



Igor BABAEV

# HERITAGE

Volume Two

# ERZOL





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A Novel in Four Volumes

Volume Two

## ERZOL

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Dear Papa!

A wise man once said that condescending fathers make their children miserable, and that one father is more valuable than a hundred teachers.

As I recall my childhood and adolescence, I understand that our father was more than that and, regardless of his qualities, was the greatest authority that we had ever encountered throughout our youth. I wrote this book as a gesture of gratitude for the daily bread, both literal and spiritual, that you fed to us. Recalling your lessons, I, just as all my brothers and sister, have but one feeling toward you – binding love.

I

**M**y father belongs to that rare breed of people accustomed to changing the world to fit their needs. He enjoys making his surroundings favorable to achieving his goals and wouldn't even think of sitting idly by and waiting for things to fall in place on their own accord.

It goes without saying that any move, even from one home to another, requires considerable effort. Things become exponentially more complex when the move is to a different city. It's difficult, cumbersome, and, ultimately, costly. Deciding to move is difficult even in our day, not to mention in the times that I'm describing. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, the decision to move to Kislovodsk was easy for Father.

In his mind, moving away from Dagestan would have been yet another path to rebuilding the Babaevs' life – fixing it, improving it, and bringing it closer to an ideal. That very decision decided our family's fate for many years to come. The choice heavily relied on his hope for luck and good for-

tune – at least according to Father’s stories. One shouldn’t discount, however, that his strong will and intuition predestined this endeavor’s favorable outcome.

A lucky turn of events had brought Erzol to the Kislovodsk Sewing Center. The few words he exchanged with the secretary in the director’s reception room, as well as his wide smile, were enough for the young woman to inform her new acquaintance of all of the problems that the Kislovodsk Karl Marx Cooperative was facing. The problems were far from insignificant. They were in dire need of a good tailor, and no matter how hard the director – Victor Kosyrev, a great man and a veteran who lost both of his legs – struggled, he couldn’t find the master he sought. The city overflowed with minor craftsmen, but a true professional, able to tackle business on a wider scale, was nowhere to be found.

This was indeed a lucky development for Erzol Babaev. Father attracted fortune and success like a magnet and was able to utilize favorable conditions at a hundred percent capacity – maybe even two hundred. How was he able to accomplish this? The ‘fault’ lies with his intuition, a trait he had demonstrated since birth. Or it may be something else – that’s irrelevant. What’s important is that he was even able to put acts of nature to use, not to mention circumstances over which he had control.

Erzol entered the office of the Sewing Center director confident that he would get a job. The stern supervisor looked the visitor over from head to toe. The veteran had a knack for figuring people out. Erzol briefly explained who he was and where he came from. He spoke of his work. He mentioned the names of his Pyatigorsk friends – Kobelev and Kutuzov – whom Kosyrev apparently knew well.

“So what’s your name?” the director inquired.

“Erzol at home, Aleksey at work.”



“And you’re a good tailor?” Kosyrev asked.

“Somewhere between good and excellent,” Erzol replied. “I don’t like to shed praise on myself. Let the others tell you. I know the craft pretty well, and can make you four suits out of a swath meant for three.”

A tailor capable of that sounded like a true pioneer! Only a madman would forego such a candidate in a time where specialists were so scarce. Kosyrev beamed with excitement.

“Write a petition then!” said the director, handing the young man a pen and paper. “I’m not promising wine and roses, but, rest assured, the salary will be decent.”

Erzol answered this proposition with a wide smile and began to carefully inscribe characters upon the sheet. Unlike tailoring, the written word was torture to him.

“How many years of schooling have you had?” Kosyrev asked, having noticed his new acquaintance’s struggle to put the letters on the page.

“Well – you know – I was in school during the War. I don’t have to tell you what kind of times those were. I tried to finish night school. Whatever they managed to teach me remained. Whatever went over my head is now long gone. I also studied tailoring in Moscow.”

The director smiled and shrugged it off.

“All in all, I don’t run a newspaper and I’m not hiring you to write articles. Now, the tailoring studies in Moscow – that’s more like it!”

That’s how Erzol got a job at the Karl Marx Cooperative.

The city where he found himself was one of the most notable in the country. Kislovodsk was a national health resort, referred to by many as a place for great people with sparse means. In the morning, it drew you in with the aroma of thousands of flowers, which all opened in a single sweep, as if coordinated by a magician. All of the gray dust seemed to vanish and the city would come alive. The custodians would enter

the picture, their boots shuffling against the sidewalks, their brooms singing in their hands with measured brushstrokes. They would be joined by the clopping of the freight horses' hooves as they hauled tanks of water. Light feminine steps would join the improvised melody as the mailwomen hurried to deliver the morning papers to people's homes and the milkwomen rushed to claim their spots at the market. The masters and the workers would trickle in and flow toward their cooperatives and offices.

The final chord of the city's complete awakening would come from the murmur of thousands upon thousands of vacationers as they left their hotels after breakfast and moved toward the wide streets of the tourist haven. They came to Kislovodsk from all over the Soviet Union to improve their health.

Erzol Babaev found himself in the midst of this leisurely celebration of life. Perhaps there was something mystical at work when he chose the new city to live in. Perhaps my father's entrepreneurial instinct was responsible for his correct decision, having spotted the unique possibilities wafting through the air of this resort oasis – ones that promised success and prosperity to an entrepreneur.

## II

**O**ur living conditions in Kislovodsk could in no way be compared to those our mother encountered during her imprisonment.

A heavy silence hung over the ward, as if the room was covered with a giant pillow that muffled any and all sounds.

Turunge woke up. She lifted her head and took a look around. There were bars on the windows and a strong, unfamiliar medicinal scent assaulted her nostrils. She turned her head and saw a row of beds atop which women lay motionless. One of them arose and sat up, legs hanging over the edge of her bed, and stared at Turunge, but didn't say a word.

"Where am I?" Turunge asked, struggling to pronounce words.

No one answered. Turunge squeezed her eyelids shut as tightly as she could, expecting this to clear her head and snap her out of the stupor she was in, but nothing had changed when she opened them back up. A lumped crawled up to her throat.



“Where am I?” she asked insistently, lifting herself by her elbows.

A woman entered the room, as if to respond to her question. She looked aged and dry, the wrinkles that gathered at the top of her forehead crowned by a little white hat.

“Babaeva?” the stranger asked with unexpected sympathy.

Turunge lifted her head and looked hopefully at the doctor, who approached the bed and sat down on its edge.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m well,” Turunge answered, her voice raspy. “Where am I?”

“At a hospital.”

“What hospital?”

“A good one – don’t worry. You’ll get better here.” The doctor smiled and took Turunge’s hand, looking for a pulse.

“Am I going to be released soon?” the patient asked with a disarming smile.

The doctor looked at her attentively.

“When you’re well.”

“When you’re well” sounded reassuring to Turunge. She suddenly started to remember – what happened to her, the children, Erzol – all piecemeal, as if looking at the past through a grimy window. The trial... People in the courtroom... The judge’s voice... ‘Five years at a correctional labor camp...’ ‘Custody of the children transferred to the father...’

Turunge roused herself. The children... Where were her children? The thought made her queasy. The doctor looked at her, concerned, and touched her hand in compassion.

“Did you remember something?”

Turunge stayed silent as her chin started to shudder ever so slightly.

“Now, now. Don’t even think of getting hysterical,” the doctor said sternly, as if trying to assess whether her pa-

tient needed additional help. Frightened by the remark, Turunge composed herself. "Everything's fine. Are you able to get up?"

Turunge gave the doctor a confused look. For a reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, the woman reminded her of Melke.

"Why do I need to get up?"

"I need to see you move," the stranger explained. "My name's Zulfiya Gareyevna. I'm your attending doctor. Show me how you walk. Try to get up."

Turunge compliantly tried to hoist herself from the bed, but dizziness overcame her and her legs were unsteady. She collapsed onto the mattress, clutching the bed frame.

"Don't worry, that's normal," the doctor placated her. "Try to get up."

Turunge hesitantly got on her feet and took two cautious steps.

"That's good," the doctor nodded. She liked this patient. It didn't seem like she would have trouble with her.

"Enough for today. You can lie down," Zulfiya Gareyevna said. "You'll take some tests, take some pills and get healthy. You'll be happy you were here – you'll see."

"Happy?" Turunge glanced at her with a glimmer of concern in her eyes as alarm overtook her. "Where... Where are my children?"

Zulfiya Gareyevna frowned, as if Turunge had said something unseemly.

"What children?"

"My children! Gena, Ella, Igor, Slava... Where are they?" Turunge's eyes narrowed to two slivers. "I have four of them," she grumbled pleadingly.

"Calm down." The doctor grimaced as if she had a toothache. "I'll find out, but I think they're with family. They're in good hands. You worry about getting better. It's better here."

Unless you want to go to the prison camp now. You're married, aren't you? That means the kids are with your husband."

These words terrified Turunge. Her husband?

"My children," she repeated helplessly. "They're all alone. My husband won't take care of them."

"Quit fixating on this," the doctor said strictly. "They'll be fine. We don't throw children out into the street. If needed, the government will look after them."

Turunge was overcome with chills.

"It's not shelter they're lacking. They need their mother."

The doctor worried as she realized that Turunge was about to lose control of her emotions.

"That's it, Babaeva," she said in a steely voice. "If you're going to get hysterical, I'll need to call in the orderlies."

Turunge, once again, struggled to compose herself.

"Is that all?" the doctor asked approvingly. "That's better."

"That's all." Turunge echoed back.

"Excellent."

Turunge was motionless as the doctor carefully looked her over once again. In her time, Zulfiya had seen all kinds of people: angry ones, violent ones, dangerous ones. This one, however, was merely defenseless. Naïve and defenseless. But she could sense willpower within her – willpower that needed to be broken.

Zulfiya patted Turunge on the shoulder and moved onto the other patients. Turunge turned to the wall and started sobbing silently.

The room was hot. The scents of sweat and phenol emanated from the floor, but no one thought to open up the bolted windows. Turunge laid like this all the way until dinner, face buried in a pillow, thinking of her children. Somewhere in the darkness, Raya's face flashed in front of her accompanied by her pleading voice: 'Leave her alone.' Turunge sunk into unconsciousness.



She awoke late at night. ‘To stay there until she is fully cured.’ That was the verdict, that she kept hearing over and over again in her head. It meant here, at the hospital. But how long would she be here? A month? Her whole life? Cured of what?

Turunge looked into the darkness, as if trying to shed some light on the future. What awaited her? How would fate treat her children?

After the trial, Turunge was placed in a prison hospital, or, as convicts dubbed them, a ‘honka’. Perhaps this was better than chopping down trees or sewing quilts from dusk till dawn at the labor camps. Who knew – the rumors about prison hospitals were varied.

The honka was located in an ancient building built while the czars were still in power. The ward’s premises had vaulted ceilings and thick walls, faint hints of people’s painted silhouettes still visible through the whitewash. It wasn’t until later that Turunge learned that, prior to the revolution, the building housed a monastery workshop. She didn’t ask more about the monastery; it didn’t particularly interest her. Turunge’s focused detachment and aloofness set her apart from the other patients. It seemed like she wasn’t fully there, in this place – only a mere part of her.

Her thoughts were with her children, who remained in her heart every living second. The thought of seeing them again was the only thing keeping Turunge from falling into desperation. The children became a raft that kept her afloat in an ocean of grief and injustice.

She regarded the pills and the injections administered to her as true destructive forces. They blunted her senses and shrouded her memory. Turunge didn’t always understand the procedures that were conducted on her, just compliantly watched the doctors doing their job – following explicit instructions to turn a healthy person into a sick one.

People, however, have a knack for getting accustomed to even the most dire circumstances. Turunge gradually adapted to her surroundings and became a part of them. She complied with the orderlies' instructions, scrubbing the floors and laboring in the kitchen. Turunge had never been averse to labor, so there wasn't much to get used to.

There was, however, a time when she was really frightened. One night, after dusk had descended over the outdoors, Turunge saw a flash of light and saw an unfamiliar old woman's face behind the fine grate of the window. Turunge had no idea where she came from. She wanted to scream – to banish the grotesque guest. When she came to, Turunge realized that there was no one else there, and that the old face in the window was her own reflection. The thought that her youth suddenly ended didn't frighten her one bit. How bad could it be?

Thoughts of her children teased her and tempted her with dreams of escape. The day dreams were stupid and ill advised. Turunge understood that perfectly well, but every time those precious doors at the end of the ward hallway opened revealing a glimpse of freedom, she stared at them like a parched deer looking at a mountain spring, ready to dash out in a single leap. She wanted to jump over the tall walls of the monastery and turn into a bird – or whatever else, anything to get her to freedom. And then... There was but one path: to her children.

Sadness would vanish. She would remember cherished moments, how her little ones crawled on the floor, tugged at her hemline and reached for her with their little hands.

Strangely, while in prison, Turunge regarded her life with the Babaevs differently. Here, memories about her fights with Erzol and arguments with Havo faded into the past. Turunge now felt that she had been foolish. Why compete with a mother-in-law who ran the house? It was like a ship – there simply wasn't room for two captains. She was young and stupid.

Turunge would occasionally ask the doctor to allow visitation with her children. After all, the people who worked here weren't animals. Why would they prevent a mother from seeing her young children?

Zulfiya would only frown in reply and try to leave the room. Turunge was denied visitation based on the fact that she had nervous episodes and cried at night. Seeing children in that state was not permitted.



