

THE GARDEN

By Marina Stepnova

Excerpts translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

Chunk 1

There was lavish, never-ending, triumphant jubilation all around. Lush, almost primeval greenery had thrust its way out of everything, curling, twisting into loops, bristling into frantic little fringes. Nadezhda Alexandrovna could physically feel quiet, unstoppable motion all around her: sleepy buzzing bees, whining mosquitoes, flowing juices in unseen, robust veins, babbling leaves, and even the high-pitched, labored squeak of future plants' pale young shoots pushing aside the earth. Hölderlin, whom she so loved, the poor, poor man (forty of the seventy-three years allotted to him spent under a stratum, many kilometers of the most transparent German madness) would have called that garden a hymn to nature's divine forces. Of course it was not a hymn at all, it was simply the hum of an organism functioning normally, full of sounds, both secret and overt, which only the most hopeless prude would have dared call unseemly.

A raspberry bush pleaded, pulling at Nadezhda Alexandrovna's hemline, and she gently drew a long branch aside as if it were a hand – it was taut, covered in microscopic but tenacious whitish thorns. There were no berries, mind you (the damn servant girl had not lied) – they had simply forgotten to prune the bushes for winter and so, lacking their previous care, the orphaned plants had all grown into lush fruitless greenery. On the other hand, entire scads of sour cherries

had ripened. And what cherries! Nadezhda Alexandrovna craned her neck and the world whirled above her – green and scarlet, dark-smooth, ripe, pierced through with light – and she began laughing from joy. Having grown up in the middle of escheated Finnic bogs, she could not even imagine such a convincing triumph of divine flesh. Nadezhda Alexandrovna leapt and picked a heavy, warm cherry. Just then, a flock of alarmed thrushes flew up out of the tree, cursing their uninvited new mistress with especially foul, vulgar words.

Come now, she muttered. Don't make a racket. There's plenty here for everyone.

The cherries' flavor turned out to be exactly the same as their appearance: heavy, hot, and dark. Alive. The next one, too. And another. And another. Nadezhda Alexandrovna quickly soaked her batiste hankie and then – after tossing it into the grass, small, balled up, and covered in bright spots resembling a consumptive's blood – proceeded to lick her sticky fingers, rushing, greedy, and swallowing hard little pits every now and then in her haste. The next row of cherries turned out to be completely different: light, almost white inside, a little sour, and cool. Nadezhda Alexandrovna strode on, suddenly staggered by her discovery of the previous mistress's design: yes, exactly, the Roditelev cherries had not yet matured, they hung green, barely showing a blush, awaiting their coming hour. The garden had been arranged as rationally and simply as a revolver: it fired row by row, so not a week went by when the owners were left without a harvest, be it cherries, plums, apples, or pears succeeding one other when their time came to ripen.

Nadezhda Alexandrovna walked over to an apple tree and picked, then bit into a big, lumpy apple, an unprepossessing freak whose warm, fragrant juice frothed on her lips. It turned out the pears were still as hard as rocks, wooden to both the tongue and the eye, but she grazed on the blackthorns to eat her fill, completely forgetting about the conventions befitting her family

line and surname, and just grunting when soft, overripe plums plopped on her head. The most luscious – blue-gray, transparent throughout, juicy – hung highest of all and Nadezhda Alexandrovna’s underarms quickly grew hot from her joyous exertion and jumping. And the telltale, prosaic spots on her linen dress would be transformed more than eighty years later into the most wonderful of quotes in an autobiographical novel by an author and poet she would never know. But no, it was too early: only his father had been born into this world in 1869...

Ah, so it’s you rattling the branches here, my dear! And I was thinking a bear had climbed up. I’d even ordered weapons be handed out. Let me, I’m thinking, I’ll take one down right in the garden, drag it in for supper, since you’ve labeled me a troglodyte.

