night, out on the street, someone, judging by the sound of it, broke a very large window.

"It's the bakery," said the grandfather, looking down from the balcony. "Run, Kolya, get us some supplies."

They began to collect equipment for Nikolai to go out, and as they did so a police car drove up, arrested someone, and then left, posting a police officer at the entrance to the bakery. Nikolai went downstairs with a backpack and a knife. By then a whole crowd had gathered outside, the policeman was surrounded, knocked down, then people began jumping in and out of the bakery; a woman was beaten over a suitcase filled with bread, then they put a hand over her mouth and dragged her into the bakery. People kept arriving. Finally Nikolai returned with a very full backpack--thirty kilograms of pretzels and ten loaves of bread. He removed all his clothes and threw them down the garbage chute; still standing in the hallway he wiped himself down with eau-de-cologne and threw all the cottonballs in a plastic bag out the window. The grandfather, who was very pleased with the new developments, restricted himself to just one comment, that they would have to save the eau-de-cologne, as well as other medical supplies. They

went to sleep. In the morning Nikolai ate a kilo of pretzels all by himself--and joked about it, saying, "And share your breakfast with no one." The grandfather had dentures and dipped the hard pretzels lugubriously into his tea. The grandmother seemed depressed and wouldn't talk, while Elena tried to push more pretzels into her little daughter. Finally, the grandmother broke down and insisted that they ration the food, after all they couldn't go out robbing every night, and look, the bakery was all boarded up, everything had been taken away. The supplies were counted and divided into rations. During lunch Elena gave her portion to her daughter; Nikolai was as gloomy as a thunder-cloud, and after lunch he ate a whole loaf of black bread by himself. They had enough supplies for a week, but after that--nothing. Nikolai and Elena both called into work, no one was answering; they called several acquaintances: everyone was sitting at home, waiting. The television stopped working, there was just a flickering blank screen. The next day the phone stopped working. Outside, people walked past with shopping bags and backpacks, and someone had sawed off a young tree and was dragging it home. Then it was time to figure out what to do with the cat, which hadn't eaten in two days and was mewling terribly on the balcony.

"We need to let her in and feed her," said the grandfather. "A cat is a valuable source of fresh, vitamin-rich meat."

Nikolai let in the cat, they fed it some soup, not very much (so as not to over-feed it after its fast). The little girl wouldn't leave the cat's side, the whole two days the cat was on the balcony the girl was throwing herself at the balcony door trying to reach her pet, now she could feed the cat to her heart's content, eventually even her mother couldn't take it: "You're feeding *her*," she cried, "what I tear out of *my* mouth to give to *you!*"

In this way they fed the cat, and now there were enough supplies for five days. Everyone waited for something to happen, some kind of mobilization to be announced, but on the third night they heard the roar of motors out on the streets: it was the army leaving the town.

"They'll go out to the outskirts and set up a quarantine," said the grandfather. "No one comes in, no one gets out. The scariest thing is that it all turned out to be true. We'll have to go into town for food."

"If you give me your eau-do-cologne, I'll go," said Nikolai. "Mine is almost out."

"Everything will be yours soon enough," said the grandfather meaningfully but vaguely. He'd lost a lot of weight. "It's a miracle the plumbing still works and the water is running."

"Don't jinx it!" snapped his wife.

Nikolai left that night for the store. He took the shopping bags and the backpack, as well as a knife and flashlight. He came back while it was still night, undressed on the stairs, threw the clothes into the trash chute and, naked, wiped himself down with the eau-de-cologne. Wiping one foot, he stepped into the apartment, and only then wiped the other foot. He rolled up the cottonballs and threw them out the door. He put the backpack into a pot of boiling water, as well as the canvas shopping bags. He hadn't gotten much: some soap, matches, salt, some oatmeal, jelly and decaffeinated coffee. The grandfather was very pleased, however, he was positively beaming. Nikolai held the knife over a burner on the stove.

"Blood--that's the most infectious thing of all," the grandfather noted approvingly as he went to bed at dawn.

They had enough food now for ten days, according to their calculations, if they survived on jelly and oatmeal, and all ate very little.

Nikolai started going out every night on business, and now there was the question of his clothing. He would fold it into a cellophane bag while he was still on the stairs, and each time he would disinfect the knife over burner. But he still ate plenty, though now without any comments on this from his father-in-law.

The cat grew skinnier by the hour, her fur was pulled taut on her, and the dinners, suppers, and breakfasts were practically torture, for the girl kept trying to throw bits of food onto the floor for the cat. Elena began simply hitting her on the hands. Everyone was perpetually yelling. They'd throw the cat out of the kitchen, close the door, and then the cat would begin hurling itself against the door.

One time this led to the most horrifying scene. The girl appeared in the kitchen with the cat in her arms. The grandfather and grandmother were there. Both the cat's and the girl's mouths were smeared with something.

"There," said the girl, and kissed the cat, probably not for the first time, on its filthy mouth.

"What are you doing?" the grandmother cried.

"She caught a mouse," said the girl. "She ate it." And once again the girl kissed the cat on the mouth.

"What mouse?" asked the grandfather. He and his wife were petrified with shock.

"A gray one."

"A puffy one? A fat one?"

"Yes, it was fat and big," said the girl. The cat, in the girl's arms, was trying to free herself.

"Hold her tight!" yelled the grandfather. "Go to your room now, girl, go on. Take the kittie. You've really done it now, haven't you? You slut! You dumb little brat! You've played your games with your kitty, huh? Huh?"

"Don't yell," said the girl and ran quickly into her room.

The grandfather followed her and sprayed her path with eau-de-cologne. Then he secured the door behind her with a chair, then called in Nikolai, who was asleep after a sleepless night, Elena was sleeping with him. They woke up. Everything was discussed. Elena began crying and tearing out her hair. From the child's room they could hear knocking.

"Let me out, open up, I need to go to the bathroom," the girl called out, in tears.

"Listen to me!" yelled Nikolai. "Stop yelling!"

"Let me out, let me out!" cried the girl. "Stop yelling yourself! Let me out!"

Nikolai and the others went into the kitchen. They were forced to keep Elena locked in the bath. She began knocking on her door, too.

By evening the girl had calmed down. Nikolai asked her if she'd gone to the bathroom. The girl answered, with difficulty, that, yes, she'd gone in her underwear, and asked for something to drink.

In the girl's room was a child-sized bed, a cot, a locked wardrobe with all the family's clothing, a rug on the floor, and some bookshelves. It was a cozy room for a little girl that had become, by force of circumstance, a quarantine chamber. Nikolai managed to cut out an opening in the door and through this he lowered a bottle filled with soup and bread crumbs. The girl was told to eat this for dinner and then to pee in the same bottle and pour it out the window. But the window was locked up at the top and the girl couldn't reach the fastener, and furthermore the bottle was a bad idea, as far as peeing went. In terms of excrement, this should have been easy enough, you took a few pages from one of the books and went on those, and then threw this all out the window. Nikolai had fashioned a sling-shot and after three attempts put a fairly large hole in the window.

However the girl soon showed the fruits of her upbringing. She was unable to go to the bathroom on the pages, as she was supposed to, she couldn't keep track of her own needs. Elena would ask her

twenty times a day whether she needed to go poo-poo and the girl would say no, she didn't, and then five minutes later she was filthy. Furthermore, the food situation was becoming quite impossible. There were a finite number of bottles, the rope broke each time Nikolai lowered down a ration, and there were already nine bottles scattered about the floor when the girl stopped coming to the door, getting up, or answering questions. The cat apparently wouldn't get off her chest, though the cat hadn't appeared in their line of vision in a while, ever since Nikolai had begun trying to shoot her with the sling-shot--the girl was feeding the cat half of what she was herself given to eat, she'd simply pour it out on the floor for her. Now the girl no longer answered questions, her little bed stood by the wall and was outside their line of vision.

They'd spent the past three days battling to arrange things for the girl, innovating, attempting to teach the girl how to wipe herself (until now Elena had done this for her), getting water to her so she could wash herself, somehow--and all that pleading for her to come to the door to receive her bottle of food (one time Nikolai decided to wash the girl by pouring a bucket of hot water on her, instead of lowering the food, and after that the girl was too scared to come to the door)--all this had so literally ground the inhabitants of the apartment down to dust that when the girl stopped answering them, they all lay down and slept for a long, long time.

Then everything ended very quickly. Waking up, the grandmother and grandfather discovered the cat in their bed with that same bloody mouth--apparently the cat was eating the girl, but had climbed out of the makeshift window, possibly to get a drink. Oy, aye, cried and moaned the grandmother and grandfather, at which point Nikolai appeared in the doorway, and after hearing them out, simply slammed the door shut and began to move things about on the other side, locking them in with a chair. The door remained closed; moreover, Nikolai wouldn't even cut an opening, he put this off. Elena was screaming and trying to remove the chair, but Nikolai locked her in the bathroom--once again.

As for him, Nikolai lay down on the bed and began to swell up, and up, and up. The night before he'd killed a woman with a backpack, but she was already sick, apparently, because disinfecting the knife over the burner didn't work, and furthermore Nikolai had, right on the street, eaten a can of buckwheat concentrate out of her backpack. He just wanted to try it, but ended up eating everything, he couldn't help himself.

Nikolai figured it out quickly, but it was already too late, he was already swelling. The entire apartment was shaking with all the knocks, the cat was mewling, in the apartment above them the

situation had also reached the knocking phase, but Nikolai just kept pushing, as if in labor, until finally the blood started coming out of his eyes, and he died, not thinking of anything, just pushing and hoping to get free of it soon.

And no one opened the door onto the stairs, which was too bad, because the young man was making his rounds, carrying bread with him, but all the knocking in the apartment of the R. family had died down, only Elena was still scratching at her door a little, as blood came out of her eyes, not seeing anything, and what was there to see, anyway, in a completely dark bathroom, while lying on the floor?