### III

It's said that people must pay for what they do, so what comeuppance for her actions could Havo have considered excessive? The neighbors' disapproving glances, perhaps? People could hear all kinds of things behind their back at the market, the gossip alone being enough to make one's insides hurt. Our women believed in all that mysticism and magic. The men, on the contrary, didn't care. All they wanted was lunch and dinner ready on the table, order in the house, and clean clothes in their wardrobe.

Women handled offense in a different manner. Unavenged offenses were considered to be more dangerous. Secretive, unexpressed contempt was thought to get into the enemy's liver and poison the brain. Who could escape that? The mountain people were quick with reprise, sharp with words, and thirsty for gossip. This was understandable – few things entertained them more.

One couldn't call public sentiments about the Babaevs unified. People would say different things. Some judged, some

held contempt, and nearly everyone pitied Turunge – to put such a young woman behind bars. Her actions were discussed from many sides, and the women differed in their opinions. Some judged Turunge: that she defied her mother-and-law and husband, not to mention the fact that she nearly maimed her sister-in-law. Others attacked Erzol: he took his wife and relatives to court and took the children away from her. The men tried to make sense of the situation. Most tried to absolve Erzol: after all, she should have listened to her man, the provider. Why did she defy him? Why did she try to take the children? In any case, most of Makhachkala had an opinion about either Erzol or Turunge, even if they were unaware of key facts and weren't concerned about finding them out.

It seemed that these vacuous conversations bothered our father least of all. Youth took its course: he focused on the future, having come to terms with the reality that trying to shut everyone up was an exercise in futility. They could babble to their hearts' content if they had nothing better to talk about – just as long as they didn't stand in his way.

After all, any situation could be viewed from a positive angle if approached correctly. For instance, he was now a free man. No one nagged him or offered him advice. And his mother was no longer angry – that was the biggest accomplishment.

Havo did, indeed, calm down once Turunge disappeared. No one completely understood what her feelings were on the matter – after all, it's impossible to see into another's soul. Perhaps she felt remorse over what happened, perhaps she felt joy. She never discussed the matter with anyone, as if she had decided that there's nothing to be done about the past. She only knew one thing for sure: if you're a wife – endure and don't argue. The daughter-in-law didn't want to comply and got what was coming to her.

Strangely, despite the fact that the arrival of four grandchildren at the Babaev household added to Havo's hassles, she

seemed younger – as if she had shed two decades. Perhaps they made her, once again, feel like a new mother. And indeed – she never referred to herself as a grandmother.

She seemed to be everywhere, at all times, managing to coexist in multiple places at once: at the stove, in the yard – cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing. She managed alone, without any help. The constant care for her loved ones seemed to be her fountain of youth.

And so the Babaevs settled in Kislovodsk. To be exact, Havo, Erzol, Nahamye and the older grandsons – Slava and I – settled there, while Gena and Ella remained in Makhachkala under the care of Fira, Mila and Liza.

“This is temporary,” Havo would explain to Fira. “We need to establish ourselves and find out what’s what. Then we’ll get the children.”

Fira flailed her arms and seemed to doubt her mother’s words. She always looked as if someone had offended her. Another notable trait in our aunt’s character portrait was her unwavering curiosity and desire to know anything and everything, especially what the neighbors were up to and what went on behind closed doors. To top it off, she had a razor sharp tongue, which, as if wielded by some evil force, could certainly pack a wallop.

Sometimes we would notice concern on the faces of the adults around us, but it would always be replaced by determination at a moment’s notice. That was all we needed. Kids need to feel protected by their family most of all. The fact that things weren’t necessarily as they seemed was not apparent to us at such a young age.

For us, children, the move was simply an exciting adventure, which promised revelation of a new world filled with treasure and new discoveries. We were oblivious to how Havo took to the move and whether it was difficult to her. Her heart was likely filled with regret over the loss of her house and her

yard, where everything still felt like home and even the open sky seemed like a sturdy roof. But the men had decided, and all that was left for her to do was to ensure that everyone in the family, especially the children, traversed the difficult transition with minimal losses.

As Kosyrev promised to his new colleague, Aleksey Babaev got a job, and a salary, albeit only big enough for a scrap of bread. Turning that bread into a sandwich would require shrewd action, as the tailor was being paid based on what he produced and had to get more orders from somewhere. This was where the uniqueness of the southern resort town where my father found himself became useful.

Kislovodsk was host to a bevy of vacation romances. The Soviet ladies, inspired by complimentary union tour packages, demanded special attention from their suitors, who were ready to win their affection by any means, even if those included squandering hard earned money and losing favor within the Party.

The women, were more than happy to play along, and aspired to at least appear graceful. Needless to say, a figure untouched by childbirth and hard work could easily assure that, but that was rare in Soviet land, so they had to resort to dresses, and an excellent dress called for an excellent tailor. Therefore, Erzol Babaev's talents turned out to be in very high demand.

The only hurdle lay in obtaining residency. The city did the best it could to protect itself from those who wanted to settle there, and registering for residency in Kislovodsk was, in theory, impossible. In practice, however, these obstacles could be overcome. All my father needed to do was figure out who to approach with each respective problem, and the cat was in the bag.

Kosyrev helped, of course. Following his advice, Erzol found some village near Kislovodsk where he officially registered, then rented a small house near the very center of the city, on Rosa Luxembourg Street. This became the starting point

for my father's methodical conquest of Kislovodsk. As you surely understand, no one gave anything to Erzol on a silver platter; everything had to be earned through his work and talent. But he created all conditions necessary to materialize his ideas about how a well-off family should live.



## IV

**A**t times, Turunge would lie in bed sleeplessly thinking of what happened to her parents and sister.

Raya's fate turned out to be fortunate. She was sent to serve her sentence in Baku – to the notorious labor camp dubbed “Tuzemka”. The name dated all the way back to the times of the czar, as most of the prisoners tended to be mountain people, whom the policemen called ‘tuzemtsy’, or ‘natives’. Starting in the mid-1930s on, the prison became an ordinary labor colony. Baku was considered to have laxer conditions, as most of the inmates were accused of economic crimes. Political prisoners were sent elsewhere.

Mikhail Hanukov's colleagues reacted to the news of his wife's arrest with relative calm, and no issues were raised with the excellent worker and highly regarded party member himself. The management pretended that nothing happened, and Hanukov generally continued to work as usual, keeping his high title and substantial salary.

As soon as he learned what prison Raya had been placed in, he reached out to his former colleague Nikolay Derevyanko, who had connections at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and could take care of people from time to time. They saw one another very rarely, but had each other's telephone numbers handy and were always ready to help. Hanukov always took the opportunity to help Nikolay with a variety of issues, and the latter, in turn, felt obligated to assist his friend.

The deputy minister lifted the receiver and dialed.

"Hello, Kolya. This is Misha Hanukov."

"Ah – greetings! It's been so long!"

"Indeed it has."

"We haven't seen each other in a while."

"Busy as always."

"Well, then – tell me how everything is. I heard that nothing has changed – managing and leading socialism toward victory."

"Management is management, but now is not a happy time. Kolya, I need a favor."

"What happened?" Nikolay grew alarmed.

"We need to meet. About a personal matter. A very personal matter."

"When?"

"The sooner, the better."

"Of course. I can do tomorrow. Where?"

"At the Domzhur restaurant."

Domzhur was a central locale in the capital. This was where Moscow's elites went to calmly discuss their matters away from public eyes and ears. Getting into the building on Nikitsky Boulevard was a difficult task, not unlike the earthly sinners' strife to get into Noah's Ark. The restaurant's regulars actually referred to it as "Noah's Ark" among themselves.

Mikhail Hanukov always preferred having important meetings at the Domzhur. There was always a table waiting

there for him, and the maître d'hôtel was always ready to offer him a private room.

The trained doorman, dressed in an extravagant gold-trimmed tunic, opened the door and the friends entered a corner room, upholstered in velvet and plush to drown out outside noise.

The waiter silently served the aperitifs – cold vodka in a crystal decanter and herring – and vanished.

After they threw back a shot each, the deputy minister unfolded a napkin on his lap and began:

“Kolya, I have major problems.”

His companion nodded hesitantly.

“Thankfully, it has nothing to do with work.”

Kolya smiled. That was a relief.

“My wife was convicted.”

“Raya?” Derevyanko gasped as Hanukov nodded. “That’s impossible!”

“For speculation – reselling of goods... And of course, according to our illustrious Soviet laws, that is a serious crime... I had no idea she was doing it. She did it behind my back, together with her younger sister. Raya sent them to Makhachkala, and the sister turned them around at the local market.”

“Why would she ever do that? You have everything!”

“Damned if I know. The sister has four children. Divorced, no money. So she started to speculate. She thought she’d make some cash, and my little idiot decided to use my connections to help. She didn’t even ask me for advice. It worked once, twice, and then someone turned them in.”

“Someone they know?”

Hanukov nodded.

“Most likely. They snagged them both up. But that’s not all. Their parents, naïvely, tried to take the blame to protect their daughters. They testified and said that it was all their fault – that the daughters only helped transport the goods and the par-

ents were in charge of the trade. Well, the judge, may he sleep on a bed of nails for a hundred years, instantly assumed signs of organized criminal activity and sentenced everyone to five years in a labor camp.

“The elders too?”

“Especially the elders – as the organizers.”

“Well, that’s no good!” Derevyanko remarked.

“Not at all. My wife is in a camp by Baku. Therefore, I have a favor to ask you regarding that. I recall you mentioning a connection you have in the correctional system. Maybe a relative?”

Derevyanko nodded. His uncle worked within the system.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Could you do something? It would be good to find someone in the Baku camp, just without telling anyone who I am. They could break Raya there. She was already in jail once for no reason. I’m afraid she won’t be able to do it again.”

“Of course I’ll help, Misha! I’ll call my uncle today and let you know.”

“I’ll return the favor,” Hanukov exclaimed.

“I know, I know. Don’t worry about that right now. Everything needs to be done quietly and carefully. Anyways, I don’t need to tell you that – you understand. A toast – to seeing each other under better circumstances!” Derevyanko grabbed his glass.

“To better circumstances,” Hanukov echoed back. “I didn’t even ask you about how your family’s doing.”

“Little by little. No major sorrows, though the times are troubling these days.”

“Troubling is putting it lightly. When Stalin was in charge, at least it was clear who to bow to and who to run from, and now? What’s going to happen? Who will betray whom?” Hanukov suddenly realized he was talking too much and cut himself off.

“Don’t worry, Misha. You can speak freely around me,” Derevyanko placated him. “Comrade Khrushchev will lead us out of this – just you wait. We have allies everywhere. We’ll get through this.”

The men threw back another shot.

“Time to say goodbye,” said Derevyanko, extending his hand. “I’ll get in touch in a few days. I’ll investigate and we’ll meet again.”

With those words, the friends parted.

After three days, Hanukov’s phone rang early in the morning.

“Hello, Misha! Did I wake you?” Kolya Derevyanko’s chipper voice said through the receiver. “Let’s meet around eleven. Can you make it?”

“Of course I can make it. Let me know where to go.”

“Let’s not bother with the restaurant. Let’s meet at the Patriarch Ponds.”

“Sounds good.”

Mikhail decided not to take the service car. He took the bus to Pushkinskaya, a stone’s throw away from the Patriarch Ponds. To his annoyance, he arrived too early, blaming his lack of experience taking public transportation.

He bought a paper during his wait and started paging through the news. Pravda’s bold, front page headline read: ‘Let’s Give the Rural Consumer a New Mobile Store!’ The article that followed, written in a dry voice complete with requisite pathos, informed that the Gorky Automobile Plant had started producing so called ‘autostores’ – ‘cars and trailers that transport refrigerated meat and dairy products’. The author predicted the wide reach to which the mobile trade would expand. Now, any village short of a field outpost would have access to a groceries, allowing collective workers to shop conveniently and without excessive time investment.



‘What a great idea,’ Hanukov instantly thought. ‘If goods are delivered directly to the consumers, almost to their doorstep, trade volume will surely increase.’

Time flew by as he read the paper, and Nikolay arrived before too long. Hanukov sprung up and the men went on to stroll along the pond.

“How’s Raya?” Nikolay began.

“Holding on. She sent a letter from the labor camp. Didn’t say anything about the conditions, just asked to send as many warm clothes as possible, as well as tea and cigarettes.”

“Understood.”

Nikolay stayed silent. Hanukov grabbed his sleeve pleadingly.

“Well – come on. Let’s get to it. Tell me everything.”

“Everything’s going as planned, Misha. Listen carefully. Here’s an envelope. It contains the names and addresses of key people. You’re going to go to Baku and find them. Meet with the first man on the list. He will tell you who to go to next.”

Hanukov listened carefully, memorizing everything, occasionally asking questions and nodding in accord. They parted ways. Afterwards, Hanukov didn’t walk to work – he ran.

He decided not to make the secretary privy to his problems and ordered a sleeper car ticket to Baku on his own. He then called the Central Committee curator of their ministry and said that he needed to urgently travel to Baku due to a family issue. The other end of the receiver maintained polite silence, then let him go.

It wasn’t until Misha was at the train station that fear caught up to him. Would everything really go as smoothly as his friend had promised? Hanukov barely slept on the train, tormented by nightmares.

In two days, he walked onto the platform of the Baku station. The succulent southern city kept moving to its own beat, which hadn’t changed for centuries. People went about their

business, steered by the voice of reason and profit, not chattering headlines.