Nadezhda Alexandrovna turned around: she’d been caught off guard, happy, with telltale berry stains on her lace collar, now askew, and even her hem; with twigs, dry inflorescences, and weightless, joyous wood dross tangled in her hair. Her husband looked at her as affectionately and merrily as he had back twenty-five years ago after asking her to dance a mazurka for the first time, no strings attached. Several months later, just as affectionately and merrily, he had led her – slender and barely noticeable in a cloud of silk and organza, very, very young – to their marriage. Affectionately and merrily described them in general, as a wonderful, even brilliant, match: the gallant guard officer with the glorious name that resounded throughout Russia and the pretty little countess with the fabulous dowry, a darling of the tsar’s family, treated kindly at court. Their parents cautiously conferred (bringing them together as if they were trotting horses worth thousands, as if they were pedigreed dogs) after counting up all the family generations, making provisions for all possible imperfections and options. And they had benefited. The marriage turned out to be as successful, affectionate, and merry as a blessed angel wing. Everything, everything turned out ideally. Fortune, the cards, habits, ways of life, even

biochemistry (the existence of which nobody then even suspected) were benevolent to the Boryatinskys and so everything came together: scents, the flavor of saliva, and a quiet bodily warmth, so they were never unpleasant for one another, and in the evenings (neither too often nor too rarely) when Vladimir Anatolyevich would approach his wife's bedroom, he was always certain to find her door unlatched. Cool Petersburg air, cool Dutch linen, cool skin of smooth forearms, fine veins, weak sigh, noiseless and cool ritual, not ritual even but sacrament.

I thank you, my dear. Good night. May an angel protect you.

They never quarreled either and Nadezhda Alexandrovna suddenly realized that was dreadful. She no longer wanted affectionately and merrily, she wanted something different.

Now, in that lush, almost indecent and overly swollen garden, she abruptly realized she had lived twenty-five years with her husband, simply side by side, as if they truly were not people but well-groomed little house dogs who had grown accustomed to a common food dish and sleeping ledge so long ago that all the vitally important, animal differences between them had been erased. It was for one to run, the other to chase, yelp while skirmishing, bite, insist on having their way, and finally yield, though only after a long, blistering run, only after battle. Nadezhda Alexandrovna was surrounded by books she had read: they quietly mumbled, overflowing with fictions and incorporeal shadows, each of which, unlike Nadezhda Alexandrovna herself, had lived a wonderful, full-blooded life. She had even carried two children into the world without the promised sufferings, and that unhurried, drawn-out, long pain of viviparity could not be compared with the make-believe Natasha Rostova's minute-long ordeal of mourning her beloved.

The word is so prized: "beloved"! Like a crown. Adorned in sharp, gleaming little teeth.

Nadezhda Alexandrovna leapt again, plucked a dark blue plum that barely fit in her cupped hand, and walked over to her husband. His eyes still smiled and he was still watching, as affectionately and merrily as always, and his temples were already grayed, my god, and the whiskers on either side of his mouth were luxuriant, splendid, scented as usual with Grasse verbena and London tobacco, and thoroughly nipped by frost, too, and under her false ringlets was a genuine whiteness; cold was approaching from all sides, loneliness, loneliness, twenty-five years together, and he still looks at her that way, and the whole time it has not been right, not right, it turned out it has not been right at all. Nadezhda Alexandrovna bit into the hot plum and held it out to her husband – broken open, almost biblical, almost a fig flowing with hunger and honey, from the garden of the small, dark-footed and also fictional Shulamite.

Here, take it, darling. Try it.

He still didn't understand, diligently and politely chewing, his back teeth still his own, the front ones, she knew, already cold ceramic crowns from elsewhere. They were so old, good lord, already so old, how could she have overlooked that, how could he have allowed it!

Tea has already been set, as you directed...

Nadezhda Alexandrovna did not let him finish: she rose on tiptoe and lurched to pull her husband to herself, as he still chewed, still not understanding. Flesh of plum, saliva, juice of sun slipping away, deafening aroma of fresh sweat...

No, not merrily and affectionately. Not merrily and not affectionately. But like this, like this, like this! And also like this. Yes, I want to. I truly so want to.