Why was the young man so late? It was because he had so many apartments under his care, four enormous buildings, and he reached their entryway for the second time only on the night of the sixth day--three days after the girl had stopped answering, one full day after Nikolai had been finished off, twenty hours after Elena's parents had passed, and five minutes after Elena herself.

But the cat kept mewling, like in that famous story where the man kills his wife and buries her in the brick wall, and when the police come they hear the mewling behind the wall and figure out what happened, because along with the wife's body the husband has entombed her favorite cat, which stays alive there by eating her flesh.

The cat mewed, and the young man, hearing this lone living sound in the entire entryway, where all the knocking and screaming had by now gone silent, decided to fight at least for this one life, and he brought up a metal rod, it was lying in the yard covered in blood, and using that he broke down the door. And what did he see there? A familiar black mound in the bathroom, a black mound in the living room, two black mounds behind a door locked with a chair, and that's where the cat slipped out. The cat nimbly jumped through the primitive makeshift window in another door, and behind it the young man heard a human voice. He removed the chair that was blocking the way and entered a room filled with broken glass, rubbish, excrement, pages torn out of books, headless mice, bottles, and pieces of rope. A little girl with a bright-red bald scalp, just like the young man's, only redder, lay on the bed. She stared at the young man, and the cat sat on her pillow, also staring at him, attentively.

My Love

Given time his dreams might have come true, and he might have found himself with the woman he loved, but the road was too long and it brought him nowhere. All he had with him that whole long and barren time was a page from a magazine, with a photograph of the woman he loved, and in fact only a few people from work knew that it was her. It was just a pair of legs, that was all, a little chubby at that, bare, in heels; she herself had immediately recognized it—her purse, and the hem of her dress. How was she to know that just her lower half was being photographed—the photographer had rushed out into the street and taken a few quick snapshots, but they only published the hem and the legs. He—this man—kept this photograph tacked up over his desk at home, and his wife never brought it up with him, though she was a strict woman and ran the entire household, including her mother, and her children, and even her distant relatives and students. On the other hand, she was a kind, generous, hospitable woman—she just didn't give any slack to the children, and her meek mother lived with them, lay on the cot, read aloud to her little grandkids while she still could, and enjoyed the warmth, peace, the television, and then afterward she spent a long time dying, also meekly, barely alive now, and went noiselessly in the end.

As for him, having buried his mother-in-law, he began waiting patiently for his wife to die as well. For some reason he knew that she would die first and set him free, and he began to prepare for this very actively: he was healthy and athletic, went running in the mornings, even toyed with weights, kept a strict diet, and in the meantime managed to work like a bull, was promoted to the head of his department, traveled abroad—and waited. His chosen one, the pretty plump little blonde, every man's dream (she looked like Marilyn Monroe), worked in the same place as he and sometimes came along on business trips—and that's when their real life would begin. Restaurants, hotels, strolling and shopping, tours and talks. How lonely he felt on those nights, returning from heaven back to his hell, into the warm, poor nest where his graceless, cramped home life was slowly bubbling, where his children got sick, went crazy, ran around like maniacs, not allowing him to concentrate, so he had to quiet them down, and sometimes this meant strapping them with his belt, after which he felt even more insulted and humiliated. His wife also screamed at the kids, she had no time for anything, she could barely turn around in that apartment, in which, as in any decent household, they also had a dog and a cat, and the cat would howl all through the night when she was in heat, and the little dog would bark every time the elevator reached their floor, and

it was at night that this whole household was most difficult for the husband to take: he would lie in his bed and fall into cheerless dreaming of the warmth, calm, and beauty that emanated from his forbidden friend on their trips abroad—the rest of the time she too was hounded by life, her husband and her mother-in-law literally hung on her neck, her mother-in-law forced her to scrub the apartment every Saturday, to the point where she was scrubbing the tiles in the bath with ammonium! Her husband would get drunk and forbid her to go to office parties, birthdays, or to anything else, always made trouble before her business trips, suspected her of everything—together he and the mother-in-law were crushing her like Scylla and Charybdis, and what is more they fought each other, the husband and his mother. The mother-in-law was always demanding to know of the pretty blonde why her husband drank so much and ate so little—even that was her fault! The girl would complain about it at work, but only obliquely, she was discreet and never dumped it all in his face the way his wife would. Sometimes you find a woman like that, the lonely husband would think as he tossed in his bed, while on the other side of the wall his children cried and whimpered in their sleep, and his wife snored heavily because of her heart problem, growing older and more loving with each day. Now here was something the mind could never grasp: How she, a dried-up old hag past forty, so loved and took such care of him! It seemed as though she could never quite believe that this elegant handsome man, with his gray whiskers, could be her husband; she was too shy to accompany him anywhere. She herself tailored her uniformly plain dresses, long and baggy, the better to hide her girth and the runs in her panty hose—there was never enough money to buy new ones. This was known as “dressing modestly and tastefully” by the many guests and relatives who came crowding in during all the holidays, devouring her pies, cakes, and salads—they were all her guests, not his, her classmates, her colleagues, her relatives—they remembered her young, pretty, with cute dimples and a big thick braid, and they didn’t even notice that she was already someone else, that she had dimmed.

In truth, she’d long since disposed of her braid and her dimples, instead toiled for her husband and her mother, raised the children, loyally ran for him, her lord and master, to the fresh food market, didn’t have time for anything, and yet miraculously was always everywhere on time (she tried so hard to be organized)—and naturally at night, having put everyone to bed, she’d sit in the kitchen with her books, or work for extra cash, or else prepare her classes. Coming home from work she’d tell stories about her students, and once in a while she’d cook a whole bucket-full of meatballs and a bucket-full of kasha, and her students would come, they’d bring flowers and make a bit of a racket; shyly, they’d eat up everything

and then entertain her with their clumsy singing. But this was only if the man of the house was away; otherwise, it was out of the question.

When the kids were born, a boy and a girl, even then her first thought was of her husband: making sure he had breakfast before work, and a warm dinner after work, and that she was available to listen to everything he wanted to tell her. There was only one interruption, when her mother started dying, and then continued to die for three years: then everything was cast aside and just kind of hobbled along somehow, it wasn't clear how, and the man of the house was reduced to self-service in the kitchen, ate breakfast alone, whatever had been left out for him, and ate supper by himself, and then withdrew into his room as gloomy as a storm-cloud, but still he was there carrying the coffin, and was indistinguishable in his genuine grief from everyone else. After the funeral the grandmother's room remained empty, closed, no one had the strength, and in fact the wife quietly resisted changing it, slept in the big room with the kids, or rather sat as always in the kitchen, sleep had left her somehow.

For the husband this was a difficult time, too: his love began complaining, demanding a real, independent, family life; she refused to go with him anymore to friends' empty apartments, the way they were used to doing during lunch breaks, and she went even further: she started flirting with the men in adjacent offices, and in the cafeteria. And the men, sensing that she'd "let down her guard," as they put it, beat a path to her door, and her telephone rang off the hook, and someone came to pick the lady up in a car, and so on. Our husband endured the fires of hell, love and duty tore him apart, he took a hard line with his girlfriend, though he did, occasionally, take solace in crying on her shoulder. What could he do! The wife, for all her desperation and grief, nonetheless noticed that her husband had dried up somehow, that his eyes had gone dangerously still and that he was just kind of drifting away. She roused herself, quickly fixed up her mother's room and moved in there with the kids, and the main room again became a meeting-place for guests, and talks, and little parties, and the husband would greet the guests as the father of beautiful children and the head of a household (and not as an abandoned homeless dog), and as a beloved, worshipped husband (not just as anyone). Now he received his breakfast before everyone else, and suddenly a few new dresses were sewn from cheap cotton, and on Sundays the wife began taking the kids away for long excursions—to the park, the circus, to the planetarium. But in the husband's room the photograph still hung with its skirt, its bare chubby legs, and the heels: he wasn't giving up.

Finally thunder shook them all, the husband of the blonde girlfriend, "our husband," as the illicit

couple called him, came apart at the seams, completely lost it, chased after the blonde with an axe, she locked herself in the bathroom until evening, and then in the evening somehow slipped out of the house, called our hero from a payphone, he ran to meet her, didn't come back until it was almost morning, later that morning he was again awoken by a terrible—as all news is that comes at dawn—phone call: the other husband's mother had found him hanging in the doorway from a rope. Of course the new widow spent the next month with some caring friends who took pity on her, meanwhile our husband couldn't bring himself to invite her over, and even in the friendly house the hostess had to terminate the blonde's stay, she was just too pretty, pale and in mourning, so that the husband of the house had begun to experience certain feelings of Platonic Friendship and Sympathy toward the blonde, which are much more dangerous than our plain human filth, in and out, in and out, and it's over.

It took a while, but eventually things settled down, the blonde received her own apartment, and someone decided they wanted to buy the old run-down place where the mother-in-law still lived, they convinced her to trade for a smaller place, closer to her niece, and the blonde got a place further out and less attractive, but still, her own, and here our husband, our hero, had finally to choose once and for all, yes or no, and start remodeling the place, and find furniture, fix the wiring, winterize the windows, etc., in the new apartment of his girlfriend. Instead, he began setting up his own household with renewed vigor, wallpapered the main room with the help of the kids, once again started exercising, pouring cold water on himself in the mornings, running, and he began looking after the kids, drilling them, because they'd grown up and they were getting in the way, was the thing. With the blonde he remained in the role of counselor and visitor, she took care of everything herself, that occupied her time, she asked for advice, showed him some kind of floor plans, and already there was someone coming around, he had a car, he brought her hard-to-get tiles for the bathroom and even harder-to-get kitchen furniture. The blonde assessed the situation correctly and kept everyone in sight, faced with the prospect of loneliness.