The deputy minister was greeted and taken to a nice hotel. As soon as he unpacked his things, Misha decided to walk around the city of his youth. Everything had indeed remained the same: beautiful girls, temperamental matrons, passionate young men, and wise and respected elders – all part of an endless sea of people. He smiled as he remembered how he had come here in search of a bride.

But now, a different task stood before him. Mikhail visited the necessary places. In a little more than a day he was able to meet with everyone on the list, even the chairman of the camp where Raya was serving her sentence, and was able to find common ground with all of them.

The Caspian Correctional Labor Camp was relatively small. The number of inmates, who assembled compression stations for the Baku Oil Refinery, was less than four thousand people.

Hanukov arranged for special privileges for his wife. They would let her receive packages: food and other goods worth their weight in gold at the labor camp. He was able to accomplish an almost impossible feat and had Raya transferred to the accounting department of the prison cooperative to be in charge of their basic monetary operations. Moreover, because of Mikhail's efforts, Raya was transferred to a solitary cell – not for bad behavior, but to protect her from the other prisoners, from the human jungle in which only the strongest survived. Lastly, in a most unheard of concession, Raya was allowed to wear a household robe instead of her prison uniform.

Finally, the chairman of the camp allowed Hanukov to visit. Upon seeing her husband, Raya couldn't help but cry and wrap her arms around him. Her tears melted Mikhail's heart. The anger, secret fear, and offense over the fact that,

by being kind to her sister, Raya put him at substantial risk, faded away. After all, it is important to know how to forgive. Hanukov held Raya tightly and felt his own tears roll down his cheeks.

“Hold on, my dear. Time will fly by, you’ll barely notice. Other than that, we’ll think of something. You’ll get a conditional release.”

Raya sobbed and nodded, saying nothing.

Hanukov was at peace as he returned to Moscow. Kolya Derevyanko had fulfilled his promise. Life was returning to its normal course.

## V

Two months passed before a panel composed of Zulfiya Gareyevna and the chief of medicine declared that Turunge Babaeva had fully recovered. Sitting on an uncomfortable chair, which was bolted to the floor, she watched the doctor scribble a terse note in her medical history: ‘Babaeva – released. Ready for transfer.’ This ominous phrase marked the end of our mother’s ordeal at the hospital and the beginning of a subsequent one in prison.

The following morning, Turunge was woken up at six o’clock and two orderlies led her through the long, phenol-saturated corridor to the very doors she had been dreaming about – the ones that led to freedom. Another sleepy orderly stood in the doorway. She looked at the convict silently and let her pass. A package of clothing laid ready on the bench: a black kerchief, a skirt, and a coat. Turunge took a while to change, trying to stretch time and not think about what would happen beyond the hospital gates. The clothing smelled like chlo-

rine. Her numb fingers struggled to tie the kerchief into a knot on her nape.

“What day it is?” she suddenly asked.

“Monday,” the orderly replied indifferently. “You don’t remember anything?”

Turunge shook her head.

“No wonder,” the old woman sighed compassionately. “Well – so long!”

She opened the door, not the one through which Turunge was let in, but the one across from it. A waft of cold air with an unfamiliar sour scent hit her face. The silhouettes of two escorts dressed in dark green appeared before her.

“Hands behind your back and exit,” a command sounded.

Turunge was led down an endless icy corridor with dim, flickering lights. Footsteps loudly echoed against the ceiling. Finally, the hallway came to an end and Turunge found herself outside for the first time in months. She stood in a courtyard under a gray, gloomy sky full of leaden clouds, deeply breathing cold, humid air, unable to get enough of it.

The policemen led her to a black prisoner transport that stood in the very back of the hospital yard. Turunge hurriedly walked over the puddles in her worn-out summer shoes. Wearing the long black skirt and coat, a bundle in her hand, she looked like a little girl. They stopped by the wagon and Turunge was ordered to get in. One of the guards sat next to her and the car left the grounds.

They drove for perhaps an hour. Turunge looked out of the small, barred window trying to determine the direction in which they were traveling, but what little she could see, she didn’t recognize. There were only gray skies and tree tops – all black, as if they had been burnt in a fire.

The car finally stopped. Upon hearing a command, Turunge clumsily jumped onto the ground. She looked around. Long, single story barracks surrounded her from all sides.

Some women rushed around nearby, all dressed in gray skirts and matching smocks. A few of them stopped and examined the newcomer with curiosity. The perimeter of the camp was surrounded by a giant fence, six meters tall and topped with barbed wire.

“Come on, move!” another command sounded. Someone shoved Turunge from behind, causing her to look back in fright. The guard nodded toward a distant barracks: “March!”

Turunge grabbed her bundle and compliantly walked forward. A sturdy, gray-haired man walked in front of her; a gaunt escort with a machine gun waddled behind her. The larger man opened the barred doors and pushed Turunge into a room with no windows. A stern-looking woman in uniform commanded her to undress.

All personal possessions were confiscated and exchanged for a gray smock and skirt, as well as a black kerchief, rubber boots and two pairs of thick cotton stockings. A half hour later Turunge stood in the barracks surrounded by bunk beds.

“This is where you’ll be now, Babaeva,” the woman chuckled. “Get used to it. Your new friends will be back from work soon, so you can get acquainted then.”

Turunge heard a creak and glumly turned around to see the heavy, iron door slam behind her, as if cutting off her past life.



## VI

Everything that happened to Hezgie after his arrest at the courthouse seemed like an endless nightmare. He listened to the judge's words in a trance-like state: "Hezgie and Melke Abramov are to be taken into custody. They are to be sentenced to five years of labor at correctional camps..."

"What are you doing?" Hezgie's screams were in vain, as were his attempts to protect his Melke. "Don't you see she's old? Have mercy! She won't make it!"

No one listened. They ripped him apart from Melke, dragged him aside like a bale of hay and threw him into a cell, which already had a dozen people in it. No one offered to make room for him, so he spent the entire night on the concrete floor, rocking back and forth, his head in his hands, chanting prayers, asking God to either return things to the way they were or to let him die.

He woke up to a splash of water hitting his face, directly from a bucket that reeked of mold. Someone tossed him

a quilted jacket and ordered him to gather his things. Hezgie had nothing to gather, having come to court with nothing but a newspaper, which was still sticking out of his jacket pocket.

Hezgie was led into the yard along with the other convicts and ordered to line up. A “Forward, march!” command sounded and they started walking somewhere. Hezgie ended up in the rightmost column with the guards, guiding shepherds on leashes, being some distance from him. Hezgie constantly attempted asking them what happened to his Melke and where she was taken, but his feeble voice was lost among the enraged roars of the shepherds, which the guards were barely able to control. Those dogs terrified the poor man. Images of war chronicle reels often shown before movies emerged from memory, with haunting memories of fascists leading a column of prisoners to a concentration camp.

Hezgie and the other prisoners were herded onto boxcars. The bolts on the doors creaked shut and the train started moving. He was pushed to a seat in the very corner, where an unbearably freezing wind blew through gaps in the metal. The allotted jacket was nearly taken by tattoo-covered giant, but, thankfully, several other convicts whose souls hadn’t yet been blackened pushed him away. After that, a bona fide war erupted between the convict groups, fought in violent clashes that took place during the long stretches between stations. The recidivist and his cronies played dirty, quietly pushing their victims into the corner of the car, where their friends couldn’t help them. Carefully planned retaliation would follow, ending with a convict rolling around on the floor, howling in pain from a mutilated arm or leg. The trip was long, and several times, corpses were taken out of the car during stops. Thankfully, they seemed to have forgotten about Hezgie. He sat in his corner, looking on in horror as powerful men, who should have been taking care of their families, wailed on each other full-force.

But finally the train stopped, the bolts squeaked for the last time, the doors opened, and the prisoners were ordered to vacate the car. Hezgie was so weakened by the trip that he barely jumped onto the ground. From the side, he resembled a leaky sack of flour dressed in a quilted jacket. Whatever was left of him weighed no more than fifty kilos – he seemed like a goner. But God obviously had other plans. He and a portion of the prisoners were loaded into a cart and got on the road. One of the prisoners – scarred face, gold crowns, and seeming to have traversed this trip before – noted that they were lucky, since they weren't being forced to walk to the camp. At times, prisoners would march some thirty kilometers through swampland while being ravaged by insects. This was purposely done by the labor camp management to demonstrate the futility of escape to the convicts. Many didn't survive the journey, falling dead along the way. There were no funerals; the corpses were simply thrown into the roadside ditch to the mercy of the forest's undertakers – packs of wild wolves that swarmed the area.

As the wagon rumbled along the roadless wasteland, Hezgie kept whispering the words of an ancient prayer: "Shema Yizrael... And my foot shall touch neither asp nor basilisk... For thousands of years my forefathers repeated this plea, as did King David, and carried out what He had sent them, and I will accept what the Almighty has prepared for me." His lips moved silently, making his neighbors think that the old man had lost his mind. He was, however, of sound mind and didn't even doubt for a second that this – this foreign land, far away from his family and loved ones – was where he was meant to die. Survival in these inhumane conditions was not something he could even hope for.

In the evening, when the crowns of the pine trees blended into the dusk sky, a gigantic meadow opened up before the convict caravan. The age-old forest, which had lined both

sides of the path tapered off and a tall fence appeared ahead, peppered with guard towers along its perimeter, silhouettes of watchmen standing motionless within them. Dogs' barking echoed across the fence, causing Hezgie's heart to tighten up once again. This was the final stop. Siberian labor camp or Siblag.

The entire territory was brightly lit by spotlights. The convicts were split into three columns and driven into the barracks. Crude plank beds lined the walls, covered by pine branches, which also thickly lined the dirt floor. A furnace, which was promptly lit, stood in the middle. In an hour, the barracks were slightly warmer.

"Lights off!" a command sounded, and the people collapsed onto the beds, like sheaths at a field, and plunged into troubled sleep.

That was Hezgie's first day at the labor camp.

Early in the morning, just as sunlight began to bring the tree line out of the shadows, a siren sounded, marking the beginning of a new day. People struggled to get up, rushing to make the morning inspection.

Once everyone lined up, a tall man wearing an officer's coat and a flawless kubanka made of astrakhan fur walked out before them. He was flanked by men on both sides – perhaps his aides or his deputies.

The camp commandant took off the kubanka. His fire-red hair glistened in the frost. 'Could he be a Jew?' Hezgie thought. He looked at the other guards. It was strange, but nearly all guards at the camp appeared to have red hair and freckled faces.

The commandant cleared his throat, frowned menacingly and began a stern speech about the fact that all of the convicts were crooks, thieves and parasites to whom the Soviet authorities showed utmost mercy by not sending them in front of the firing squad and letting them absolve their mistakes at

this construction site in a forgotten corner of the world where he, the chief of the camp, was lord, king and god. That here, there was no other law outside of his commanding words, and they need to obey it without question if they want to survive.

The commandant then looked over the lineup with a steel glance that stopped at the uncomely Hezgie. He pointed his finger at him and roared:

“You! Old man. Step forward. Tell me what you’re in prison for.”

Hezgie was taken aback. He had never lied in his life – carrying on the ‘difficult’ legacy of his ancestors – and couldn’t answer the simple question. Could he say ‘for my daughters’? They wouldn’t understand, and it seemed wrong to utter names so dear to his heart in front of this mob. He could say ‘for theft’, but he hadn’t stolen anything. Hezgie decided it was best to stay silent.

The commandant waited for a few arduous moments, then scowled in displeasure and repeated his question: why was the old man here. But Hezgie was stubbornly silent.

Clouds were gathering over his head as Hezgie had an epiphany:

“I am in prison for not walking in line with the Soviet authorities.”

The phrasing came out of nowhere, on its own, from the time in Hezgie’s distant past when he was locked up in a barn awaiting execution. Then, the stern commissar Yenakurov, who had long tortured Hezgie and his father-in-law, ended his torments with the same phrase: ‘You don’t walk in line with the Soviet authorities, Abramov.’

Perhaps Hezgie said something wrong or mixed something up, or maybe this crowd of prisoners found it particularly funny to hear an old Jew pronounce the Russian words, because everyone erupted in laughter.

The camp commandant was laughing as well, which diffused the situation.

“Fine,” he said, still laughing. “We’ll teach you to walk in line.”

After that, he instantly bounced back to his stern persona and ordered the old man to get back in line.

The commandant then walked past all the convicts again, looking everyone in the eye, ending, once again, on the old man:

“Can you read and count?”

“Of course I can,” Hezgie squeezed out, once again confused.

“That’s good. You’ll work at my warehouse. Keeping track of lumber. Otherwise, there’s no one I can count on here. Everyone lies and cuts corners, but you Jews know your way around numbers.”

The commandant looked left and right, as if everyone who he couldn’t rely on was standing behind him.

“Disperse!” a command sounded.

The convicts scattered among the barracks so that they could quickly eat their paltry rations, take a swig of hot water from a mug and set off to work until evening.

Hezgie would have remained standing if someone didn’t push him in the back and told him to move. And he did, barely feeling his legs under him.

Thus began his new life – as a warehouse worker at a camp in Tomsk Oblast’s remote forests. Such was his fortune. He wouldn’t have made it a week as a lumberjack.

His boss, the warehouse supervisor, an Armenian man with a Polish last name – Pilsudski – turned out to be a decent man who wasn’t hard on Hezgie unless it was necessary. He even allowed him to read newspapers once in a while. But, most importantly, he helped him connect with his children on the outside.



It wasn't until a month later that Hezgie got word about his Melke – that she was nearby, also in a swamp-surrounded impenetrable forest in the Tomsk Oblast – at a women's camp.