Chunk 2

The quail, a female, was grayish and unprepossessing, and she was sitting nestled into grass just as gray, meaning Boryatinsky nearly stepped on her, then veered after stumbling on a hummock. The quail didn't even stir and only her squinted little black eye made clear that she was alive. Are you out of your mind, sweetheart? Or are you playing games with me?

Boryatinsky looked closer. So it was. Several light clumps of dust – fledglings – lay beside the quail. Also playing dead with all their might. Boryatinsky bent and wanted to touch one with a finger but the mother quail quickly billowed, puffing her feathers and attempting to scare him or at least cover all the fledglings at once, though she also immediately grasped that it was no use, she could not. A wave ran along her back, not from a tremor but from pain, so visible, so noticeable, that Boryatinsky withdrew his hand. Pitied her. Despite being an inveterate, experienced hunter who sometimes bagged so much game during a season that it was even shameful to boast.

The quail went still again as if she hoped Boryatinsky had not come for her or didn't exist anyway, just as a personal death does not exist. After all, only others die. And each of us is secretly certain of our own immortality. Boryatinsky inopportunistically recalled a particularly successful trip to the marshes: whistling of wings, fervor, pleasant pain in a shoulder tired from the rifle butt, and a victorious, primeval return home with trophies. Nadenka, who was already noticeably large with child at the time, came out on the back porch and saw a heap of teals nearly as high as the top stair. The women were bustling around, the French chef cawed, calling out orders, and a breeze fanned the fluffy feathers, pulling them, puffing them, so the mountain of shot fowl stirred as if it were alive. How she had gazed then, Nadenka. First at the mountain, then at him...

Shoo, Boryatinsky muttered and nudged the clueless quail with the toe of his boot. Shoo, go on, silly. And take your children with you.

The mother quail flapped as if she'd come to her senses and her brood shuffled into a thicket, alternately going still and huddling into the ground or scurrying and cheeping. It was as if a snake had slithered past. Everything jingled quietly, very faintly, from the heat, like leaves on a tin garland, and only the sun, nearly invisible, had dissolved into the gray sky, seeming not only soundless but completely motionless, too.

Boryatinsky's hound – flashy and broad-chested – ran to him, panting loudly. He sniffed the shaggy grass the mother quail had crushed and glanced guiltily into Boryatinsky's eyes. You lost your chance, you old dummy, Boryatinsky softheartedly said in reproach; the hound's ears and tail immediately drooped. In embarrassment. Boryatinsky patted his warm reddish head and scratched his withers in a spot that was distinctive, odd: it looked as if a butterfly had landed and spread its white wings on the dog's coat. The fur under Boryatinsky's fingers was strange, lifeless.

Boryatinsky looked up and suddenly realized the forest was lifeless, too, as if it had been drawn. No, not even drawn but imprinted on the grayish sky, as if it were an engraving from a children's book. And the tower on the horizon was not Russian, it was toothy, from that same book with the long-forgotten title. The surrounding grayness thickened, and squished – it was dangerous, not real, which the hound seemed to sense, so he pressed his side into Boryatinsky's leg and began softly growling. Don't be silly, Pilate, Boryatinsky scolded. But the dog choked from fear and growled louder, very loudly, with almost human intonations, it's, it's, it's...

It's ending, said a squeaky, childish voice.

And Boryatinsky woke up.

He was lying on the sofa in his study, head uncomfortably thrown back and, most likely, snoring horribly. Yegor, the valet, shifted from one foot to the other at the doorway and, in the dark, a candle accentuated first his grayed side-whiskers and then a row of tightly crowded book spines. Boryatinsky sat up, rubbed his numb neck, and groped with his feet in search of house shoes. Where the, confound it... Ah! There it is. And another.

Yegor, I dreamt of Pilate. Can you imagine? After all, I've never had a better dog. Eight years and I can't find a replacement.

It's ending, Vladimir Anatolyevich, Yegor repeated guiltily in a voice that was squeaky, not his own, shaky from tears, Nadezhda Alexandrovna ordered...