The photo still hung above his desk, and he already had an assigned day, for visiting the blonde—he had, incidentally, left the institute where they'd worked, his relations with it had soured when she, the blonde, was supposed to be promoted and get a raise but was turned down because the working masses complained. He left, in protest, and promised to bring her with him eventually, whereas his wife didn't understand anything and just shone with relief, and there was a party in the house, and they baked pies, because the husband had finally left Her, though the photo still hung in its place.

He left and did well at his new job, the little kids grew up, athletic and tall, well-mannered, the way kids can be when they're in a family that worships its father, strengthened by the love and servitude of the self-effacing mother. The word of the father was law, and that's how they walked, in order: the father first, then the children shoulder to shoulder, and then behind them, a bundle of a mother, directing the family from a distance, like a remote control. It was a joy to see them, though the photo of the legs was still there.

The mother of the house waited until the boy, the younger one, entered college, and then surrendered entirely, just as her mother had done. Standing in the kitchen one evening, she collapsed, in front of everyone, began to choke and continued choking for three nights in the hospital. The family, a disciplined and hard-working family, regrouped, set up a watch in shifts, plus old friends and relatives came to help, as well as her long-ago and still loyal students, and, from the other side, from inevitable death and oblivion the husband rescued his wife. By the time they brought her home she was already a shriveled old lady, the only thing she could move was her right hand, and only a little, she would make sounds with her lips that no one could understand, and often, often, a tear would come running out of her eye. It was as though she were apologizing with her whole being for this state of things, apologizing for her entire past life, for not being able to create anything for her demigod and in the end making herself a cripple. In time the members of the household grew used to their heavy burden, though sometimes they'd grow frustrated and yell at each other—all these sanitary dishes, after all, and daily baths, and bed sores, and then thoughts, involuntary thoughts, about how long this might go on, how many years, this animal or even vegetable state—they suffered these thoughts. But the husband seemed to calm down suddenly, his soul became anchored, and all his movements around his wife were soft, patient, his voice was gentle. The kids still sometimes screamed at each other and at their mother, they had their own uncertainties, they were losing their mother, that is, their foundation and their pillar, and they became weak, unsteady parents to their mother, they felt that something was wrong here, that they didn't have a future, or rather that they did, but it was awful. The kids blamed each other, they said everything to each other, and, oh God, in front of their mother! But their zeal did not diminish, their mother lay there clean and fresh, they put a little radio-transmitter next to her pillow and sometimes they'd read to her aloud, but still she often cried, for no reason at all, it seemed, and would try to say something with just vowel sounds, without using her tongue.

On the night she died and they took her away, her husband collapsed, and in his sleep he heard her, she was here, and she lay her head down on the pillow next to him and said, "My love." And after that he slept happily and was calm and dignified at the funeral, though he'd lost a great deal of weight, and he was honest and upright, and at the wake, when everyone was home, in front of everyone, he told them all that she had come to him and called him, "My love." And everyone froze, because they knew that what he said was true—and the photograph no longer hung over his desk. It had disappeared from his

life, all of that had evaporated, it just ceased to be interesting at some point, and he suddenly, still at the table, began showing everyone the pale little family photos of his wife and kids—all those excursions they'd taken, without him, all their little entertainments, that were so poor but so happy, in the parks and the planetariums, to which she'd brought the children, when she tried to make a little life for them on the tiny island, the only one still left her, where she shielded the children with herself, while towering over everything was that disgusting photo from the magazine—but it was gone now, everything was fine, and she'd managed to say to him the little phrase, "My love"—without words, already dead, but she'd done it.

The Cabbage-Patch Mom

There once lived a woman who had a tiny little daughter named Droplet. The girl was just a tiny droplet and she never grew. Her mother took her to doctors, but as soon as she showed her to them, they refused to treat her! No, they said--and that was that. They didn't even ask any questions about her.

So then the mother decided she wouldn't show her little Droplet to the next doctor. She went to his office, sat down, and asked: "What should you do if your child isn't growing properly?"

To which the doctor replied, as a doctor should: "What's wrong with the child? What's the child's medical history? What is the child's diet?" And so on.

"This child wasn't born," the poor mother explained. "I found her in a head of cabbage, young cabbage. I took off the top leaf, and there she was, a little cabbage-patch girl, a little drop, this big, a little droplet. I took her with me and I've been raising her ever since, but she hasn't grown at all, and it's been two years."

"Show me the child," said the doctor.

The girl's mother took out a matchbox she kept in her breast pocket, and out of this matchbox she took half of a hollowed bean, and in that cradle, wiping the sleep from her eyes with her tiny little fists, sat a tiny little girl.

The mother also took a magnifying glass from her purse, and with this magnifying glass the doctor began examining the child.

"A splendid girl," the doctor said under his breath. "In good health, well nourished, you've done an excellent job, mother. Now get on your feet, little girl. That's right. Good."

The little droplet climbed out of her little bean and walked around on the doctor's desk, back and forth.

"Well," the doctor said. "I'll tell you this: She's a splendid girl, but this isn't the right place for her to live. Now where exactly she *should* be living, I can't tell, but definitely not here with us. We're not the right crowd for her. This isn't the right place."

The mother said: "It's true, she tells me she has dreams about her life on a distant star. She says everyone there had little wings, they flew through the fields, she did, too, she ate pollen and dew from wild flowers, and they had an elder, who was preparing them, because some of them would have to

leave, and they all waited in terror for the day their wings would melt--because then their leader would take them to the top of a high mountain, where there was an opening to a cave, and steps down to it, and the ones whose wings melted had to go down there, and everyone else watched them as they went down, farther and farther down until they were as small as a little droplet."

Sitting on the desk, the girl nodded.

"And then my little princess also had to go down, and she cried, and walked down the stairs and that's where her dream ends, and she wakes up on my kitchen table, in a cabbage leaf."

"Interesting," said the doctor. "And, tell me, what about you? What's happened in your life? What's your medical history?"

"Me?" said the woman. "My life? I love my girl more than I love my life, it's so terrible to think she's going to return to the place she came from... As for my history, well, my husband left me when I was pregnant with a child, and I didn't have it... It was so trying for me. I went to a doctor who referred me to a hospital, and there they killed my baby inside me. Now I pray for him. Maybe he's in that place, in the land of dreams?"

"Interesting," said the doctor. "I see now. I'm going to write you a note, and you'll take it to a certain person. He's a hermit, he lives in the forest, he's a very strange man and sometimes it's impossible to find him. But he might help you. Who knows."

The woman put her little girl back into the cradle made out of a little bean, put the bean back into the matchbox, put the matchbox back into her pocket, took her magnifying glass and left--directly for the forest, to look for the hermit there.

She found him sitting on a pile of garbage near the road. Without uttering a word she showed him the doctor's note and then pointed at her breast pocket.

"You need to put her back where you found her," the hermit said, "and not look at her anymore."

"Back where? To the produce store?"

"Stupid woman! Where'd they find her?"

"In a cabbage patch. But I don't know where that is."

"Stupid woman!" the hermit yelled. "You knew how to sin, you must know how to save yourself."

“Where’s the cabbage patch?” the mother asked again.

“Enough,” said the hermit. “And don’t look at her.”

The woman cried, bowed down, crossed herself, kissed the hermit’s smelly, frayed sweatshirt and walked away. When she turned around a minute later, there was no longer any hermit, or any trash pile, just a wisp of fog.

The woman grew scared and ran. Evening was approaching and she kept on running through empty fields. Suddenly, she saw a patch filled with rows of little cabbage buds poking through the earth.

It was growing dark out, and the woman stood there in the drizzle, holding her breast pocket, thinking she couldn’t leave her daughter here in the cold and the fog. The girl would get scared and start crying!

So with her hands the woman dug up a big clump of soil and a cabbage bud with it, wrapped this into her slip, and dragged the heavy bundle with her to the city, all the way home.

As soon as she crossed the doorstep, falling down with exhaustion, she took out her largest pot and placed her clump of soil and her cabbage into the pot and then put all this on her windowsill. And to avoid ever looking at it, she closed the curtain.

But then she thought: she’d have to water the little cabbage. And in order to water the cabbage, she’d have to look at it.

So she took her pot out onto the balcony, into real field conditions. If there was rain, there’d be rain, and if there was wind, there’d be wind, and birds, and so on. If the baby lived and grew inside her, like all other babies, then she’d be protected from the cold and the wind, but her little Droplet was different, she couldn’t hide inside her mother’s body, she’d have only one cabbage leaf to protect her.

Carefully moving aside the young, firm leaves of the cabbage bud, the mother put her little daughter inside it--her Droplet didn’t even wake up, in general she loved sleeping and was an unusually quiet, happy, and easygoing child. The cabbage leaves were hard, naked, and cold, and they immediately closed around the little Droplet.

The mother quietly stepped back from the balcony, closed the door, and began living all by her lonesome again, just as before. She went to work, returned from work, prepared herself some food, and never looked out her window to see what was happening with her cabbage plant.

The summer went by, the woman wept and prayed. So as to hear even just a little of what was

happening out on the balcony, she slept next to the door, right on the floor. When there wasn't any rain, she worried that the cabbage would wilt; when there was rain, she worried that it would drown; but the mother forbid herself even to think for one second of what her little Droplet was doing there, what she was eating and how she was crying, there by herself in her green grave, without a single motherly caress, without any warmth at all...

Sometimes, especially at night, when the rain came down in buckets and the lightning thundered down, the woman tore herself up trying not to go out on the balcony and cut down the cabbage plant and take out her little Droplet and feed her a drop of warm milk and put her into her cozy bed. But instead of this the mother ran downstairs and stood in the rain, making quite a spectacle of herself, to show her Droplet that there was nothing scary about rain and lightning. And all the time she thought that it must have been for a reason that she'd met the filthy hermit-monk and that he'd told her to put her little Droplet back where she found her.