Hezgie's heart sank. He pictured his untended Melke being there, and wept bitterly. But at least she was alive. She worked at the laundry, and even though the labor was rumored to be unbearable, Melke was able to let her husband know that the conditions were tolerable, that she was managing, and that no one was hurting her.

Such news was somewhat reassuring. Perhaps things weren't as bad as they had seemed in the beginning. Perhaps he would be able to live in this world alongside Melke yet. The only thing left to do now was find out what happened to Raya and Turunge. How were those poor things doing? This was information Hezgie wouldn't get for quite a while.

## VII

**T**urunge gradually adjusted to the new way of life, which left no room for anything personal. It was strange, but the other convicts viewed her – a quiet loner – as a sociable person. This was probably thanks to her ability to carefully listen to her companions, letting them speak their mind without interrupting.

The prisoners had an instinctive knack for separating truth from dishonesty, quickly spotting liars who denied their own crimes and presented themselves as innocent victims. In Turunge's case, everything was clear and simple. Her candid accounts of her husband, the beatings, being betrayed by those close to her and her imprisonment inspired inexhaustible womanly sympathy, immune to jail time and violence, from the other inmates. Her new companions held a unanimous opinion: Turunge was a victim of a husband that never loved her and a cruel mother-in-law.

As to the children, everyone gave the same advice: to write to them as often as possible, constantly reminding

them that they have a true, loving mother that doesn't stop thinking about them for a single second. Turunge zealously followed their guidance and sent letters to the outside at every opportunity. The deputy chief of correctional work, a generally hardened, stone-cold woman immune to others' pleas, developed a surprising sympathy for Turunge and started sending her letters on to Suleiman Stalsky and Yermoshkin Streets.

Replies came only from her family home. Her sister Anya informed her that the children are with the Babaevs – that the older ones, Igor and Slava, were with their father, either in Zheleznovodsk or Kislovodsk, while the younger ones, Ella and Gena, remained on Yermoshkin Street under the care of Erzol's sisters.

Turunge became especially nervous on the days when she got these letters. She wasn't sure how to take this splitting of the children: why would her ex-husband take the two boys with him to another city and leave the other children under the care of his sisters, who didn't particularly like either them or her? How were they doing there? Were they being raised properly and fed well? She was also worried about whether they would remember her, their mother. After all, Ella and Gena were so little when they were separated from her.

Such thoughts always gave her a throbbing headache. Turunge tried to restrain the bitter umbrage that took root in her damaged soul and frenetically completed her labor camp tasks. Even her fellow inmates, who regarded her with understanding, avoided approaching the grieving woman with requests and advice at times like these.

Her anger would gradually subside, replaced by apathy. She would start chanting under her breath: 'my darlings: Igor, Slava, Ella, Gena.' This ceaseless repetition of names calmed her, and she imagined a sturdy wall of love growing around

her children, a wall that would protect them from misfortune, and warm their fragile juvenile souls in the absence of motherly tenderness.

## VIII

**A**t first, either Slava or I would ask with a child's sincerity and directness: 'Havo, where is our mama? When will she be back?' In these moments, Havo would cringe, as if iron spikes were piercing her ears. Sometimes, instead of answering, she would rush to the kitchen, come back with something tasty, and shove it into the hand of the one asking the question, as if trying to distract us from such thoughts. This elementary approach usually worked. We would light up with joy at the sight of a treat and, yelping happily, run away to divide our unexpected 'acquisition', forgetting everything else in the world.

But the strategy wasn't always successful. At these times, Havo wanted to yell: 'It would be better if you didn't have a mother at all!' to her grandchildren, but she would restrain herself and say nothing, pretending that she didn't hear the question. We would leave, confused at Havo's unexpected deafness, not noticing the little flames of anger that

burned in her eyes. One only had to remind her about that drone Turunge, who decided to turn the Babaev household upside down, broke the laws of the ancestors and wanted to be the primary housewife. Imagine that! She decided to defy her, her mother-in-law, the elder of the house! Unheard of! Melke didn't raise her daughter right, so let both of them pay their penance! These things don't fly at the Babaevs'. All that was expected of Turunge was unquestioned compliance. She wanted to establish her own order, to assert her will and contradict everyone, so she got what she deserved.

Moreover, Havo convinced herself that the Babaev family were victims as well. They left their established home in Makhachkala, and while they were promised milk and honey here in Kislovodsk, they still suffered. It was good that her favorites, Slava and I, were with her.

The decision to only take two children to the new home at first was made at a family meeting. Before Erzol established himself and everything settled in its place, Havo would have trouble managing four grandkids. She refused to think that such treatment of the little ones, Gena and Ella, was unfair.

In Kislovodsk, Havo worked with no respite, trying to establish a household, and still didn't manage to do it all. In order to make his mother's life easier, Erzol enrolled Slava and I in a five-day boarding school. 'Let them get used to living independently, and grow up to be men,' Father thought. 'As long as they're fed and put to bed in time, it's be fine. We'll settle in, and this mayhem will end. Then, Havo will be able to surround everyone with her care.' Erzol had no doubt of that.

Gradually, Turunge's image left the children's conscience, and memories of her became shrouded with fog, surpassed by fresh impressions of their new hometown, the boarding school, and the children and educators they met there. Actually, being at the school didn't leave us with particularly memorable im-

pressions. Every Saturday and Sunday we rushed home in anticipation of seeing Havo.

We didn't realize how shabby our life on Rosa Luxembourg Street had been. The house was an ordinary shack, with no heating, plumbing, or yard facilities. Everyone lived this way, and the Babaevs in no way differed from their neighbors. Nevertheless, Erzol kept repeating to Havo: "You'll see, we'll live better in no time," and searched for a permanent home instead of a temporary one.

Fira would periodically notify Havo that there weren't any problems of note with little Gena and Ella. And what problems could there be? The kids didn't exactly understand their mother's disappearance, but certainly felt her absence. The youngest Babaev knew perfectly well which hands picked her up – her mother's or her other relatives'. But could her crying tug at the adults' conscience or common sense? They decided that she only cried because she couldn't find her mother's warm breast.

Gena remembered Mama for a little while, but also couldn't make sense of where she went and was content with the vague explanation that she went on a trip and it was unclear when she would return. Fira's or, more often, gentle Liza's embraces did their part in weaving the web of forgetfulness, pushing the warmth of Turunge's hands into the past. Years would pass before this lack of love, the adults' tepidness in their treatment of Turunge's children, would bear its fruit and reflect on their future and health.

We, Havo's older grandchildren, had it differently. When we weren't at the boarding school, Grandma's warm hands were always near. It must be said that she did everything to ensure that we didn't feel deprived of motherly love.

Meanwhile, Father remained in Kislovodsk. Things were moving upward, first and foremost because of Sewing Center Chairman Kosyrev's support. The brave veteran always



dressed in paramilitary garb and valued people's honesty and courage above all. Kosyrev returned from the War without both feet, and prosthetists equipped him with two wooden ones that he mounted below his knees. Seeing his face convulse time and time again, it wasn't hard to guess that he experienced hellish pain while walking, but he never even uttered a hint of a complaint.

Right away, the Sewing Center chairman took a liking to the diligent Erzol. He was never at a loss for words, could diffuse any situation with a joke, was always the first man at work, and the life of any party afterwards. In turn, Erzol expected Kosyrev to grant him independence at work and to trust him entirely.

Erzol earned this trust after one notable event. He liked to take long walks. The miniature two-story buildings of Kislovodsk's inns and hotels, adorned with ornate railings and turrets, seemed to have been transported there from another world. Father felt that while walking along these streets he was breathing in the air of times past. Nothing stood in an enterprising man's way toward expressing his talent and earning public recognition.

One time, while strolling through the city, Father came across the unremarkable two-story building home to the Kislovodsk Vocational School. Here, future workers of tailor shops and sewing factories were educated. What's more appealing to a young man than young women? Not to mention that these ones were tailors as well! Erzol went upstairs to the office of the institution's director and introduced himself. In the midst of the conversation, he discovered that the students were lacking the materials necessary to perfect their skills. Erzol came to an agreement with the vocational school director that he will supply them with leftover fabric from the Sewing Center warehouse. This was advantageous to both sides. The cooperative would be paid and rid itself of excess materi-

als that just sat there without use. In turn, the young women had a shot at a complete education. Everyone would be happy.

Kosyrev was pleased when Erzol told him how he planned to dispose of excess raw materials, amazed at the new tailor's shrewdness. From that moment, the director began to trust my father and allowed him to enter into agreements on the cooperative's behalf. This was the moment that Babaev's ardent nature had been waiting for.

Erzol decided to learn everything about the land to which fate had brought him. This was not merely the curiosity of a leisurely traveler. My father wanted to expand. The cooperative where he worked as a tailor made a decent profit, but Father knew that if the enterprise transitioned to mass production, revenues would increase exponentially. This was not a business anyone in the small town was involved in. Custom orders for party bosses' lovers visiting the resort were the greatest extent of «out of the box» thinking at the Karl Marx Cooperative. But those weren't that plentiful, even considering the abundance of government officials in Soviet times.

Erzol decided to expand the business's reach. The Stavropol Krai region, where Kislovodsk is located, wasn't limited to the resort-filled Caucasus Foothills. The city was also surrounded by simpler resort towns that had their own infrastructure. On one hand, they were inhabited by ordinary citizens with low income levels. On the other, they were visited by people of means, ready to spend significant amounts of money.

Yessentuki, Pyatigorsk, Mineralniye Vody, Zheleznovodsk, Lermontovsk – all these vacation towns were filled with tourists with full pocketbooks. The satellite cities were well connected by an electrical train that ran every half hour. My father would simply get on and travel to the next town. That's how he ended up in Nevinnomyssk, located where a little river with the imposing name of 'Bolshoi Zelenchuk' flowed into a majestic river that went by the short name of 'Kuban'.

Few remembered how in the 19th century Russian Cossacks named a settlement, which would later become the city, with a curse word, due to the fact that the cape on which it stood resembled a part of the male anatomy. The name stuck, and the local mayor, afraid that the rumors would reach the emperor himself, ordered the city to be renamed to ‘Nevinnyi Mys’ – ‘Innocent Cape’ – in order to erase the unfortunate toponym from the memory of the Cossacks that inhabited it. Though his efforts seemed destined to fail, they miraculously succeeded. The new name stuck, and the old one was gradually forgotten.

Years passed. After World War II, the Council of Ministers of the USSR decided to build a giant chemical plant in the city that would produce nitrogen fertilizers from natural gas. The plant would also produce poisonous ammonia. Construction went forward in leaps, and by the end of the 1950s the lindens and sequoias that adorned the streets were eclipsed by the shadows of seven giant smokestacks, which spouted white, poisonous fumes night and day. Upon seeing them, Erzol smelled fortune.

The following day he tried to get an appointment with the chemical giant’s director. At first, the secretary refused to put a meeting with a stranger on the books, as her boss hadn’t met with anyone below the rank of the Secretary of the City Party Committee. Nevertheless, the member of the Karl Marx Cooperative achieved the impossible and flattered the old crone into getting the party bigwig to see him. Erzol left the meeting beaming with joy.

When the innovative tailor recounted the events to Kosyrev, the chairman was speechless. My father had managed to get an order for several thousand uniforms for the chemical plant workers, and the monetary figure on the contract was quite impressive. And so the Karl Marx Sewing Cooperative established a mass production section, and the tailors’ projections begun to please the members of the city government.

In only three months – a quarter – my father’s portrait appeared on the recognition board. It ‘resided’ there for a while, and wasn’t removed as long as Erzol remained at the cooperative.

But this was only the surface of his success. While squeezing maximum profits out of production, Father himself was gradually changing. He was soon elected to the cooperative’s governing board. The voting took place in the auditorium, headed by a table covered with the indispensable red bunting, the ‘bisons’ – executives who had been there since the cooperative’s establishment – seated behind it. Comrade Kosyrev presided. He cleared his throat for a long time, then poured himself a glass of water as a gesture of importance, downed it, then nodded to the secretary. She read in a smooth voice: “To elect Aleksey Naumovich Babaev as a member of the cooperative governing board”.

“All in favor?” the chairman asked.

The presidium instantly bristled with a forest of raised arms.

“All opposed?” Silence hung over the room. “Unanimous,” said Kosyrev, announcing the tally and adjourned the meeting.

This is how my father, at the age of twenty-six, took the first step onto the tall career ladder.

## IX

**E**rzol only appeared in the city some six months ago, but he had already managed to accomplish quite a bit. He had an understanding of how the resort world operated and knew which doors to knock on in order to move business forward instead of letting it idle in place. First, however, he needed to find or build a suitable home, which turned out to be quite difficult. Father wanted it to be a beautiful place – one that he would want to rush back to after work.

Luck smiled on him once again. The old house itself, located on Katyhin Street and suggested by the director of the vocational school, was unimpressive. The dwelling stood right by the road in a Russian neighborhood full of artisans: builders, masons, carpenters. Father noticed it because the building was well situated, with no neighbors along the peripheries. What lay beyond the property was a fairy tale: a tall bluff with a mountain river flowing through the gorge below. On a clear day, one could even see the twin peaks of Elbrus from

the far end of the yard. He could dream of nothing more. Father shook hands with the seller, and Nahamye applied for a construction loan.

The purchase of the lot and the construction of the new home marked the beginning of a new chapter in my father's life – a point of reference. Jewish people have believed through the ages that a separate home for one's family was essential. A Jew who still lived in a family home was a loser, a *schlimazel*, a 'half-man'.