Boryatinsky gasped and didn't hear him out: he ran off, wrapping himself in his robe along the way.

It was hot in the nursery, exactly like in the dream he just had, and some frenzied women, completely unfamiliar, were darting around. Boryatinsky had trouble recognizing the disheveled, sweaty Tanya, who was pushing one of the women away from a very quiet, frightening cradle. Not a sound carried from it. Not a one. There was absolutely nothing to breath – it was as if he'd dived head-first under a quilt. And the stench, good Lord! What was that, anyway! Boryatinsky looked around the room for his wife and didn't find her. She'd stepped out? They carried her out? Tanya, he barked, Tanya, what the hell! Where is Nadezhda Alexandrovna? Tanya turned around and the woman she'd been attempting to pull away found a moment and seized the child, small and as hard as a log, from the cradle. Lifeless, that was absolutely obvious.

Tanya threw up her hands – now what was that all about! Give the child back! But the woman pushed Tanya away, took refuge off in some corner, among chairs, blocked the child

with her whole body, then suddenly bared her teeth. Boryatinsky had seen this so many times when hunting! That motion with the side and rear. To close off. Protect. The threateningly raised upper lip. That desperation, that rage. Of these helpless and terrifying mothers. She-wolves, she-bears, doe hares. The doe hare is nothing – the female quail, even that one, the one that wasn't real, the one in the dream, would also have been glad to kill Boryatinsky. She simply could not. She could only die. And she would have died. Any mother would have died. If only for the sake...

By death conquering death, reaching the very foundation of life. Its essence.

The woman suddenly hissed through her bared, clenched teeth – *Meisel, faites venir Meisel immédiatement!* – and only then did Boryatinsky recognize her.

It was Nadya. His Nadenka.

Princess Nadezhda Alexandrovna Boryatinskaya.

Née von Stenbok.

Chunk 3

Out of the entire visit to the Uvarov home, all that lodged in Meisel's memory was the huge, nearly human-height greenish vase standing at the entrance: he had recoiled from it as if it were alive. And then there was his excellency's very white belly, which breathed as softly as dough under Mudrov's focused fingers. Meisel had no recollection whatsoever of either the promised team of four horses or the carriage or the palace itself – he simply had not taken note.

Something else surprised him very much. Before touching the patient, Mudrov had extracted a dark phial from his pocket and assiduously rubbed his hands with a thick yellowish liquid. It smelled of something familiar, unexpectedly satiating, edible.

Olive oil, Mudrov confirmed. I recommend it, colleague. *Cholera morbus* is highly communicable not only from inhaling air spoiled by insalubrious fumes and miasmas, but also from touching very ill patients. Thus, one cannot reject precautionary measures prescribed for quarantine.

Cholera – the Lord is gracious – was not confirmed in count Uvarov.

The count (who had but overworked his innards at a dinner party) beamed with relief as he received recommendations of a hygienic character: eschew raw or overly cold foods, keep his body warm, and avoid chills. Mudrov advised wearing (and not removing) a special band of baize or flannel at his midsection in order that his abdomen remain warm. Right then and there he sketched that very abdominal band on a sheet of paper.

Meisel was absolutely unneeded and stood beside them like a post. He did not even nod.

Mudrov accepted the money (a respectable assignat flashing zeroes) and put it in his pocket with barely a bow. Count Uvarov entreated them to stay for dinner but Mudrov declined – politely, adamantly, with the same calm dignity as he took the honorarium. Meisel envied him. He was unable to do that. And really, to be honest, he was unable to do much of anything. But now he saw why it was worth learning.

They also declined horses – Mudrov proposed walking, to loosen their limbs, thankfully it truly was close. In actuality, Meisel did not want to return either. He was weary of death. Simply weary. Mudrov stopped outside the gate and held out several ample banknotes for Meisel.

Your share, colleague, he said, not giving Meisel a chance to even open his mouth, Take this, I shall be none the worse. Nor will His Excellency. If you yourself will not hold yourself in high esteem, nobody will trust your treatments.