In this way a summer passed, and the autumn came. All the produce stores were selling young firm cabbage plants, but the woman couldn't yet bring herself to go out on the balcony. She was afraid she wouldn't find anything there. Or she'd find a wilted cabbage plant and inside a little clump of red silk, the dress of poor Droplet, whom she'd killed with her own hands, just as she'd once killed her unborn child.

And then one morning the first snow fell, unusually early that autumn. The poor woman looked out her window, terrified, and rushed to open the door to her balcony.

As the door began to open, reluctant, with a heavy creaking sound, the woman heard a frightened mewling from the balcony, persistent and shrill.

"A cat!" the poor woman cried, thinking a cat had come over from a neighboring apartment. "There's a cat on the balcony!" And everyone knew how much cats loved to eat everything that was small and ran around.

At last the balcony door opened and the woman ran out into the snow just like that, in her slippers.

Inside her pot was an enormous, glorious cabbage, covered with numerous curly leaves like rose petals,

and on top of the plant, lying on its many curls, was a thin, ugly baby, all red, with flaking thin skin. The baby, closing tight its tiny eye-slits, made mewling noises, choking with sobs, shaking its clenched little fists, wobbling its bright-red toes the size of currant berries. And as if that weren't enough, the baby had, stuck to its bald head, a little scrap of red silk.

"But where's Droplet?" the woman thought to herself as she brought the whole cabbage plant and the baby into the room. "Where's my little girl?"

She put the crying baby on the windowsill and began digging into the cabbage. She lifted every leaf very carefully, but her Droplet wasn't there. "Who left this baby here?" she thought. "Is this a joke? What's this thing doing here? What am I going to do with it? Look at the size of her. Just dumped her here, they did. They took my little Droplet, and left me with this..."

The baby was clearly cold, its skin had grown bluish, its cries become more and more piercing.

But then the woman thought that after all it wasn't this girl-giant's fault that she'd been dumped here, and she picked her up, carefully, without pressing her to herself, took her to the bath, washed her with warm water, cleaned her off, dried her, and then wrapped her in a clean, dry towel.

She brought this new girl to her own bed and covered her up with a warm blanket. As for herself, she got her old matchbox and took out the little half-bean where her Droplet used to sleep and began kissing it, and crying over it, remembering her little Droplet.

By now it was clear that her little Droplet was gone, she'd been replaced by this enormous, ugly, clumsy thing with its big head and skinny arms--a real baby, and not at all hers.

The woman cried and cried and then suddenly she stopped. She thought for a second that this other child had stopped breathing. Could it be that this girl had died, too? Oh God, could she have caught cold on the windowsill while the mother was digging through the cabbage plant?

But the baby was sound asleep, her eyes closed tight--a baby that no one needed, and really in fact an ugly, pitiful, helpless little baby. The woman thought that there wasn't even anyone to feed it, and took her in her arms.

And suddenly she felt as if something had struck her on the breasts, from within.

And, like every mother on earth, she unbuttoned her blouse and placed the baby to her breast.

After feeding her little girl, the mother put her to bed, and then poured some water into a jug and watered the cabbage plant and placed it on the windowsill.

With time the cabbage plant grew--it gave long sprouts and pale little flowers, and the little girl, when she in her turn got up on her weak skinny legs and began to walk, immediately headed over to the window, swaying, and laughed, pointing at the long, wild shoots of the cabbage-patch mom.

I'm Here

How can you forget that feeling, it comes like a blow, when life flees from you, and happiness, and love, thought a woman, Olga, watching as her husband plunked himself down and practically inserted himself next to, essentially, a child--everyone here a grown-up and suddenly out of nowhere this girl-child. And then he stood up with her and went over to dance, addressing Olga gleefully on the way, "Look at this little treasure! I knew her when she was in the sixth grade." And laughed happily. It was the hosts' daughter--of course. She lives here. How'd she forget that, Olga thought as they rode the subway home, her partly drunk husband, a hearing aid in his ear under cover of his eyeglasses, taking a folded-up newspaper, self-importantly, from his pocket, then squinting morosely under the harsh subway light. They rode, they came home. He settled down with that same paper on the toilet and then fell asleep, apparently, because Olga had to wake him up with a loud knock at the door, and everything was so petty, so embarrassing, though of course everything is always embarrassing in one's own home, thought Olga. Her husband snored in bed, as he always did when he'd been drinking. "My God," thought Olga to herself. "Life is over. I'm an old woman. I'm over forty and no one needs me. It's all over, my life is gone."

In the morning Olga fixed breakfast for her family. She needed to go somewhere. Anywhere--to the movies, to an exhibit, maybe even the theater. But who'd go with her? It's a little odd, going alone. Olga called all her friends: one was sitting with a warm wrap--she had a condition she called "a moveable feast," her kidneys were bad. They chatted. Another friend didn't answer, maybe they'd shut off the phone, another was just about to go out, she was at the door practically, yet another one of her elderly relatives had fallen ill. That one was a lonely spinster but was always cheerful, energetic, a saint almost. Not like us.

She might try cleaning the house--her boss used to say: "When I hit bottom, like when they gave me the diagnosis, the same as my sister's and she'd just died--well, I came home and just started mopping the floor." This was always followed by the tale of the diagnosis--magically mistaken! And the lesson was, Don't give up! Keep the floor clean!

The laundry, the dishes--everything everywhere after last night's preparations for that idiotic birthday with her husband's college friends. So Olga should clean up and all the while think about how no one does anything to help her? Her husband will get up, hung-over, won't look them in the face, will nag,

yell, brood over the magic vision of the little girl from last night, the daughter, that's right. Then he won't be back until evening. No, she needs to get out, get away, hide somewhere. Let them take care of themselves for once in their lives. She's tired.

And then Olga realized: Why not visit the only place on earth where no one will turn her away, where they'll always be happy to see her, where they'll sit her down, make her tea, ask how she is and even invite her to stay over; why not visit their old landlady, from the dacha, where they lived so many years in a row when Nastya was still little, and she and Seryozha still hoped for a better life? She was an especially dear memory, this landlady, for Olga; with her complicated relations with her own mother Olga had become attached to this stranger, this wise and touching old woman. She even seemed beautiful, to Olga, and kind, and clever like a child. Meanwhile Baba Anya had been long divorced, if you can say that, from a daughter who never visited and was sleeping around on a grand scale, and who left the mother something to remember her by in the form of little Marina, a beaten-down little creature in black hair who was afraid of everyone.

Yes! When you've been abandoned by everyone close to you, do a kindness for a stranger, and you'll feel the warmth of their gratitude on your heart, and it will give your life meaning. And most of all, you will find a quiet refuge, and that's all we want from our friends, isn't it.

Inspired, Olga chuckled to herself, quickly cleaned everything, trying not to wake her family, and then went to look for her stash of Nastya's old things that she'd been collecting over the years for Baba Anya, knowing that her little girl was being raised without any outside help.

She even found something for Anya, a warm shawl, and just two hours later was running across the square in front of the train station, having almost been hit by a car on the way (now that would really be something, wouldn't it, if she died, it would certainly be a solution to all sorts of problems, the disappearance of a person no one needs or wants, it would free everyone, Olga thought, and even paused on this thought for a while, amazed by it)--and a moment later, as if by magic, she was descending from the commuter train at the little rural station that she knew so well, and, dragging her big backpack behind her, walking down the familiar dirt road from the station to the edge of the settlement, in the direction of the river.

It was a Sunday in October. The place was light, empty, the trees were bare already, the air smelled of

smoke and Russian baths. The fallen leaves gave off the scent of young wine and other people's established lives, as well as a whiff of the graveyard, somehow, and the windows were already lit, though it wasn't yet dark. Nostalgia, wide-open spaces, the pearly white skies and the happiness of years gone by, when she and Seryozha were young, when their friends came out here, all of them so happy, drinking, barbecuing, etc. And they helped Baba Anya, since something was always leaking, or collapsing, or needing someone to hammer something in. In those years you could leave little Nastya with her for an evening, Nastya had befriended silent little Marina. Baba Anya would put them in bed while Olga and Seryozha went into town for someone's birthday party, drank and sang until sunrise, and maybe wouldn't even make it back until the next evening. The whole time their daughter was safe, and Baba Anya would even say, Go on, take a vacation, you think I can't handle these two? So they did, they went south for two weeks with Seryozha. And Baba Anya also enjoyed it, they left her money and groceries. True, when they got back Nastya was so excited she immediately got sick and stayed sick for exactly two weeks. Their whole vacation was forgotten, their tans erased, Olga didn't sleep for ten nights: the girl almost died. Everything in life seeks equilibrium, Olga said to herself, walking with her backpack, said it with such assurance she might even have said it out loud.

The path was soft, the soil here was mostly damp clay, and up ahead, where the road curves, we take a left past the doctors' fence. That was what they called their neighbors, and it was true, in a way, the husband worked for the local epidemics control office. On Saturdays they'd pump out the waste from under their outhouse and pour it all over their garden, supposedly in the interests of ecology (actually because they didn't want to hire a truck to take it away), and the smell of this organic fertilizer carried through the village. The same rotten wind was blowing now (which explained the graveyard smell, thought Olga).

Baba Anya used to laugh at this agricultural program. She'd been a crops specialist herself, had worked at an institute, even went on business trips, and it was only after retiring and moving out here that she returned to her peasant roots, to the language of her ancestors, calling strawberries "redberries" (alternately, "victoria"), wearing a kerchief on her head and remains of rubber boots on her feet, going to the bathroom behind the bushes (now *that* was fertilizing). Everything grew in her garden as if by magic, all by itself. She'd moved out here a long time ago, leaving her apartment in the city to her daughter, supposedly to give her space (actually it was only after a protracted civil war that had led to the

destruction of both sides, as civil wars always do).

Olga successfully navigated the overgrown path, through the thinning black wild-grass, it looked like no one had passed this way in a while. She took the rusted ring, which they used instead of a latch, off the gate, ran the damp gate away from the fence, and happily swung herself toward the house, seeing that a curtain behind the window had just shivered.