Some would find it strange, but Erzol's own children weren't at the forefront of his priorities – his parents were, Nahamye and Havo. He was building the house specifically for them, to give them a home that would become their paradise and fortress. And it had to be the best house in the city, even better than the pre-revolutionary mansions that he admired on his walks around town. This is what our home ultimately became.

There was, however, one nearly insurmountable 'but'. Keep in mind the time that we're discussing. The war on comfort and opulence surpassed all other forms of competition. If the remaining ideologies were put aside, the epoch's main slogan would read: 'don't stand out, be like everyone else'. For that very reason, constructing a two-story home would be viewed by ordinary citizens as an act completely out of the ordinary. This was a hefty detriment, as opulence was equated to crime.

Father came up with a solution to the problem. It was actually quite easy: the first floor was partially sunken into the ground, and appeared as a sort of ground floor, divided into a bunch of utility rooms. The authorities fell for it, not finding any opulence in the plans and blueprints, and granted a construction permit.

So it began! Each and every weekend everyone in the Babaev family, both young and old, gathered for a *bona fide*

subbotnik. We worked with no respite, from dawn till dusk, without feeling tired. The workers who built Cheops' Great Pyramid had nothing on us. It was truly a religious rite. Father used the now nearly forgotten adobe construction technologies to raise the walls from a mix of clay and straw. The children helped make it. We'd get into large wooden boxes and pound the mixture with our feet. Later, workers would use the paste to make bricks, dry them under the southern sun, and then used them to build walls. Construction was slow, but steady.

Throughout this time, we lived in the little house that had stood on the property for ages. But even there, Father managed to set up running water, something that none of our neighbors had. An image remains engraved in childhood memory: put a bucket under the fountain, push the lever, and water will flow from the faucet with a rumble, angrily beating against the bottom – bold, gabby, white like milk from the millions of bubbles. Let it calm down for a second, and it'll become clear, like crystal. Cold enough to make your teeth hurt, and oh so clean. There was but one drawback: it was a long and difficult haul, as the fountain was far away.

Father made a clear assessment that burdening Havo to such an extent was out of the question. Without water, the home wouldn't be clean, food wouldn't be cooked, and guests couldn't be invited. When water finally flowed from the faucet, Erzol was ecstatic. An onlooker may have thought that he felt like Moses, after drawing water from rock in the Sinai Desert. Perhaps, Moses had an even easier time: all he had to do was perform a miracle. In order to get the permits, Father had to perform his magic at least three times. And finding scarce piping back then was more difficult than feeding Moses and his fellow travelers with manna from the sky after their exodus from Egypt.

Plumbing instantly set our family apart in the eyes of the street's other residents. Soviet neighbors were a frightening



concept, as informers – eyes and ears of the observing authorities – could easily be among them. The number of fates crushed and people jailed because of anonymous letters was immeasurable.

But Father was able to get along with pretty much everyone. The new neighborhood was settled primarily by Russian artisans. The Babaevs could easily have been the first Jews that moved to Kislovodsk permanently – we were certainly the first ones in the vicinity. We became the basis for judging our entire people.

People here lived very poor lives. Then, suddenly, our father appeared and offered compensation for help with the construction of our home. The builders, carpenters, plumbers – all participated, and none refused.

A bit later, Havo met and got acquainted with the neighbors as well. Unlike Father, she took a more womanly approach to meeting people, acting more subtly but forging stronger connections. She also provided opportunities to make some money, inviting others to patch up some clothes and acting in an unusually friendly manner. But no matter how outwardly warm Havo was to her Russian neighbors, she was very distant from them on the inside. She, a proud Mountain Jew, didn't even entertain the possibility of intermarrying or uniting with others.

If one went up the river, the majestic Elbrus was twenty-five kilometers away. The mountains radiated pristine, unquestionable strength – strength that likely turns a man into a man, a successful and powerful one.

Overall, everything in the world that surrounded us, Erzol's children, was subject to all kinds of strength. Strength came from the mountains; strength came from Havo; strength came from our father. Strength spread over the meadows and through the river that ran along the bottom of the gorge, enclosed by steep cliffs. Many weirs intersected the river,

forming small lakes, in which we would swim during the summer.

More than half a century passed, but the beautiful, enchanting memories – of the pristine mountain air, the crystal clear river, the intoxicating scent of mountain herbs and flowers – remain fresh in my mind.

Another notch in my memory is our neighbor Aunt Tosia's cow – huge, red haired, with spotted sides that looked like a world map. The dark spot looked like the African continent, the light one, like Asia.

When you're a little boy standing next to a gigantic cow, you feel what a strong and powerful creature it is. The cow was always docile with Tosia around, and followed her commands like a trained dog. The beast's intelligence fascinated a child's imagination, as did the milk. I liked to watch as Tosia milked her darling and how the white stream of milk shot out from under her fingers, shattering against the metal bottom of the pail, the level rising higher and higher. It was one of the wonders of the world! A wonder that always ended with a cup of warm milk which Tosia would hand me with a smile.

Still, the construction of the house itself remains the most memorable. We watched how the foundation was laid, then how the walls grew around it and window gaps were outlined. Rooms were born: the bedroom led to the study, our room followed, then Havo and Nahamye's quarters. There was a huge kitchen, the living room. We were especially excited about the construction of our room. Our own, separate room! The thought itself took our breath away.

After some six or seven months, the house was ready. Not only did Father install running water, but there was sewage access as well. A shower and a bath followed – royal luxuries at the time. The house was a fairy tale – with not one, but two entrances.

We, the children, couldn't figure out why Father would need a separate entrance that led directly into his office. Until one day, when a woman left through Father's door. She slipped out quietly, like a mouse, and dissolved into the darkness. It wasn't until many years later that I realized why my father acted the way he did. Erzol was guarding his children's chastity. Such was the time. The morals were very strict, but people fell in love just the same. We however, lived in a peculiar reality where only one woman existed – Havo.

One time, Havo was either in the garden or had gone to the market. I was alone in the house, playing with my toy cars. One of them rolled under a bed. I rushed to get it, tripped over something, and hit my head against the floor at full speed. My vision went dark, tears rushed from my eyes, and blood rushed from my nose. My screams must have been heard a mile away.

The doors suddenly burst open and Havo came in – not walking, but flying. She picked me up and squeezed me close, kissing my face and saying:

“Come on, my little one, come on, my son. I'll kiss it and it'll feel all better! Come on, don't cry. It doesn't hurt anymore. Right, Igor?”

“Mommy!” The words came out by themselves.

Havo was instantly taken aback, as if she had been gun-butted.

“Mommy,” I kept repeating, feeling a blessed ocean of love spilling out inside me. “My mommy!” I'd lean into her even more tightly, covering her face with kisses.

Before that, none of her grandchildren had ever seen Havo cry. And here we were, tears seeping out of her eyes. She held me so tightly that I could hear how quickly her heart was beating. She whispered, over and over, like a chant:

“My son! My little son! Everything will be good from now on.”

I had a mother again.

In 1956, we celebrated a long-awaited housewarming. The entire Babaev clan had gathered. Father brought young Ella and Gena from Makhachkala, and Slava and I were taken out of the boarding school. Normal life began.

## X

**H**anukov was at home when the phone rang and a voice echoed from somewhere far away.

“Misha, I’ve been released.”

He didn’t understand who he was talking to at first, and nearly asked ‘Who was released?’, but then made sense of it.

“Raya? Where are you?”

“I’m in Baku,” said Raya, trying to shout over the static. “I already bought a ticket to Makhachkala. I’m leaving in an hour. I’m going to Moscow from there. Meet me, if you can.”

Cut-off tones followed.

Raya was released for good behavior at the end of 1957. The process itself took place without pomp and fanfare. During the morning lineup, the guard called her into the supervisor’s office. A tired woman with a drooping face told her in a heavy voice:

“Hanukova, your request for conditional release has been granted.”

Raya blinked rapidly out of confusion, as if she had something in her eye, and then asked in a voice that didn't sound like her own.

“Whose? Mine?”

“Yours, yours,” the supervisor replied indifferently. “Whose else?”

She continued to talk, but Raya wasn't listening. She couldn't understand whether this was a dream or reality. ‘Your request for conditional release...’ This could only mean one thing: her ordeal was over.

After informing her husband, Raya took the first train from Baku to Makhachkala. She walked around her native city catching odd glances from people. Perhaps, Raya made an odd impression. She beamed with happiness. It suddenly started to rain and Raya lifted her head, sensing the cool drops falling down on her. She stood on a small stoop under a building's awning. The rain grew heavier, turning into a downpour. The awning quickly gave way to the water, but that only made her laugh. Let it wash everything away! It seemed like this wall of rain sliced away her miserable past from the hope-filled present. She wanted to start life anew so much. She couldn't hold back, and tears started rushing down her cheeks.

In Makhachkala, Raya only spent one day at the house on Suleiman Stalsky Street. She didn't want to delay, rushing to see her husband, and dreamt of leaving as soon as possible. Misha helped with the ticket and let her know who to talk to in order to get a sleeper car. Daniil lent her the money.

She felt orphaned at home without her parents. Everything reminded her of the tragedy that the family had lived through. Besides, Raya didn't have much to talk about with her brothers. Somehow, they had gradually drifted apart.

Therefore, she didn't heed Daniil's requests to stay for at least a week, spent a night in her childhood home, and left for the train station the following morning.



## XI

Erzol's tireless nature constantly searched for new ways to apply his entrepreneurial abilities. In Soviet times, such talents were supposed to be more shameful than a venereal disease, and even mere hints of them had to be purged from one's self. So many people drank themselves into oblivion after stifling their inner businessperson and not being able to find another outlet for their now dormant strengths. It would be common for one to make a lot of money but not be able to apply the funds to anything other than purchases at restaurants.

Our father was not like this. A case regarding merino wool cloth comes to mind. The fabric was made from combed withers, and a suit made from it could be used for years without any visible wear. One of the southern supply bases, where Erzol's friend was a director, had a huge surplus of it, which carried negative implications for the entire enterprise, as the inability to turn it around would lead to an inevitable supply reduction and a loss of bonuses for the whole collective.

One day, Father happened to visit his friend, the director, who looked very unhappy.

“What’s wrong?” Father asked.

“I’m in trouble, Erzol.”

“The sun is shining, women are beautiful – what more do you need?”

“You go on and joke,” the director grimaced, as if stricken by a toothache, “but I have fabric... Heaps of fabric. Mountains of fabric. And no one wants it.”

“What kind of fabric?”

“Merino wool.”

“Merino wool...” Erzol ruminated. “I’d probably take it.”

“No you wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s expensive. Three hundred rubles per lousy meter! Who’s going to buy that? Would you buy that?”

“Well... I don’t know,” Father hesitated.

“That’s the thing – no one knows,” the colleague remarked in desperation, “and I can’t lower the price.”

“Why not?”

“How should I know? I need a decree from the Council of Ministers, that’s why. It’s forbidden to sell goods below final cost price. But what about when it’s useless? How do I explain to them that this wool isn’t of use to anyone because it’s so expensive? Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Father nodded. “How much of it do you have?”

“About thirty thousand meters.”

Erzol whistled.

“Wow. That’s enough to clothe a garrison.”

“That’s what I mean!”

“And here I thought you were about to hang yourself over women.”

“As if... Let them hang themselves over me.”

“At least you haven’t lost your warrior spirit!” Father paused to think for a second. “I have a solution.”

“Surely you must be joking!” the director replied in disbelief.

“You can’t lower the price of the fabric?”

“No.”

“Can you use it to make clothing – suits for instance?”

“Sure!”

“Well – there’s your solution! Give all of the fabric to me. We’ll make it into men’s suits. They’ll be wonderful – like a shot of cold vodka in the morning. We’ll put them up for sale at exactly half price – without any council. I assure you – the suits will fly off the shelves like bullets.” Erzol stayed silent about the fact that the skillful tailors at his cooperative would be able to make more suits than documented out of that much fabric, profits from which would be divided amongst themselves.

“You think that’s possible?” The director asked, curiously.

“I don’t think – I’m sure of it. Come on – write an order: “Transfer fabric to be made into suits to the Karl Marx Operative.”

“Not operative – cooperative,” his colleague corrected him.

“Same damn thing,” Father waved off in annoyance. At the time, he, having only finished eight grades’ worth of night school, didn’t pay much thought to writing properly, as long as he could conduct good business.

That’s how the deal of a century was made. The next day, the Karl Marx Cooperative received several truckloads of extremely expensive woolen fabric.

The tailors went to work. They sewed for five or six days, and in a week a hundred men’s suits tailored to match foreign fashion adorned the storefront of the Kislovodsk City Department Store. The prices were astronomical. Savvy customers

would try them on and return them, clicking their tongues and scratching their foreheads in regret. After several days, the price was slashed in half. News of this spread across the city like wildfire. Once people saw the new price at which merino suits were sold, they went crazy for them and lined up at the registers waiting impatiently for the cashier to ring them up.

The suits were sold off instantly. The plant's workers got bonuses, their director – a commendation, Erzol and his friends – a solid profit.

And so, life was hitting stride at the Kislovodsk cooperative, alongside to our household establishing itself.

What was happening to our true mother, however, was a fact that remained foreign to us.

## XII

**T**urunge stood alongside everyone in the yard, awaiting orders to go to work, when she was suddenly pulled out of the ranks and ordered to go to the administrative building.