But why...

Mudrov again did not allow him to finish, he already understood.

I recommend that you heed both the abundance or the modesty of the patient's means. And sometimes – Mudrov emphasized the word *sometimes* in a voice that seemed to palpate – sometimes treat gratis, regarding grateful memory more highly than momentary glory.

Hippocrates; Meisel recognized the quote.

Exactly. As they say, Hippocrates had his patience tried and bids us, too, to those same trials. Well then, shall we go? You know which route to take? We shan't go astray?

They walked through the hot, empty city and continued discussing, unhurried, with gusto, those very abdominal bands that Mudrov had seriously and sincerely put his hope in because, Colleague, if cooled perspiration falls on the stomach and bowels, it will generate a tendency for contracting cholera. For it is in the stomach and bowels that cholera makes its visit.

Meisel nodded, serious, feeling glad Mudrov was speaking to him as an equal and even trusted him to carry his doctor bag (truth be told, Meisel practically took the bag away from him, hoping to feel himself at least somewhat necessary, if only the very slightest bit). They walked through Haymarket Square without noticing it, zealously comparing the properties of chlorinated lime; according to Mudrov, the best was produced in Moscow, at the Kartsov chemical factory in the Presnya area. Mudrov groped around in his pocket and held out a phial to Meisel.

Here. This is a settled solution, I prepared it myself. It must be added to cold water without fail. You will work it into your hands. Do take it, don't be shy. I have a lot. And in

general, always carry with you everything you need, right in your pocket. Opium. Lancet. Not to save another's life but your own. The Lord loves those who help themselves.

I thank you, Matvei Yakovlevich. And how about the olive oil?

I shall keep the oil for myself, please don't be cross with me. It will not dry the hands. And it is aromatic. My dear mother seasoned the sauerkraut with it at lent. Oh, but she was very handy at salting cabbage!

They spoke a bit about their parents, favorite games, and favorite places, feeling glad they were both Muscovites, countrymen, practically related, and Meisel was not really afraid of anything then, just as he had felt as an infant alongside his father, a German of few words who knew how to quiet the fiercest nightmare: he simply floated out of the horrifying whirling darkness, took his son in his arms and pressed him to his shirt, which was hot and damp from sleep. And the quiet light from that shirt, from his father's face, washed away any fears, any troubles or illnesses.

Mudrov gave off that same light. Or perhaps that was how it seemed to Meisel, who was weary and haggard.

Matvei Yakovlevich, will you permit me to ask for a place in your department? When I finish my studies, of course...

Mudrov had no chance to answer.

They had turned onto Haymarket Lane.

The cholera hospital had been routed.

Om-m-m! Om-m-m! Om-m-m!

Two days ago, indestructible oaken window frames on all three floors had been roughly, brutishly knocked out. Pulpy white debris stuck out of them like broken bones. A door frame

quietly squeaked, barely holding on a hinge that remained intact. A second lay next to it, close by, mercilessly wounded by an axe.

Several mutilated beds.

A poker, bent into an arc, was smeared on the sharpened end with something grayish-red and plastered with human hair.

A stool smashed to smithereens.

Instruments. Basins.

And glass. A lot of glass: slabs, wedges, shards.

All reflecting nothing. Quiet. Covered in fresh, still live, blood.

Not one window in the hospital was intact.

Mudrov stopped.

Good Lord!

Om-m-m! Om-m-m!

The sound was receding. Finally satiated. Triumphant. Abating.

This time, Mudrov heard it, too.

He stood for another second, stunned, disbelieving, his lower jaw shaking, then he sighed, briefly, quickly – and it was as if he had gathered himself together anew from some sort of pieces he himself had not previously seen. There was no longer any fear on his face. Indeed, his face was gone. There was now a dark, motionless, furious mask.

Quickly! Quickly!

Mudrov tore his bag from Meisel's hands and rushed off into the building, crunching and slipping on the shards of glass.

Examine everyone here then come to me upstairs. There may be people! Alive!