Baba Anya was home! She must have been too happy to see Olga; she'd always loved their family.

Knocking on the door, which didn't even have a lock, Olga passed by the cold front hall and banged on the canvas that Baba Anya used in place of wall paper.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," came the hollow little voice of Baba Anya.

Olga entered the warm house, the smells of someone else's home, and immediately her spirits rose at the sweetness of it.

"Hello, Babushka!" she cried, almost in tears. Warmth, a night's rest, a quiet refuge awaited her. Baba Anya had become even shorter, dried-out, but her eyes shone in the darkness.

"I'm not bothering you?" Olga said happily. "I brought your Marinochka some of Nastya's things--tights, warm pants, a little coat."

"Marina's not here anymore," Baba Anya answered quickly. "She's not here anymore."

Olga, the smile still on her face, grew terrified. A chill ran up her spine.

"Go on," Baba Anya said, quite clearly. "Get out of here, Olga. Go. I don't need it."

"I brought you some things, too. I got salami, some milk, a bit of cheese."

"Then take it all with you. I don't need it. Take it and go, Olga."

Baba Anya spoke, as always, in a thin, quiet, pleasant voice--she wasn't insane--but her words were inconceivable.

"Baba Anya, what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Everything's fine. Now get out of here."

Baba Anya couldn't be saying these things! Olga stood there scared and insulted. She didn't believe her ears.

"Have I done anything wrong, Baba Anya? I know I didn't visit for a long time. But I always thought of you. Just, life, somehow--"

"Life is life," Baba Anya said vaguely. "And death is death."

"I just couldn't find the time, somehow..."

"And I've got more time than I know what to do with. So go on your way, Olga."

"I'll just leave these things with you, then," she said. "I'll put them out, so I won't have to lug them all the way back with me."

(God, what could have happened?)

"For what, what for?" Baba Anya asked in a clear, aggressive voice, almost as if to herself. "I don't need anything anymore. It's over. I'm dead and buried. What do I need? Just a cross for the grave, nothing else."

"But what happened? Can't you just tell me?" Olga persisted in desperation.

The house was warm, and the floor of the corridor in which they stood was covered, as always, with cardboard, so there'd be no dirt in the house. The door to Baba Anya's room stood wide open and inside you could hear the radio, buzzing like a mosquito, and through the windows you could see out into the trees in the yard. Everything had remained as it was--but Baba Anya, it seems, had lost her mind. The worst thing that can happen to someone still alive had happened to her.

"I'm telling you what happened," she said now. "I died."

"When?" Olga asked automatically.

"Two weeks ago now."

Horrible, it was horrible! Poor Baba Anya.

"Baba Anya, where's your little girl, where's Marina?"

"I don't know. They didn't bring her to the funeral. I just hope Svetlana didn't take her. Svetlana was no good, oh she was no good, she must have sold the apartment and spent the money, she came dressed in rags to the funeral. She fell apart completely. She had sores on her feet, open sores, wrapped in newspapers. Dmitry buried me. She was useless there. Dmitry shooed her away."

"Dmitry?"

"The one she left Marina with when she was just a baby. She was a one-year-old. Dmitry, Dmitry. He put little Marina in an orphanage then, I picked her up. You don't remember, or maybe I didn't tell you?"

"I remember something like that, yes."

"Maybe I didn't tell you. There were plenty like you here. They come, they leave, not a letter, not a word. I died alone. I fell down here. Marina was in school."

"But I've come! Here I am!"

"Dmitry buried me, but he just had me cremated, and he still hasn't picked up the urn. I wasn't buried, so I came here. I'm just here for the time being. Svetlana has gone all bad, she's a bum, a real bum. She doesn't even realize she can live here. Dmitry scared her out of the crematorium when she sat down and started wrapping her feet in newspapers. Somehow she found her way to me in the hospital, then the morgue. She came off the bus, pus was leaking out of her sores. She found a newspaper in the waste basket. Svetlana, I know, she was hoping to get a drink at the wake. Dmitry found her somehow, he didn't know she'd become like that. But I won't be here long, just until the fortieth day. After that, it's goodbye. And that's it, Olga, now go."

"Baba Anya! You're just tired, that's all. Lie down! Maybe you'd like it if I stayed here with you a while? I'll find little Marina. When did she disappear?"

"Marina disappear? No, no. When I fell down, I couldn't remember anything at first, but then afterward, when they were taking me away, the only one I saw was Dmitry. Where was Marina? And Dmitry was the one who took me from the morgue."

"Dmitry, what was his last name?"

"I don't know," Baba Anya mumbled to herself. "Fedosev, I guess. Like Marina. She's Fedoseva. God bless him. He brought a priest to the funeral. That was it, they were the only ones there--no one was told, he didn't know who to tell. He told Sveta and then chased her off forever. She'll be here soon, I'm waiting for her. She's about to die."

"No one told me," Olga said suddenly.

"And who are you, Olga? You rented the cottage a long time ago. You haven't been here in how long--five years? Marina's twelve already! I just hope she'll stay away from here, oh I hope she doesn't come!"

Five years. Nastya is fifteen already, a teenager. They haven't had a summer here in five years! Nastya's grandmother has a house in the town of Slavyansk in the Kuban. There's a river there with ice-cold water in it. The girl comes back from there a total stranger, wild, smoking cigarettes. Already a woman, for certain.

"Forgive me, Baba Anya!"

"God will forgive you, he forgives everyone. Now go. Don't stay here. And take your old rags with you. The thieves have been here already. I open the door for them all. I'm no one now."

"These aren't rags, these are nice things for a little girl. Wool tights, a little coat, some T-shirts."

Olga was trying to convince Baba Anya that everything was fine, that this horror was just a fantasy imagined by her aching heart, which was, like Olga's, abandoned and hurt.

"Baba Anya, I came out here thinking this might be the last refuge for me."

"There's no such refuge for anyone on earth," Baba Anya said. "Every soul is its own last refuge."

"I thought at least you wouldn't chase me away, you'd take me in. I thought I'd sleep over."

"No, Olga, what are you talking about. I'm telling you. You can't, I don't exist anymore."

"I brought some food, please try it."

"You'll try it yourself later. Now go, go."

"It's cold out there. Here, in the village, the sky, and the air are just...Baba Anya! I so much wanted to come here, I was hoping--"

Baba Anya answered firmly: "I'm worried about Marina. I'm very worried about her."

"I know, I understand that," said Olga. "I'll find her."

"Svetlana's on her way, she's lost everything, but she's still alive. If she were dead, she'd be here. But I don't want to see anyone here, do you understand? Leave me alone, all of you! Where's Marina? I don't want to see her. I don't want to, you get it?"

Baba Anya was obviously talking nonsense. Want, not want. But she stood firm, blocking the hallway with her diminutive frame.

Olga imagined walking home with her heavy load, the bread, the groceries, the liter of milk.

"Baba Anya, do you mind if I just sit here a minute. My legs hurt. My legs really hurt all of a sudden."

"And I'm telling you one more time: Go in peace! Take your legs from here while you still have them!"

Olga went past her, as if Baba Anya wasn't even there, and sat down on a chair in the room.

The smell of an outhouse from the neighbors came in even more strongly through the open window.

The room looked abandoned. There was a wrapped-up mattress on the bed. That never happened at Baba Anya's, she was meticulously neat. She always made the bed very carefully, topping it with lace-covered pillows. And that awful smell!

"Baba Anya, can you put some water on for tea?"

"There's no teakettle, I'm telling you, bad people came and took everything," Baba Anya said from the hallway in that same crystal-clear voice.

"And the water, is there any water?"

"Water... There hasn't been water in a while, only in the well. But I don't go out."

"I'll run out and get some water?" Olga offered from the room. "You haven't had tea in a while, probably?"

"I died two weeks ago."

"You still have the bucket for the well?"

"They took the bucket, too."

Olga took a deep breath, walked into the kitchen and found it completely ransacked. The small cabinet was wide open, the floor was covered in broken glass, a beat-up aluminum pot lay on its side on the floor (Baba Anya used to make kasha in it). In the middle of the floor stood an empty three-liter can from some beans. Seryozha had brought that can once for some dinner, but they didn't open it, they had baked potatoes instead, and they left it for Baba Anya when they went back to the city in the fall.

Olga took the can in her hands.

"And take all your luggage, too!" Baba Anya said.

"How am I going to drag all this to the well?"

"Take it, take it! Take your purse!"

Olga obediently slung her purse over her shoulder and went out the door with the can. Baba Anya dragged the backpack after her, but for some reason she didn't come into the outer hall.

The cold met Olga outside, along with a strong fresh breeze, and everywhere in the abandoned garden were tall blackened weeds, their hollow seeds swaying in the wind. Olga stumbled over to the ravine, where the nearest well was. They'd put in running water for everyone long ago, except they didn't quite reach here, to the impoverished Baba Anya, who couldn't raise the funds for it.

The ravine was covered with old trash, it was practically a dump, and there was no bucket at the

well, just a piece of folded brown string. The bucket had been expropriated, as Baba Anya used to say.

Here Olga's head began to spin, and everything around her turned clearly, blindingly white--but only for an instant. Without losing consciousness, Olga found a big crooked nail, and pulled a chunk of brick from the ground. She broke a hole in the side of the can, though in doing so slashed the index finger on her left hand--she sucked the blood out with her lips--found a fresh ribwort leaf, placed it on the wound, then somehow managed to tie the rope to the can, and released the catch. Her improvised bucket dropped, picked up water, she brought it back up, now as cold as ice, untied the rope from it and, holding it away from her body, carried the cold can, full to the brim, thinking only of poor Baba Anya, who didn't have a drop of water in the house. She went up from the filthy ravine, up the clay path, her legs weren't used to it and hurt, or rather they were numb. At the top of the path Olga put the can down and looked around.