“Babaeva?” The captain, who was in charge of education at the camp, looked at the convict with eyes that expressed annoyance at everyone and everything. “Alright!” She started rummaging through a pile of paper on her desk. “Where did I put it? Oh, there it is.”

The captain picked up a folder, pulled out a thin sheet of paper and brought it close to her eyes.

“The request for inmate Tatiana Hezgievna Babaeva’s conditional early release was considered and confirmed by the court’s decision.”

Turunge stopped listening – she thought that she had died. She had known that being released was a possibility since a month ago, when the date for her request to be reexam-

ined had been scheduled. She was happy at first, but then got scared and forbade herself to even think about it. Why would the court show her any kind of sympathy? No, it was better to not hope. And here she was, felling shell-shocked. What if the captain was playing a joke on her? Such animals existed – Turunge had heard stories.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you happy?” she suddenly heard the captain say. “Babaeva, I’m talking to you.” Turunge grew pale. “I’m not lying to you, Babaeva, don’t worry.” The captain’s voice grew warmer. “Here’s the court’s decision. You’ll be released in a week. And now, go back to work. I’m not going to break protocol for your sake.”

Turunge returned to work like a sleepwalker. She was suddenly struck by fear of the future. How will her children receiver her? Will they remember her? Have they been separated?

## XIII

**S**lava and I were running around the playground located in Kislovodsk's Resort Park by the Narzan Spring, playing football with the other guys for ten kopecks.

We were children of the streets in the gentlest definition of that term. We didn't sit over books at home like the exhausted nerds. Entertaining distractions like computers and television didn't exist, so the boys would spend much of their free time outside. Saying that we loved football was like saying nothing at all. Nearly all boys were captivated by the game, which raised several generations of Soviet children. We were knowledgeable not only about the teams in the first division, but also about those in the second and third. Lev Yashin was deified. Admitting that you don't like football meant losing clout among friends or even losing one's standing as a guy. Only girls were allowed to not like football.



Even with that backdrop, our love for the game bordered on obsession. At the mere hint of a free minute, we would instantly run to Havo.

“Mama, we’re going outside, to play football.”

“What about your homework?”

“We did it!”

And... we’d be gone without a trace.

We would gather the team and run to either the Resort Park or the nearby playground. Compared to other courtyard teams, the Babaev team felt especially privileged. We had a great advantage over the others: a real football. This wasn’t some homemade contraption, which would fly no further than some five meters when you kicked it. It was a real, leather ball, stitched with sturdy twine – one that could fly to the other end of the city if you kicked it accurately.

The ball was given to us by Erzol’s younger brother Alik. He appeared at Erzol’s home around 1959, not alone, but with a young wife. Havo had to endure a tragedy: Alik’s wife was a Russian.

Our uncle’s spouse was named Nadia. She was from Makhachkala, and the lovers had met during entrance exams in Moscow, when they got to talk and determined that they’re from the same city. The girl had failed the test, returned to Makhachkala and enrolled in the local pedagogical institute to study German. She kept in touch with Alik. He was handsome, an athlete and a very talented football player. He could turn hopeless situations into goals, even if he had to score them from a corner of the field at unbelievable trajectories almost parallel to the goal. It was all miraculous – as if Alik had the ability to bewitch the ball and steer it in the right direction. This impressive athletic ability had the authorities at the institute turning a blind eye at the student’s less than stellar academic record. The success of the football team seemed more important.

This sporting talent carried with it an unrestrained competitiveness, which fueled the darker side of Havo and Nahamye's son's nature, which only concerned itself with the pursuit of pleasures. That quality, however, didn't begin to express itself fully until later.

Mutual attraction was strong between the youths and Alik didn't resist passion's pull. When it was discovered that Nadia was pregnant, he married her. Havo couldn't come to terms with the fact that her son was determined to tie his destiny to a girl who wasn't Jewish. The mother tried to forbid her son from courting a Russian and tried to talk him out of it, but it was all in vain. The wedding took place. In response, Alik and his bride were not accepted at the parents' home.

This didn't seem to bother our uncle too much. Nadia carried the pregnancy to the expected term and gave birth to a girl, whom they named Sveta. They spent a few years in Moscow, where Alik attempted to study, transferring from one university to the next but not finishing any of them. At the end of the day, the constant moving from one rental apartment to the next with a small child led to our uncle returning to the parental nest – Erzol's home. It looked like a wayward son's return. No one knows exactly what it took for Havo to come to terms with a Russian daughter-in-law. Erzol got his brother a job under him and Alik began paying football for Kislovodsk's 'Trudovie Rezervy' - 'Worker Reserves'. Everything seemed to be going well, but it became clear that Alik preferred parties, gambling and drinking to all other pastimes.

We, the children, didn't know any of this and were simply proud of him. The fact that we lived with a real football player elevated us to great heights in the eyes of our friends. In addition to the ball, Alik had brought us decommissioned football equipment, which wasn't suited for a serious game, but was more than the boys could possibly dream of.

We'd grab our treasures – the ball and torn up cleats – and run like the wind to the football field, anticipating a battle to rival the European Championship or even the World Cup.

Most frequently, the boys would chase the ball around till exhaustion at the Resort Park, under the watchful eye of the plaster pioneer statues, silently blowing into their horns and beating their drums. The sculptures saw their fair share of the frenzied little players' torn up knees and the ball, flying from net to net to the screams of 'goal!' at the top of children's lungs. The winner took all! The two or three rubles won by these means would be spent right away: on ice cream and lemonade, which would all be eaten, drunk and divided among the crowd. And then the re-match would happen.

The perimeter of the football field was lined by outlandish trees with wedge-like leaves, the name of which was only known by the botany teacher. When they were in bloom, the boys found themselves in an intoxicating cloud of aroma, which whispered of things that hadn't happened yet – of dates with girls still to come. The children's hearts would beat faster, unaware of what was causing them to do so. But then, the wind would blow away these premonitions, and football would return to the forefront of our thoughts and feelings.

The kids had another form of entertainment: table tennis. I could play for hours – one only needed to find a table, some chalk to split it up into your half and the opponent's, and get paddles and a ball. The aspiring champions would run around like mad, to and fro, right and left, to send the cherished white ball to the opponent's side. Ping pong, ping pong...

When we were sick of that and the other, we'd run around the seemingly endless Resort Park. We'd tire ourselves out and collapse on the grass, like puppies after running around and watch the vacationers, who wandered along the park's

paths in their leisurewear, accompanied by their dogs and their beloved other halves.

This is how we remember our first springs in Kislovodsk.

## XIV

Between tailoring and coming up with new plans and business ideas, Erzol's work took up the entirety of his time. One could easily think that some sort of complex alchemical process was constantly taking place within him – a bubbling mixture of his drive, penchant for adventure, complacency, and a borderline manic need to pleasantly surprise his loved ones. Considering all this, Erzol came off as very calm in public. He was often the subject of conversation among his friends, who would often argue about and judge his actions, often unable to grasp the motive driving him. Nevertheless, most who knew him saw him as a mischievous joker, who always loved to make quips and play tricks. Besides, most knew better than to start a fight: Erzol was massive enough to knock an opponent down with a single blow if tested.

The perception of Erzol as a placid man, however, was erroneous. Inside, he was like a boiling pot when faced with

a goal. An example comes to mind: a time when Erzol watched the calendar with impatient anticipation. It happened that the city government promised to build a natural gas network the following year, though the City Council said right away that there wouldn't be enough pipes to cover all neighborhoods. It was obvious that the neighborhood where the chairman and the first secretary lived would be prioritized. Nevertheless, Erzol had no doubt that he would be able to connect his own home as well, and did everything he could to establish the necessary connections with the powers that be in order to facilitate pipeline construction on Katyhin Street,

Amidst loved ones, Erzol changed. He wasn't afraid to show exhaustion and could be abrupt at times. Also, at times it seemed like a bitterness overtook him, blocking his good-naturedness. If someone told Father something he already knew, but not in a manner he expected to hear it, he would convince himself that he was unloved and his opinions weren't being respected. The reason for this may have been his own mother, who always strived for all problems to be solved exactly in the manner she wanted.

Perhaps this is why our father was so insistent on Turunge, the mother of his children, being compliant without question and contradictions. Regretfully, Turunge's strong character did not deliver this, and the suspicion that she may, in fact, be stronger than him would enrage him. Erzol's desire to prove that he was in charge got so far that Turunge ended up behind bars. Did his conscience torment him over this? Hardly. In his mind, the move put an end to his life as a family man.

## XV

**H**aving established himself in Kislovodsk, Erzol admitted that he lacked a confidante. If only Isay Adamov moved there! Together, they could come up with various plans of action and discuss issues that outsiders couldn't be made privy to. Like Erzol, Isay was in constant search of a new enterprise to which he could apply his skill and, hopefully, hit the jackpot. From an observer's standpoint, he appeared to jump from one extreme to another, when, in actuality, Isay was pointedly moving toward his goal: to make as much money as possible. And it wasn't the sum itself – important as it was – that drove him, but the excitement of the chase in getting to it. This was the kind of friend that our father lacked for his plan to take over Kislovodsk once and for all.

One day, Erzol was walking around the city, pondering something. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice behind him and couldn't believe his ears – it was Isay's. Erzol turned around to find a middle-aged stranger behind him. This



couldn't have been a mere coincidence. When he was alone that evening, Erzol made a decision. He pulled his address book out of the drawer and dialed. He heard a tone at first, then a familiar voice.

"Adamov on the line."

"Hello, Isay. It's me, Erzol."

"I'm so happy to hear your voice!" Isay shouted through the receiver. "You aren't back in Makhachkala, are you?"

"As if. Actually, I was calling to see if I could pull you out of there as well."

"Why?"

"Come here and I'll tell you."

The conversation ended there.

"So you spoke to Isay?" Havo asked that very evening.

"Mama – I want to arrange for Liza and Isay to move here. Wouldn't that be great? We have room at the house. They could stay here while they get settled."

Havo nodded in agreement. The thought of her daughter being nearby warmed her heart. Babaevs shouldn't live apart. The mother looked at her son with gratitude. He was ready to take on yet another burden – that's how important family was for Erzol. He was ready to do anything for the sake of his brothers, his sisters and his parents – Havo and Nahamye.

"That would be good," Havo replied quietly and started mixing dough. "If they're coming, I'll make ingarpol."

"That's what I'm saying! Let them visit, look around, and then we'll see."

Several days later Erzol went to the train station to meet his sister and her husband. He wandered up and down the platform looking for them until he caught sight of the short, brisk figure that could only belong to Isay. He stepped off the train like a circus illusionist. He had a briefcase in his hand and a pilot's cap – the requisite element of Caucasus chic – atop his head. He gallantly helped an elegant dame in black dress

and hat off the train. It took Erzol a moment to recognize his sister.

“Liza!” he shouted across the whole platform and ran toward her.

“Erzol!”

“You look beautiful!”

Isay stood next to her.

“What are you smiling at, you handsome devil?” Erzol released Liza from his embrace and moved on to Isay. “You made it!”

The men laughed loudly.

Five minutes later they strolled through the train station square, Liza mincing daintily behind them, like a mouse. Suddenly, Isay stopped.

“What happened?” Erzol looked at him curiously.

Isay squinted slyly, then took a deep breath.

“I smell money!” he announced, his eyes sparkling.

Erzol jokingly shoved him in the side.

“Wait up. Not so fast.”

Three cars stood parked on the square. Erzol proudly pointed at one of them.

“Get it!”

“Yours or a service car?” Isay asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Service car.”

“Must be a good job!”

“How’s Mama?” Liza inquired happily once they were inside.

“Getting ready. She cooked up a feast.”

“I can imagine,” Isay grumbled.

“She’s been running between the kitchen and the dining room all day.”

Ten minutes later, they were on Katyhin Street. Nahamye was already standing on the porch. Liza stopped at the gate, a lump crawling up her throat. Time had taken its toll. Her

father was no longer the powerful man she was accustomed to, his once-straight back now hunched. His warm smile, however, lit up his face as always.

“Papa.” Liza gently touched Nahamye’s face.

“Daughter.” Nahamye smiled. The Babaev clan was invincible. His children were so tender and kind. His heart started pounding and a coughing fit overpowered him.

“Papa, are you alright? Are you sick?” Liza asked, frightened.

“Leave it alone, darling. I’m not allowed to be sick with your brother around, or he’ll get the whole hospital here.”

Nahamye wasn’t exaggerating. Erzol tended to his parents more than he did to his own children. Our grandfather was well aware of his son’s outstanding abilities. What he didn’t know, however, was how high Erzol would get. Our grandfather was only upset by one fact: the way Erzol regarded women. Like a shlemazl, or a recent graduate, his son had convinced himself that he hadn’t found his true, special love, and constantly searched for his ideal woman. Nahamye knew that a man who thought this way would never have an ideal marriage, always looking at women skeptically and trying to find someone better. But this was not the time to ruminate on this issue. There was joy at the Babaev house: his beloved daughter and her husband had come for a visit.

Nahamye embraced his daughter again.

“What do you think – did I age terribly?” he asked, smiling.

“Of course not, Papa! Whoever said such a thing?” Liza replied bashfully, donning her usual disarming smile.

“You’re too kind,” said Nahamye, patting her on her shoulder.

“I’m kind too!” Isay interrupted.

“And that’s excellent. Let’s go eat,” Nahamye said, flailing his hands. “Havo! Come greet our guests!”

The friendly crowd barged through the door and into Havo’s arms.