And he disappeared inside. Only thudding feet; stepstepstep.

Om-m-m! Om-m-m-m! Om-m-m-m-m!

Meisel finally saw human bodies among frightened, tormented objects.

Fractured. Motionless.

Obviously thrown from great height.

No.

They had simply torn apart the peasant man who used to fumigate everything with vinegar.

Meisel recognized him by his bast shoes. Nobody else wore bast shoes.

This is a patient. And this is also a patient. If I remember correctly, he died this morning – he was lucky.

And what is this?

Meisel quickly averted his gaze, squinting.

It was Blank.

Breath. Breath. And another breath. Calm.

Meisel forced himself to open his eyes. He stooped.

Blank was lying on his back, one leg all wrong, agonizingly twisted, heel turned up.

Broken in at least three places.

One ear nearly torn off. On the cheek: cuts, deep, even.

They'd apparently pushed him through the window. Monsters.

But the face itself was quiet, clear. As if sleeping. Or resting.

Dead?

Meisel fell to his knees, right into the broken glass, tried to grope for the carotid artery, and finally noticed the slow, thick puddle spreading under the back of Blank's head.

Everything around him went black. Gray. White. Lifeless.

And only the puddle was unbearably, impossibly, crimson.

Meisel clumsily lifted Blank's head and then quickly pulled his hand away after plunging into something soft, pulsating.

There simply was no back of his skull.

Blank's head knocked quietly on the roadway.

And again.

Meisel looked in horror at his own fingers: soiled with brain matter and bright blood, still very warm.

He barely swallowed his vomit, acidic and wicked, instantly rising even with his throat.

Blank opened his eyes at that moment.

He was alive.

His eyes were alive. They asked for help. Did not want to die.

Meisel knew what to do. Raise the head. Put his frockcoat underneath. Set the broken limb. But the primary thing was to stop the blood flow. He already knew how to do that. Not just to let blood. To stop it, too.

He was the best in his class. Ablest hands. Soundest memory. Clearest head.

He had never seen wounds like this but Mudrov surely had. Mudrov would handle it. Operate. Affix a plate to the back of the head. Meisel knew they did that. He had not yet seen this for himself but had certainly read. He needed to summon Meisel. He had instruments. In his bag. And in his pocket. Instruments. Opium infusion. Charpie. Alcohol. Suture material.

Omnia mea mecum porto.

Always carry everything you need with you, colleague.

Lift the head. Stop the blood flow. Summon Mudrov.

Lift. Stop. Summon.

Meisel suddenly vomited, quickly, spasmodically, almost on Blank.

He barely cleared his throat, choking.

His arms shook, not responding. Someone else's blood had dried on them, sticky.

The light was going still in Blank's eyes.

He wanted to say something, probably give a hint, but could not.

And again could not.

He just released a thick crimson stream from the side of his mouth.

His eyes went dark gradually, as unhurried as water under snow. And there was no fear in him, no forgiveness – only disdain and pity. Disdain and pity. And also shame. Shame for Meisel.

Meisel slowly straightened up.

He wiped his hands on his frockcoat. Finally unbuttoned it – the buttons seemed to scatter aside in fear now, in all directions.

Lift. Stop. Summon.

Mudrov suddenly leaned out a third-floor window, disheveled and frightening. He shouted, Where's doctor Blank? Did you find him? Is he alive?

Meisel inhaled very, very deeply, as deeply as he could, attempting to push air through his throat, ragged from vomit.

He frantically wiped his hands again, this time on his sweaty, icy shirt.

The blood hadn't gone anywhere. It was on his fingers.

Is he alive?!, Mudrov shouted again.

And then Meisel turned and ran.

Down the lane, through Haymarket Square, farther, farther, gasping, falling, rising again, and he kept wiping everything off, wiping his hands on himself, on walls, on the dirty roadway, again on himself, until he'd worn his palms and fingers raw and everything around him was black, gray, lifeless. Except the blood, and that blood was everywhere.

Everywhere, no matter where Meisel ran.