Baba Anya's tattered fence was filled with gaps, and you could see the house clearly from here. Now there were no curtains in the windows! Olga felt an ice-like fear, the dark fear of a healthy person before insanity--the sort of insanity that can tear all the curtains from the four windows in seven or eight minutes.

Still, Baba Anya needed to be fed or at least given something to drink. She'd call the doctors, lock the house, find Marina somehow, or Svetlana, or Dmitry Fedosev. As for who should live here--the homeless Sveta, the heir, who'll drink away the house in the blink of an eye, or poor homeless Marina--wasn't for us to decide. Or she'd take Marina herself! That's what. That's what she'd do, now that she's involved of this business. You wanted to leave your life, well, now you've left it and ended up in someone else's. No place in the world is free of lonely souls in need of help. Seryozha and Nastya will be against it; Seryozha won't say anything, Nastya will say, That's interesting, Mom, as if we didn't know already you were koo-koo. And her mother will of course cause a terrific scandal over the phone.

Olga stood there, thinking all this over, with difficulty, knowing that she should keep going, but her legs had filled with lead, they refused to take orders, didn't want to carry three liters of ice-cold water to the pillaged house of the crazy old woman, didn't want to experience more hardship in this life. The sharp wind howled up the hill where Olga stood, frozen, a mother and wife, standing there like a homeless woman, like a pauper, with her only worldly possession at her feet in the form of a three-liter tin can filled with water. The sharp wind blew, the black skeletons of the trees screeched, and the fresh watermelon

smell of winter appeared. It was cold, bitter, it was getting dark quickly, and she immediately wanted to transport herself home, to her warm, slightly drunken Seryozha, her living Nastya, who must have woken up by now, must be lying there in her night shirt and robe, watching television, eating chips, drinking Coca-Cola and calling up her friends. Seryozha will be going to visit his old school friend now. They'll have some drinks. It was the usual Sunday program, so let it be. In a clean, warm, ordinary house. Without any problems.

Olga took the can in both hands and carried it down, to Baba Anya, but slipped and fell on the clay, spilling half the water on herself. Oh God! Her legs were hurting now for real.

But Baba Anya's door was locked, and no one opened even though she kicked at the door with her sick legs and yelled like a woman possessed.

Someone above her noted, very clearly, very quickly: "She's yelling."

But Olga knew another way into the house, through the ladder into the attic, and there through the chute, along the steps in the wall, you could make your way down to the terrace--they'd climbed into the house that way more than once, she and Seryozha, late at night, when they couldn't find the keys.

Olga left the can at the door.

Baba Anya was sitting inside that house, insane, without water, and there's no way she'd be able to take the food out of the fastened backpack, not in the mindless state she was in. How quickly it can happen to you, when you lose everything, and the intelligent, kind, wonderful human turns into a wary silly little animal...

With some difficulty Olga got the ladder out from under the house, placed it against the wall, climbed up the rickety rungs, the third one gave way and she fell, hurting her legs again (were they broken?). Moaning, she kept climbing, got up on the roof after all, managed to injure her hands, too, and her side was now in pain, and her head, and once again, for a moment, this great white space opened before her, but that was nothing, it disappeared right away, and then she barely dragged herself along the dusty attic, made it down to the terrace—the tortuous unbearable journey. And then the door from the terrace turned out to be locked, too. Apparently Baba Anya had thought of this, and put it on a hook, for fear of thieves.

All right.

Olga broke into tears and began banging on the door with her fists, yelling: "Anna Sergeevna!

Hello! It's me, Olga! Let me in!"

She stood and listened for a moment--there was nothing—just a distant sound like some earth trickling down in a little stream.

"All right," Olga said finally. "I'm leaving. The water is in a can next to the door. There is bread and cheese in the big pocket of the backpack, at the front. The salami is there too."

The way back up the wall was even harder than the way down, her hands wouldn't listen to her at all as she took hold of the notches, and Olga descended the ladder already in a state of half-madness, somehow avoiding the broken third rung. The white light shone in places through the twilight, the white light of unconsciousness.

When she made it to the station, she sat down on an ice-cold bench. It was so cold, her legs were frozen and ached terribly as if they'd been crushed. The train was a long time in coming. Olga curled up on the icy bench. Trains kept passing by the station, she was the only one on the platform. Now it had gotten dark for real.

And then Olga woke up on some kind of bed. Once again there opened before her (there it is!) that endless white space, as if she were surrounded by snow. Olga moaned and turned her gaze to the horizon. There she saw a window, half obstructed by a blue curtain. Outside the window it was night, and lights shone far away. Olga lay in a vast dark room with white walls; her covers were weighing her down like rubble. She couldn't raise her right arm, it was pressed down by some kind of weight. She raised her left hand and began examining it; it was so pale as to be almost transparent. There was a large dark scratch on her pointing finger--from where she'd picked up the brick at Baba Anya's house. But the wound was almost healed.

"Where was I?" Olga asked loudly. "Hey! Hello! Baba Anya!"

She tried to raise herself up--without any success. Her legs hurt fiercely, that much was certain. And a pain was cutting into her lower abdomen.

There was no one around.

Finally she managed to raise herself up, leaning on her right arm, and look around.

She was lying on a bed; a semi-transparent tube was protruding from this bed.

A catheter! They'd put a catheter into her! Like they'd put one into her dying grandmother long ago, in the hospital. And this was a hospital. Nearby there was another bed with an inert mass of white in

it.

“Hello! Oy! Help!” Olga called out. “Help Baba Anya! And Marina Fedoseva! Help them!”

The mass of white in the next bed started moving.

A nurse who’d just woken up walked into the room in her white robe.

“What are you yelling for,” she said. “Quiet. You’ll wake everyone.”

“Where am I?” Olga cried. “Let me up! Marina Fedoseva, you need to find her. Let me up!”

“And you will be up and about, you will. Now that you’ve...returned.” She left and came back with a big needle. While she received her shot, Olga was trying to remember, painfully.

“What’s wrong with me, nurse? Tell me.”

“What’s wrong is that your legs are broken, and your arm, and your pelvic bone. Lie still. Your husband will come tomorrow, and your mother, they’ll tell you everything. Also a concussion. It’s good you woke up. They’ve been coming here, waiting, and nothing. Can you feel your legs?”

“They hurt.”

“That’s good.”

“But where, where? What happened?”

“You got hit by a car, don’t you remember? Sleep now, sleep. You were hit by a car.”

Olga was amazed, she gasped, and once again she was knocking at Baba Anya’s door, trying to bring her water. It was a dark October evening, the windows in the cottage rattled from the wind, her tired legs hurt and so did her broken arm, but Baba Anya didn’t want to let her in, apparently. And then on the other side of the window she saw the worn-out faces of her loved ones, covered in tears--her mother, Seryozha, Nastya. And Olga kept trying to tell them to look for Marina Fedoseva, Marina Dmitrievna, Baba Anya’s Marina, something like that. Look for her, Olga said, look for her. And don’t cry. I’m here.

Marilena's Secret

There once lived a woman who was so fat, she couldn't fit in a taxi, and when going into the subway she took up the whole width of the escalator.

When sitting down, she needed three chairs, and when sleeping, two beds, and she had a job in a circus, where she lifted heavy things.

She was very unhappy--though a lot of fat people live quite happily! They are known for their kindness and sweet temper, and most of us, in general, like fat people.

But the enormous Marilena carried a secret inside her: only when she returned to the hotel at night (the circus is always traveling, after all), where, as usual, three chairs had been set up for her, and two beds--only at night could she really become herself, that is to say, two average-sized, very pretty girls, who would begin, right away, to dance.

The enormous Marilena's secret was that, once upon a time, she'd danced on the stage as two twin ballerinas, one of whom had golden blonde hair, whereas the other, for variety's sake, had curls black as tar--this made it easier for the sisters' admirers to send their bouquets after the performances to the right sister.

And, naturally, a certain magician fell in love with the blonde, whereas he immediately promised to turn the second twin, the brunette, into an electric teakettle, a very loud electric teakettle, that would always travel with the married pair to remind them that this second sister, before she was a teakettle, took just one look at the magician and immediately tried to convince her sister to break off the acquaintance.

But just as he was pointing his magic wand at the brunette, her sister, the blonde, got so red in the face, and so sweaty, and irritated, and started hissing and bubbling, no less than a teakettle--that the magician realized this wasn't going to work.

"Brides like this," said the magician, who knew a thing or two about it, having been married 17 times, "wives like this are even worse than teakettles, because whereas you can turn off a teakettle, you can't do anything about a boiling woman."

He decided to punish the troublesome twosome.

Now, all this took place in the hallway backstage, where he'd cornered the twins after the show

so he could meet the blonde and propose his marriage plans right away.

It's hard to tell about his other skills--but this he certainly knew how to do.

Incidentally, if anything didn't go right for him immediately, he'd lose interest and grow bored and just abandon the whole thing halfway through.

He usually transformed his old girlfriends and wives at random, into whatever came to mind: a weeping willow, or a water faucet, or a fountain in the center of town.

He liked to make them weep for the rest of their lives.

"You'll do your share of sobbing, trust me," he told the girls now, blocking them in the crowded hallway on the way to the dressing room.

"Oh, really?" answered the sisters. "And do you know that when we were born, the Fairy Butterbread said that if anyone ever makes us cry, he'll turn into a cow! And he'll be milked five times a day! And he'll spend his whole life up to his knees in manure!"

"Oh really?" laughed the wizard. "In that case I have a present for you! You'll never be able to cry again! That's one! And two--you'll never see each other again! Now that we're at it!"

But the sisters replied:

"The Fairy Butterbread thought of that, too. She said that if anyone separates us, he'll be turned into a dysentery germ, and will spend the rest of his life in hospitals, in terrible conditions!"