“My God! You’re so skinny! Is Isay starving you?” the mother said, marveling at her youngest daughter.

Liza was a miniature copy of Havo. Home, family, stability, prosperity and the fear of losing it all were all tenets that shaped both her and her mother’s worldview and character.

Isay gave Havo a ceremonial kiss on the cheek, as Liza tugged on his sleeve dramatically.

“You heard Mama’s question – why are you starving me? Explain yourself!”

Isay laughed.

“You better answer!” Erzol chimed in in support.

The brother and sister started laughing, and soon enough the rest of the family had no choice but to shed the last remnants of seriousness. Soon the whole home rang with laughter, as if to tell the world how the Babaevs should live, demonstrating the strength and might of their kin through this display of pure, simple happiness.

After the laughter and embraces subsided and the guests had changed out of their travel clothes, the whole family sat down at the already set table. Erzol poured vodka for everyone. Erzol loved, knew and understood vodka, well aware of how his body reacted to it, and would still be able to revel and joke when his companions lay flat on the floor.

“Well – five grams per tooth, and...” He went on with his toast, which was long and interesting, as usual, weaving words into simple but engaging stories. After hearing out the long and grateful toast to the Creator, everyone drank.

“So – tell me more about how you’re wasting away in Makhachkala,” Erzol asked Isay, laughing.

“I’m not exactly wasting away,” Isay remarked thoughtfully, chewing on some kurze.

“Oh, stop it. Trust me – I know. You can’t do anything substantial there. The possibilities are too limited. Surely you know this.”

Erzol poured another round.

"It's not that simple," Isay replied. "As long as there are competent people, business gets done."

"Just not in Makhachkala," Erzol retorted. "We're always away from the sweet spot there. Dinner's always on the table, of course, but not a shot in hell at dessert."

"You're exaggerating," Isay countered. "But you're certainly doing well here, that's for sure. To your home!"

And they drank again.

"Agree with me – it's better here," Erzol continued.

"How is it better?" Isay asked in genuine curiosity.

"I'll show you tomorrow."

They continued to chat, argue, laughed, but the long journey and the joys of reunion had done their work. Havo was the first to notice that Liza was tired. Isay followed suit, growing quieter. Only Erzol continued to talk without respite, his rumbling laughter ringing through the air.

The following day, Erzol and Isay went for a walk through the city. Father was showing his friend 'his kingdom'.

"Nahamye would agree with me," he said as they approached the Karl Marx Cooperative. "Kislovodsk is a goldmine. You know why?" Erzol stopped and widely gestured at the city's panorama. "These are all resorts. You know who comes here? Only bigwigs."

"That's all talk at this point."

"All talk?" Erzol was winding up. "Listen to me. There are so many people here come tourist season! And all of them have money!"

"Look – we aren't criminals."

"I'm not talking about robbing them," Erzol laughed. "They're giving it away willingly. And the air!" He nudged his friend's shoulder. "Can you feel the air?"

They entered the cooperative building.

"Let me introduce you," Erzol said as they entered an office. "My friend Comrade Kosyrev, director of the cooperative."

Kosyrev sat in the office with three or four other executives, over a lively discussion. To Isay's surprise, once Kosyrev saw Erzol, he quickly wrapped up the meeting.

"Alright! Let's finish this later. Right now, it's time for a 'key moment', so to speak."

The mysterious phrase – 'key moment' – seemed to impress Kosyrev's subordinates, who instantly vacated the director's office.

"Ivan Aleksandrovich," Erzol said to the director, "meet Isay."

Kosyrev replied with a firm handshake.

"He's a close friend," Erzol continued, "and a valuable asset with a knack for industry."

"Masha," Kosyrev called out to his secretary, who sat in the neighboring office. "Bring something for the table."

"No-no, don't worry about it!" Erzol protested. "We're in a rush – so many things to do."

The director didn't insist. Isay simply looked on in wonder.

After talking to Kosyrev, they went outside, where most passers-by offered reverent greetings:

"Our respect to Aleksey Naumovich!" they would tell Erzol.

Isay would only grunt as his friend told him their titles. He realized that Erzol is no longer the man he knew in Makhachkala. His network was impressive even to a man as connected as Isay.

"Friendship is a huge asset," said Erzol, explaining his tactics.

Listening to his friend, Isay understood that Erzol's mention of a "goldmine" was not that farfetched. This was not Makhachkala – everything in Kislovodsk was different.

"Stay here. Take my advice and stay," Erzol said in conclusion.

Indeed – Isay had much to think about. He was always interested in work that allowed room for private initiative unhindered by regulations and instruction. Kislovodsk seemed to promise just that.

Three days later, Isay and Liza were on their way home. Once already on the platform, Erzol drew Isay closer by his shoulder and told him quietly:

“There’s nothing there for you. That’s a fact. And think about Liza. You need an heir, and with my parents here, everything would be easier.”

They hugged tightly, and Isay jumped onto the stair leading to the car. The train started moving.

## XVI

On the day of her release, Turunge was woken up at the crack of dawn and taken to the quarantine room. They dug up the black, burnt and tattered bundle that held her personal belongings. She was ordered to change. She was then taken to a room where the correctional supervisor explained to Babaeva that parole was not all sunshine and rainbows. It was, at best, walking the edge, as many didn't pass the test of freedom. The supervisor gave Turunge a pointed look.

“You understand, right?”

She needed to check in with a parole officer once a week, until the end of her sentence – two and a half years. She also needed to get a job – that was a requirement. Otherwise, she would get another sentence for parasitism.

Turunge nodded compliantly, demonstrating that she took note of what was being said.

And here she was, standing at the checkpoint, freedom at arm's reach. It was drizzling outside, and a thick fog shroud-



ed the outlines of the surroundings. It seemed like the entire earth was stuck in this dull, ominous mist. The truck that was supposed to take her to the city broke, and she was forced to walk to the road on foot. But Turunge had reached it before she even noticed. She soared, as if she had wings, rushing home to her children. Trucks traveled back and forth along the road, rarely interspaced with cars filled with overdressed passengers.

Makhachkala was somewhere nearby – she knew that. The rain had stopped, but the fog had gotten thicker. She couldn't see anything beyond a few meters. Turunge put out her hand, trying to flag down a driver that would take her to the city. Suddenly, her eyes were struck by headlights' yellow beams. She ran ahead, waving her hand. Brakes squealed, and a truck came to a stop barely a foot away from her.

"What are you doing, you idiot!" someone screamed. "Do you want me to go to jail?" A giant man in an ushanka hat and a quilted jacket much like Turunge's climbed out of the cabin. "Have you lost your mind?"

Turunge was hit by a barrage of prison-slang curses. She listened and smiled.

Having let off his steam, the driver looked at the crazy woman, then noticed the path that led off the road.

"Are you getting out of lockup or something?" he asked, almost pleasantly.

Turunge nodded.

"You should have said so! And here you had me going off! Climb into the back – I'll take you to the city. There's no room in the cabin. I'm taking my wife to the hospital. She's in labor." The fellow proudly pointed inside the truck. Turunge smiled at this development.

"God bless," she whispered.

She tightly gripped the edge of the back, pulled herself up, and rolled over the high divider. Once inside, she crawled

all the way up to the cabin to avoid the draft and wrapped her jacket tightly. The truck moved forward.

The whole way, Turunge tried to sneak a peek at the driver's young wife, whom he was taking to the maternity ward, through the dirty back window of the cabin. The thought made Turunge recall her own pregnant belly, and how happy she was when she found out she was going to have a baby. No, love didn't exist in the world. Not even for this young woman, the happy foolish girl. What will happen to her the day after tomorrow, when she gives birth? Will she still be happy? A half-year will pass, and she'll return to work. Her husband will come home drunk one night, smelling like another woman. That's love for you.

The truck stopped on the outskirts of the city. The ginger man climbed out of the cabin and apologetically pointed at the barracks outlined through the fog.

"That's where we're going. Will you make it the rest of the way?"

"I'll make it," Turunge nodded. "Thanks, guys."

He nodded.

"Alright, so long."

She jumped onto the ground and waved to the mother to be – for luck. Only after that did she look around, trying to figure out what part of the city she was in. The neighborhood was unfamiliar, but it didn't matter. She was in her native Makhachkala, free. She wouldn't be lost here. Turunge walked the rest of the way.

From a distance, the Abramov home on Suleiman Stalsky Street seemed abandoned. The windows were tightly shuttered and there didn't seem to be any activity inside. The gate was latched shut. Turunge stopped indecisively and looked at the windows. She got on the tiptoes and reached over the gate, looking for the latch. She entered the yard. Kushnir – the shepherd, that Daniil had brought into the home several months

before her arrest started barking. The dog rushed at her, but suddenly stopped, sat down and started wagging her tail.

“Kusha! You recognized me!” Turunge quietly whispered and extended her hand. The dog lowered her ears, and started to whimper and fawn. Turunge gently scratched her behind the ear, then smiled uncomfortably, as if her unannounced arrival made her feel guilty even in front of the dog. Feeling her legs growing weaker, she walked onto the stoop and knocked. She remembered how she would rush into the house in the past at full speed: “Papa! Mama! I’m here.”

The door creaked open and a woman’s silhouette appeared.

“Who’s here?” Anya’s voice asked.

“Anya! It’s me!” Turunge replied, nearly screaming, feeling weaker and weaker.

“Turunge! Sister!”

There, in Anya’s tight embraces, Turunge bawled, loudly, without shame or restraint.

And so concluded this September day in 1959.

## XVII

**H**avo was the first to hear the news. She received a call from Makhachkala, which informed her that Turunge had been released. Havo couldn't decide whether to be happy or upset. She only knew one thing: Turunge could come to see her children at any second, and that's when the real problems would start. What would she tell the kids? How would the reunion go? There were more questions than answers.

Havo looked around in confusion. So much in their life had changed. Here they were, in a new house, with the children living the life they should, and things settling in. And here she was – free again. She would show up and start asserting her rights.

The river hummed from below. The mountain stream's dull murmur suddenly shifted Havo's thoughts to past events in Makhachkala. She remembered how Turunge tried to take Erzol away from her, his mother, how she tried to have everything her way. Nevertheless, it turned out that Erzol was un-

questionably loyal to her – Havo. He built a new house specifically for her – Havo. Knowing that her son did everything for her – Havo – filled her with strength and levity. This was true filial love. As long as her son was at her side, Havo would feel happy.

She sighed, once again feeling confident and empowered. The sudden news seemed insignificant. Besides, the time when Turunge would visit the children was still vague and uncertain.

Havo stood at the kitchen, working as usual, and didn't hear right away that someone had entered the house. When she sensed her son's presence, she asked, not turning away from her cooking.

"Have you heard that Turunge was released?"

For a second, the same oppressive silence that preceded all of the scandals in Makhachkala hung over the kitchen. Erzol was tense. For a second, he thought that his ex-wife was going to walk through the door at any minute and everything would start over. He frowned, and the illusion faded.

"How did you find out?"

"Fira told me. She said that Turunge came to our former home. She asked the new residents if they know our new address. She must want to see the children." Havo took great care to say this nonchalantly.

"The children?" Erzol asked contemplatively, as if he only now realized what that entailed.

"Are you surprised?" Havo asked.

"Doesn't she know?"

"How would she know?"

"I thought her sister... That the Shcherbatovs would tell her everything."

"The Shcherbatovs?" Havo scoffed. "Who knows what her sister will tell her? They're all nuts there!"

Erzol frowned sternly. It seemed that Turunge would be in for a surprise. She'll start making inquiries, coming for vis-

its, and they would be forced to sort things out once again. Everything that he had fled from would return. He needed the advice of a seasoned man familiar with the situation – Isay Adamov.

Luckily, Isay was ready for his friend's phone call.

"Have you heard that Turunge has been released?" Erzol began, skipping over formalities.

"I have. Fira told me."

"Why am I the last to hear about this?"

"Why are you making an issue out of this? Liza talked to Fira, who told her. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal? Nothing, except for the fact that Turunge will want to see my children. She already looked for us there – on Yermoshkin. Asked about an address. Do you understand?"

"I understand. So what?"

"What do you mean, 'so what?' What if she comes here? Do you think I need her chasing me around Kislovodsk, accusing me of kidnapping her kids? People know me here! I have a reputation."

"Every man has the right to make mistakes," Isay remarked. "And every husband has the right to get divorced."

"You keep making jokes about this."

"Calm down, Erzol. This is not a big deal. I'll take care of everything. In fact, it's already taken care of. You think I sit around here for no reason? Makhachkala isn't as bad a city as you make it out to be."

"Again with the riddles?"

"What will you give me in exchange for what I'm about to tell you?"

"The moon from the sky," Erzol snapped back angrily.

"Fine – I'll sell you good news in exchange for a case of beer."

"Deal."

“Zhigulevsky beer.”

“Fine – tell me already.”

“She was released on parole.”

“So?”

“So – before the end of her sentence, which is two and a half years at a minimum, she’s stuck in Makhachkala. Consequently, she won’t be making any trips to Kislovodsk.”

It was as if a load was lifted off Erzol’s shoulders.

“I owe you two cases of beer,” he grumbled and hung up.

Two and a half years were plenty of time to take care of things and get the children ready. Two and a half years were no longer as scary. In any case, there wouldn’t be any unpleasant conversations in the immediate future.

The world suddenly became brighter. The water in the faucet seemed to flow more happily. Erzol tiredly ran his hand across his face. Goddamn, his stubble grew quickly.