"That's even better!" said the failed bridegroom-wizard. "I'll keep you two together forever and ever! You'll always be together--the Fairy Butterbread will be very pleased. Unless of course"--and here he laughed quietly to himself--"someone tries to divide you in two, in which case I agree that the guilty party should indeed be turned into a dysentery germ! I think that's fair--really your Fairy is a mensch. But who will even think of cutting you in half?"

Then the twins answered:

"That won't work! By the Fairy Butterbread's enchantment, no matter what, under any circumstances and in any weather, we need to dance together every night for two hours!"

The wizard thought about it and said:

"That's not a problem. You can have your two hours. When no one sees you, you will dance two hours every day--and you'll live to regret it, believe me."

Here the twins turned pale and threw their arms around one another and began saying their

goodbyes--but already they were unable to cry.

Meanwhile the wizard, chuckling to himself, waved his magic wand, and right away a girl-mountain rose before him, pale and frightened, with a chest like a big pillow, a back like a blow-up mattress, and a stomach like a bag of potatoes.

This girl waddled heavily to the mirror, took one look, let out a groan--and fainted.

"And that's that," the wizard said sadly, and disappeared.

Why sadly? Because life always appeared to him in its worst aspects, even though he could do anything. Really, he had no life to speak of.

No one loved him, even his parents, whom he'd once, after a minor argument, turned into a pair of slippers.

Naturally his slippers were constantly getting lost.

The wizard took vengeance on everyone who failed to love him. He literally laughed at all the poor, powerless human beings, and they paid him back in fear and hatred.

He had everything: palaces, planes, and ocean liners, but no one loved him.

Maybe if some kindly soul had come along and taken care of him, he'd have brightened up, like a copper pan that has a dutiful master.

But the trouble was that he himself couldn't love anyone, and even in the passing smile of a stranger he saw some evil scheme and a hidden wish to get something from him for nothing.

Here however we'll leave him—he walks through the wide world, not fearing anyone (which is too bad), while our fat girl was immediately kicked out of the theater by the guards, who said she had no right to be there. She wasn't even able to take the twins' purses, with their money in them—who was she to be grabbing other people's things?

Marilena--formerly Maria and Lena--nearly died of hunger in those first few days. She lived at the train station, then in the municipal gardens. She couldn't dance anymore to earn her living, and who's going to give their spare change to someone like her—who ever heard of a fat beggar?

A beggar like that needs to go away somewhere quiet and lose some weight, otherwise she'll starve.

And she'll lose that weight quickly, believe me.

But our Marilena couldn't lose weight, even if she'd stopped eating entirely: the wizard had made

sure of that.

Incidentally, many overweight people seem to be cursed in just this way: no matter how much they diet, the weight comes right back, as if by black magic.

In any case, no one invited our Marilena to perform her dancing duets anymore.

First of all, because you can't dance a duet by yourself!

Second, because she was too fat.

Finally, no one recognized her, and everyone knows that you can only get on in show business if you have connections.

However, late at night in the park or among the backyards of the train station, the big fattie would turn into two very thin ballerinas and very sadly, stumbling from hunger, dance a Charleston, a tap number, some rock and roll, and the *pas-de-deux* from the ballet "Sleeping Beauty."

But at those times no one saw her, just as the wizard had promised.

Finally she figured out a way to make things better: she went to the circus and proposed a booth in which she'd eat a fried bull in ten minutes.

The directors of the circus thought this a grand idea, and they set up a trial run, in which the hungry Marilena ate an entire bull in four and a half minutes!

The bull was, it's true, rather petit and definitely underfed, as the directors of the circus didn't want to spend too much money.

After eating the bull, Marilena felt such a burst of strength, that, in her excitement, she picked up the director and the head administrator, each with one of her pinkies, and carried them around the arena.

Here she was immediately signed up at the circus as the world's strongest woman--hailing, it was announced, from the islands of Fuji-Wuji, where she was a world champion.

No one mentioned the bull-eating anymore, as that could have incurred serious expenses.

Instead, every evening Marilena put on a show wherein she picked up a horse and buggy, a steam-boat, and, as an encore, the entire first row of the audience, who sat on connected chairs.

That's the only way she could make money at the circus. In art you must always shock your audience; otherwise you'll quickly starve to death.

Breathing heavily, after every show she'd go to a restaurant, where she'd eat a whole fried lamb, drink a jug of milk, and then, without paying, take a taxi to her hotel.

Her supper was a commercial for the restaurant—gamblers would gather there to bet on how quickly Marilena would eat her lamb.

Her shopping also took place in the same spirit of fun. Tailors would sew dresses for fat Marilena and then invite the television crews and photographers: Here's Marilena BEFORE, and here's Marilena AFTER. Look how she's been transformed by the dress!

And the magazines printed photos of the big happy fat girl with her pretty face—it's true that, because it was now double the size, her nose was bigger, but, on the other hand, her eyes were simply enormous, and her teeth were so big and so white that all the toothpaste and toothbrush companies threw themselves at her feet, begging her to advertise their pastes and brushes.

In other words, she became much richer than she'd ever been.

And now she became seriously annoyed by her night-time dances, which she'd brought upon herself by making up the Fairy Butterbread when faced with the gullible wizard.

Because by now she'd begun to forget that inside of her were two souls, and these souls kept quiet and cried without tears in the dark prison of her powerful body. In their place there was now growing up inside Marilena's body a whole strange new soul, fat and gluttonous, obnoxious and fun-loving, greedy and tactless, witty when this was advantageous for her, and grim when it wasn't.

It's no secret, of course, that souls sometimes die within a person and are replaced by others—especially with age.

Marilena's new soul knew perfectly well which journalists from which papers needed to be treated to dinner before an interview, and when the best time was to visit the dance club for oppressed overweight people, and when she should deliver the companies' presents to the orphans (the companies paid her for this, too).

She no longer cared about her nightly dances and about the two souls that were allowed for some reason to appear for two hours every evening, miserable and lonely—they disrupted her entire schedule, they didn't know the way things worked, that she'd had a hard day, there was a flight to catch at six in the morning. They didn't know how to count profit and loss, but instead would suddenly start to remember their hometown and their poor mother and father, who'd died, and this just got in the way of

the whole evening's fun, for Marilena.

They became especially troublesome when Marilena acquired a fiancé, a young man named Vladimir, with very plump lips, who quickly took all her accounts upon himself, and all her calculations and negotiations.

And he would become very annoyed that every evening Marilena disappeared for two hours and came back looking like a horse run ragged, and refused to talk with anyone and shut off the phone.

He'd taken over Marilena's whole life, and couldn't understand where these two unpaid hours were going, and he'd throw loud tantrums about it.

Marilena loved him and gave him an enormous salary, and even hired his sister Nelly. But for some reason she was too shy to tell him about those two hours.

One day, Nelly, the sister, announced that Vladimir had set up a vast ad campaign about dieting for Marilena. It was for two companies that specialized in special diets and cosmetic operations.

And they'd be paying her an enormous sum of money!

They couldn't let this chance pass by, Nelly insisted. Vladimir was off on a business trip, to both South and North America, and would return just in time to see his new, young, thin bride.

"I'll be able to dance," said Marilena—forgetting that if she became too thin the two souls inside her would die of hunger.

Nelly answered by saying that she was also going into the same clinic for some plastic surgery—she too would be getting younger and changing a few things about her face, she said. "So you won't suffer alone," joked Nelly, who was usually very grim.

So Marilena was taken to the clinic, where experienced surgeons photographed her from all sides, then hid these photographs for later (when they'd cause a sensation), and then led Marilena down the corridors of the clinic, further and further down, and finally locked her in a room—a very nice room, except with no windows in it.

Marilena couldn't understand what was happening, she wanted to call someone but there was no telephone. She knocked on the door, but no one came.

She started knocking harder, then simply banging on the door—and don't forget, Marilena

worked as a strong-woman at the circus—but still it was in vain.

Having bloodied her hands with all her knocking, Marilena collapsed on the floor. But suddenly she heard some distant strains of music, as she always did before the dancing began, and then saw her thin little sister, and herself became Maria again, and together they danced.

Apparently it was time for their evening dance, and cursing everything in the world, the two twins danced with their bloody hands.

They told each other what they'd long suspected—that this was the beginning of the end, that Vladimir had decided to get rid of Marilena and take all the money for himself, and that the clinic was just a trap.

But their performance was barely over when fat Marilena devoured the dinner that had appeared somehow next to the door.

After her dinner, Marilena felt terribly sleepy and had just enough time to realize that she'd been poisoned before she collapsed right where she was, next to the wardrobe.

When the prisoner awoke, she decided to fight for her life and not eat anything, just drink water from the tap—but you know how fat people are, they can't go an hour without eating something, and sure enough Marilena soon had to eat what was left for her next to the door—a pot of thick meat and cabbage soup with the bone still in it.

After eating this she literally crashed onto the bed and lay there unconscious until she was stirred awake by the soft strains of music that announced her evening dances.

Now Maria and Lena danced together with difficulty, it was a slow, clumsy waltz, a farewell waltz, because by now it was clear: someone had decided to poison big Marilena.

For much of the time the sisters talked about their imminent death, prayed and wept without tears, bid farewell to one another, remembered their childhood, their father, who left them so early, and their mother who died soon after.

And where their parents' souls had gone, so the sisters were now destined to go.

The next day big Marilena didn't even have the strength to get out of bed and drink some water from the tap.

She lay there under her own enormous weight, and talked quietly to herself in her two voices—and one of the voices was whiny and petulant, while the other was soft and kind.

“If you’d agreed to marry that wizard, none of this would have happened to us,” said the first voice.

“Right, and now you’d be a teakettle,” said the other.

“No, we’d have convinced him not to do that! And anyway, I’d rather be a living teakettle than dying like this, in prison.”

“Don’t worry,” said the first, soft, kind voice, “soon the angels will bring us to Mother and Father.”

“We don’t need anything!” wailed Marilena. “No money, no Vladimir, just let us go live somewhere on the islands of Fuji-Wuji!”

“If only,” Marilena answered herself curtly.

And then a miracle occurred: with a soft rustle one of the walls slid aside, and Marilena felt the night’s dampness against her skin, though she couldn’t believe it.

The room slowly filled with an evening fog and the smell of jasmine and hyacinths.

The head of Marilena’s bed was pushing right against a wild rose bush, and its simple pink flowers hung now over her pillow.

With great difficulty Marilena picked herself up and crawled into the garden and collapsed into some stinging weeds, and a whole rain of dew fell upon her.

The thirsty Marilena licked the moisture from the grass and her wet hands with her dry lips. Then she jumped up—the quiet music was already playing—and began to perform some kind of dance among the bushes, either a cricket dance, or a mosquito dance, with hops and jumps.

“Don’t you see?” Maria cried out happily. “We’re in heaven!”

“Oh no, already?” Lena sobbed without tears. “What about my life? Is it over?”

Just then the two ballerinas were grabbed by two sets of strong paws, and as it happens these were people without any wings or white robes—just regular security guards with guns and sweaty shirts.

They grabbed the ballerinas and dragged them roughly, even though they didn’t in the least bit resist, just Lena squeaked out something like, “I don’t think this is heaven.”

The guards apparently dragged their prisoners through the wild rose bushes, because pretty soon their hands and shoulders were scratched and even bleeding, so that by the time the girls were

dragged into the porter's room, they looked like people from the wild.

Right away the guards wrote up a protocol about the violation of a secure zone, and then they began interrogating the sisters as roughly as they could, especially on the subject of whether the prisoners could pay a fine of three million rubles immediately. If so, they'd be released.

"Where would we get that kind of money?" the blonde Maria asked them. "We don't even know anyone here, we're just passing through. We're dancers from the ballet."

"Are you out of your minds?" the brunette Lena yelled at them. "Just grabbing people for no reason! We'll file a complaint!"

"All right, if you have no money, you're going to get a prison sentence of life without parole!" the guard said cruelly. "You don't maybe have two million? We're not greedy."

But here something strange happened—another guard ran into the room and barked: "Who's this? This isn't her! You let her escape! What are you two doing here? Nelly's yelling like a mad-woman! There's supposed to be one fat one—and you've got two ragged clothes-hangers! You'll answer for this yourselves, then. She's coming now."

And sure enough, a woman all bundled up in bandages ran into the porter's room accompanied by a suite of doctors in their robes. With all her bandages, you could only recognize her by her low, mean voice.

"What's this? Where is she? What, you want to go to back to prison? Why were you hired, huh? As soon as she left her room, you kill her in self-defense! Who's this you're showing me?"

"They were just, just standing right where the wall opens," the guard defended himself. "These two rag dolls. There was no one else there."

"What, what, you crook! You dead man! Why I'll send you to Fuji-Wuji for this! Did you forget what your sentence was? Vladimir did everything for you, he saved you from death row, and now this? What are you waiting for? Get out there and comb that garden! And put these two in separate rooms and interrogate them, maybe they know something."

With that, Nelly and her suite of doctors left the room.

The only one left was the head guard, the one who asked for the three million.

With a sweet smile, he said: "Oh, you'll tell me everything! I have such methods—such nice methods! Oh, you'll talk, you'll confess that you killed the fat girl yourselves and ate her. And raw, at that.

There's no other way. And you'll be executed! Whereas we'll be paid three million for our hard work. Marilena was supposed to be killed accidentally anyway. Do you hear? And anyway that big fatso was all filled up with narcotics. And she was supposed to kill one of us here, by the way. That one, he looked in, he doesn't know, naturally. Telling everyone what to do, he is. Too bad it didn't work out. But this is even easier. Oh, I have such terrible methods of torture! You'll be amazed, I guarantee you. You'd be better off confessing now, so as not to suffer too much before your execution. Because you ate her, didn't you?"

But here the two hours of dancing apparently came to an end, because Maria began to be drawn inexorably toward Lena, and Lena toward Maria, and the guard found himself in between them.

"Hey!" he yelled. "What are you doing? What's gotten into you two? I'll shoot! Stay where you are!"

Maria and Lena were already flowing into one another around him.

Here the desperate guard reached behind his belt for a knife and began blindly chopping the air with it.

And right after the first blow, when he divided Maria's arm from Lena's arm, the sisters felt that they no longer needed to join together.

The bloodied, scratched-up ballerinas found themselves standing there staring at one another; the guard was gone.

"You know what happened?" cried the incredulous Lena. "It's just as the wizard predicted. Whoever tries to divide us will turn into a dysentery stick!"

"Eww," said Maria, "let's get out of here, we've had enough trouble without picking up dysentery."

Shocked and staring at the floor—where, according to their calculations, right now a fat, hairy dysentery microbe should be crawling—the sisters ran out of the room.

Sometimes one evil defeats another evil, and two minuses make a plus!

No one stopped them.

They ran out into the garden, stumbled around for a long time in the wet bushes until they found a gate and a guard on the lookout.

"Hurry, there's a fat woman with a knife in there, she threatened to stab us!"

"A fat one?" the guard became excited and threw himself at the telephone.

Lena and Maria jumped out of the gate. They were free. They ran away from that cursed place as

fast as they could, ran and ran, until they reached the familiar train station, from long ago.

Where else is a homeless person to go?

They washed up, first in a puddle behind some bushes (apparently it had rained in the city that night, while they were escaping), and then in the bathroom.

The few scratches on their foreheads and hands were nothing—all sorts of things can happen to wandering poor people.

At the train station, Lena and Maria looked through some newspapers that were lying around and learned that tomorrow would see the long-awaited triumphant return of big Marilena, the star of the circus, who now weighed fifty kilograms instead of one hundred.

Next to this announcement was a photo of the new Marilena (quite obviously the secretary Nelly, but with big teeth and widened eyelids, which made her look a little cross-eyed, like a bulldog, but what can you do) and an ad for a remarkable clinic where in three days a person can get a new body and also be habituated to a new healthy diet through the use of miraculous herbs.

It also said that Marilena was leaving the circus to pursue a new life, since she can no longer lift heavy things or eat whole lambs, and is no longer in fact the world's strongest woman nor the champion of the islands of Fuji-Wuji.

But now she's bought herself a dieting clinic and an institute for herbal remedies and appointed her husband Vladimir as director—they'd been married long ago, according to the paper, but kept it secret, because a great artist can't belong to just one person, as she belongs to everyone.

Moreover, the new Marilena has opened a museum of the old, fat Marilena, where the fat strong woman's old things will be displayed, including her underwear, and photos of her with her husband Vladimir.

The newspaper also printed photos of the gradual transformation of the old fat Marilena into the new Marilena, although this was already obviously a fake and a cheat, as both Maria and Lena well knew. But what can't you do these days with some retouched photo negatives!

Here too there was an interview with Vladimir in the family car, a Rolls-Royce, King-Sized (the king size was made special for the old Marilena, but they couldn't just throw away a working car, could they?), before a new palace and in front of the very clinic the sisters had escaped from that night.

"He set everything up so smartly," Maria said.

“It’s good we never told him about the dances!” Lena said. “That’s thanks to you—you were afraid he’d be offended if he found he had two fiancées.”

They were quiet for a moment, standing in the empty nighttime train station.

“So what do we do now?” asked Lena.

“We dance,” said Maria.

“Of course! Remember the old rule? In any predicament one must dance!”

And they assumed the first position, and, quietly pronouncing the magic phrase, “one-two-three, one-two-three-four,” they began to perform dance steps.

Immediately a small circle of nighttime bums, station workers, and sleepy late-departing passengers with their suitcases and children formed around them. Everyone clapped in delight and threw some very small coins to show their appreciation (rich people don’t sit in train stations at night).

The ballerinas gathered the money quickly, knowing that wherever there’s a crowd there will soon be policemen with their nightsticks, and departed from their temporary stage, bought tickets for the next train, and left this terrible town where they’d had so many adventures because of their talent and beauty.

A year later, the LenMary sisters were famous in the next town over for their wonderful dance performances in the most expensive theater, and now they were accompanied everywhere by their own bodyguard, a frail old man in a general’s uniform (generals are more feared, for some reason), and they had a house on the sea and contracts to visit all the countries of the world, including the obscure islands of Fuji-Wuji.

Among their audience, incidentally, you can quite often meet the wizard, who sends them flowers, emerald crowns, and fans made from peacock feathers—he has strange tastes. He’s also afraid of the sisters and their unseen protector, the Fairy Butterbread, since she was able to defeat his own powerful spell.

Now he enjoys loving from afar, in secret and out of harm’s way.

Especially as the unknown and fearsome Butterbread might still punish him for his little tricks of long ago.

Strangely enough, the sisters also often receive love letters from a man named Vladimir.

He writes to say that he's loved Maria and Lena ever since he first saw them, and he doesn't even know how to choose one over the other, and so is willing to marry each of them in turn.

In the meantime, he writes, he has found himself in some financial difficulties, having been robbed by his cruel wife Marilena, who somehow put all of their shared property in her own name and then ran off to who knows where. Meanwhile the clinic that he, Vladimr, headed has been infected by dysentery, and the government forced him to burn the whole thing down! So for the time being Vladimir asks for a temporary loan of just thirty million, with a payback period of 49 years.

These letters were always accompanied by photos of Vladimir in his swim suit, in a tuxedo at a fancy ball, in a turtleneck reading a book and then in a leather coat and hat next to the smoking ruins of his clinic, with a rueful smile on his pale face.

The sisters, it's true, never read these letters. They are read in his free time—and with great interest—by the old general, who then files them into a folder, affixes a number and places it on a shelf, hoping that someday he will be able to retire and in his retirement write a novel, with photographs, about the surprising power of the love of one young man, V. "The Sorrows of Young V.," it will be called.

--Translated from the Russian by Anya Gessen and Keith Gessen