Isay’s move to Kislovodsk took place two months after Turunge’s return from the labor camp. The house on Stalsky Street – almost directly across from the Abramovs – was sold, and Isay and Liza left Dagestan.

Erzol kept his word and helped his relative. A few meetings with key people, a few more lunches, and Isay – a stranger in the city – was welcomed by its masters with open arms.

Isay was appointed director of a couple of shabby cafeterias: a diet café and a milk bar, as well as a bakery that made doughnuts. They were the dying wonders of communal foodservice, frequented only by local laborers unconcerned by the smell of day-old cabbage soup, dirty tables and dumpy service. There was, however, a bright side to the squalor: the cafeterias were located in heavily trafficked places, always teeming with tourists. This was what Isay needed to start building a business.

One day, I accidentally overheard a conversation between two neighbors down the street. One woman asked the other:

“Did you hear? Jews moved in around here.”

“The kikes? Yes - over there!” the woman pointed at our house.

And so I found out how the neighbors regarded us. That mysterious word – ‘kike’ – evoked alarm and caused one to see the world at sharper angles. It also caused me to think: what made me so different from the other boys who were never called by that word? Katyhin Street was mostly settled by Russians.

To add, the neighbors’ eyes were always especially vigilant. Whenever Havo carried heavy bags back from the market, bundles of greens, cucumbers and tomatoes sticking out, she was always followed by the judgmental gazes of several local women. Obviously, they all had these things in their gardens, but they grew them, and the Babaevs bought them. Therein lay the difference.

Envy and knowledge that Jews were always the first to be singled out as culprits followed us, Erzol’s children, from a young age. Everyone in the Babaev clan fought this differently. Havo, for instance, did so subconsciously. This was part of her survival knowledge she had learned from birth. She knew all of her neighbors by name, knew of their problems, the details of their family life, and always knew what to say, what advice to offer, and, once in a while, gave them money to tide them over until the next payday. She would sometimes help the neighbors by buying milk, cream and meat from them. Havo was well aware of what was being said behind her back, but tried to smooth over this unfairness in various ways.



## XVIII

**Y**et again, Erzol wanted something that no one had or could possibly have. His inner drive burst into action, scattering sparks like an electrical conductor after shorting out. Adrenaline boiled in his blood – he wanted to change something, build something, improve something.

It was as if he was on a quest, a search for artifacts that would advance him to a higher level and force others to marvel at his cunning and organizational ability. The boiler room and steam heating system he installed in the basement became one such symbol of progress. It wasn't even about how much easier hot water in the home made life for our family. After all, Erzol grew up in a place where people were used to getting by without amenities. Father was more concerned with the fact that he achieved what few others could. He was like a mountaineer who had just climbed the Elbrus – now that that was done, it was time to take on Mount Everest. Erzol moved towards his peak, dragging his children behind him. While they

were still little, however, he would have to conquer the heights on this own.

One day, Erzol called everyone into the basement. A giant metal cylinder covered with black oil paint towered over the room. It stood on massive brick blocks and was surrounded by a spider web of pipes that meandered somewhere into the low, wood-paneled ceiling.

"This is the boiler room. That's the boiler, and this is the furnace," Erzol said curtly, opening a hatch on the assembly that was shielded by a thin metal screen.

"The most important thing here is the burner," he said.

He pressed a button, and a plume of blue flame swept through the chute with a deafening pop, simultaneously plunging us into excitement and horror.

"No one should ever try to put their hands in there," Erzol warned sternly. "You're guaranteed to get burnt."

The children looked at the perfectly straight flame in enchantment.

The furnace took up a significant amount of space under the boiler.

"The burner is constantly working," Erzol continued. "There's a sensor inside that measures the temperature. And this is the boiler."

He moved his hand as if he was holding a magic wand, as we listened, breathless.

Erzol closed the hatch and went around to the other side of the boiler.

"See," he said, knocking on the metal cylinder. "It's already warm."

We took turns touching it. The metal was indeed warm.

"It's very important to always check the pressure in the boiler, to make sure it isn't above normal," Erzol explained.

"And if it's above normal?" Slava asked. "What happens?"

"It goes 'boom'," Erzol replied.

The kids' eyes widened.

"The pressure needs to be checked several times a day."

The furnace was fascinating and mysterious. It heated water in the house. Its mechanics weren't understood, but the result was perfectly clear. It took on responsibility for life, mood, and even, in our opinion, Mama Havo's happiness.

The furnace gave heat when it was well fed. Therefore, we finally had a responsibility on which the well being of the family depended. We had never encountered a similar thing in the past.

Father showed us a shiny rock called anthracite. We knew from school that the first revolutionaries were mostly coal miners and stokers, and that their sparks lit the flames of the revolution.

We would stock up on anthracite before the winter. In the fall, a huge truck would arrive at the house and unload a giant pile of black rocks. Neighboring men hired by our father would instantly rush in to move the coal to the basement. From there, we would carry it in buckets, cleave it, and toss it into the furnace.

The most frightening thing about the black mountain was that we, the children, were responsible for breaking this multitude of chunks into smaller pieces. You'd hit a monolithic piece with all your might and – crack! – the block would shatter into dozens of little rocks. Crumbs would spray in all direction, and black soot would settle on our faces. A half hour of this would make one's skin turn black.

Havo would laugh when we would show up after such work.

"My little devils!" she would laugh, grabbing her sides. "Hurry and wash up!"

We'd run and shower, happy and proud, happy to have completed a task and achieved a result. Perhaps this was when that magical feeling entered our lives – the conquest of a

height, the irreplaceable joy of understanding that you have reached your goal. We stood under the hot water, heated by our heroic labor, and understood that this was its direct result. We put our hands under it, rubbed brown soap over our shoulders and bellies and were happy. We were filled with drive, energy and that same vitality – a lust for life. Of course, it was still too early for us to understand this.

As I mentioned, our house was attached to a sizable piece of land, and it was a sin to leave it unused. Father believed that the garden should play a role in raising the children as well. Therefore, on weekends, when he was home, we, the children would be ‘driven to the soil’ early in the morning. Here’s what would happen: our father’s resounding voice would call us over and we’d be issued a gardening inventory. Father would pick up a shovel and plunge it into the soil with the agility of a circus strongman, then turn over a sizable clump of soil and yell:

“Do as I do!”

We would plunge the blades into the ground with our immature hands and hang on the handle, unable to turn over the captured soil. Father would laugh, come up to us, and show us what to do. How to properly hold the handle, the best angle for digging with ease – and, magically, everything would begin to work.

“Come on, you schleps – look,” Father would yell happily.

The earth would shake from his strikes, and we marveled at how easily and aptly he did it.

After an hour of such work, our hands would be covered with blisters, but we persevered and kept digging until the shovel complied, like a fiddler’s bow.

Erzol taught us how to plant potatoes properly, showing us what depth to bury the tubers at to ensure a big, sprawling plant. And the way we reinforced the tomatoes! We’d put stakes into the ground next to the bushes and tie the brittle

stems onto them to prevent the plant from snapping under the weight of their red fruit.

Tending to the trees in the fall, we felt like artists. Father would prepare a special solution, and we'd arm ourselves with brushes and start covering the bark with layers of whitewash. Father looked on to make sure that we painted properly, covering every inch of the trunk with a barrier impenetrable to harmful bugs.

This was invaluable experience for us. For Father, it was a part of his child-rearing curriculum.

At one point, we were each allotted a plot of land. We looked on in horror as Father measured our portions with wide steps. He then handed us shovels and said:

"This needs to be a garden bed. Get to work."

We picked up our tools and began to dig. After a half hour I was already used to it. After another three, each of us had our own garden bed.

Afterwards – as I recall, on the next day, a Sunday – father picked up some paper packets, poured a mound of white seeds into each of our hands and said:

"These are future cucumbers. Look at what you're going to do with them."

He led us to our plots. He drew a shallow groove in the dirt with a thin stake and started tossing white seeds into it, every ten centimeters or so, covering them with dirt. He then told us to take over. Then we made two or three grooves on our garden beds and scattered the seeds into them.

After a week, tiny sprouts appeared above the level surface of the ground. There was no limit to our joy and excitement when Father showed us that marvel. So this is what hard work led to! The joy of victory! We saw how soil reacts to tending and responds to sweat spilled upon it. All this remains in our memory.

But an 'enemy's' call to battle soon followed. After a few days, thin, sprawling leaves of grass appeared next to our

sprouts. Havo called these weeds. They needed to be fought – torn out without mercy. But that wasn't all – the weeds' roots were usually unique in that their roots grew much deeper into the ground than those of garden vegetables.

"That's life too," Havo would say. "No one wants to be deprived of it. Just like you. People wanted to rip you up, wanted you to grow up like weeds, but your father didn't let them."

"Who wanted us to become weeds?"

We couldn't understand what she was talking about, but the notion that our father kept someone from letting us become weeds hung strong in our memory.

And so our summers would pass.

At times, Havo or Father would come out into the garden and conduct an executive inspection of our plots. It was like a war parade. The best would be chosen: me, Slava, Gena and Ella would take turns at victory. Our labor turned into a competition. We were taught that there can only be one winner, and victory has to be achieved at all costs.

It took years for us to understand why Father did these things. His intention was not to entertain or humor us. This was conscious, planned education to get us used to difficult, tedious work to achieve a result.

Had we resisted and treated it as a mere game, punishment would surely follow. Father would still make us fulfill the responsibilities that he had bestowed on us, since we had to help Havo.

Luckily, we enjoyed the work, which we considered to be a form of entertainment, if a difficult one. Had a stranger looked at the Babaevs at the time, he would surely see our house as a Garden of Eden, where only happy people lived.

## XIX

**T**wo weeks after her return Turunge decided to write a letter to her children. This followed a long conversation with Anya. They sat in the kitchen, doors locked, to prevent intrusions and unwanted advice.

“I’m their mother. It’s my responsibility to take them back,” Turunge ranted. “The parole office told me what my rights are, and that I can go to them in Kislovodsk as soon as my sentence is complete.”

“Alright – you’ll go. Then what? What are you going to do with the children?”

One merely had to say the word ‘children’ in Turunge’s presence for her to lose the last bits of confidence and calm she possessed. She would flame up, as if someone put a lit match near her, becoming tense and nervous.

“What do you mean? I’m going to take them.”

“Alright, you’ll take them. Where? Here?”

Turunge nodded.

“Fine. So there’s enough room,” Anya agreed, “but how are you going to feed them?”

Turunge looked at her sister in astonishment.

“Don’t you understand? They want to live with me.”

“I do understand, but that’s not what I’m talking about. How are you going to support yourselves?”

“What do you mean? I’ll get a job. You’ll help, and so will Zachar.”

The unquenchable thirst for a reunion with her children got more severe with each day Turunge spent since her release from prison. The anticipation of seeing them filled the entirety of her soul, displacing the sadness that had been nesting there. This desire turned into a deep neurosis, its foundation a tragic union of love and hatred: love of her children and hatred of her husband.

“You’re crazy,” Anya replied, tragically gazing at the ceiling. “Fine. Write a letter then.”

The sisters started discussing the letter’s contents. Turunge was afraid of making mistakes and asked Anya to do the writing. She reluctantly complied and began, cursing and chain smoking cigarettes as she went along. Ultimately, they ended up with only a few sentences: ‘Dear children. We’re waiting for you. Your mother, Turunge. We will see each other soon. Kisses and love.’

They put the letter into an envelope, attached a stamp, and put it in the mailbox.

Days of tense anticipation followed. Blind faith in positive change forced the woman’s heart to fill with vague hope. Everything would be better again.

The parole officer didn’t lie and got Turunge a job at the foundry. Much like in prison, she would wake up at the crack of dawn, albeit to an alarm clock instead of a siren, and report for her servitude. There, she could be yelled at, teased, shoved – she didn’t care. It was as if she hid from her surroundings by thinking of her children, sending them signals of motherly love, calling each one out by name, and receiving



no reply – only cold silence, as if all the connections on the other side were severed. This terrified Turunge.

One time, she walked into a toy store. She stopped by the toy cars and instinctively started looking through them, imagining which ones she would buy for her boys. She lost track of time, unaware of whether she had spent one minute in front of the counter or ten. She ultimately grabbed one of the cars off the shelf. She imagined arriving home, the children noisily running up to greet her. She would offer the toy to either Igor or Slava, and the kids would run around, each trying to claim it as his own. Turunge forgot all else in the world, until a sharp voice pulled her out of her stupor.

“Would you like to buy it?”

This startled Turunge. A young saleswoman stood in front of her.

“No-no! Here – take it. I’m fine. Sorry.”

She then saw a little boy at the opposite end of the store that reminded her of her sons. He stood by his mother, pleading for her to buy a graph paper notebook. The mother didn’t want to, but the boy kept insisting: “I’ll use it to count days! That way, I’ll know when Papa will be back.”

A shock swept over Turunge.

She carefully looked the woman over. Could it be that the child’s father was in prison? She quickly walked toward them.

“Can I buy this notebook for your boy?”

The woman was taken aback and looked at her cautiously.

“Please – allow me.”

Without waiting for an answer, she approached the register, hurriedly gave the saleswoman two coins, grabbed the notebook and handed it to the boy.

The child’s face lit up. He looked at his mother pleadingly, as if asking for permission to take it, then turned and smiled at the stranger.

“What’s your name?” Turunge asked tenderly.

“Gena,” they boy answered, then blushed, ran to his mother, and hid behind her skirt, only peeking out with one eye. Perhaps the stranger would have more gifts?

The boy’s mother confusedly shifted her glance between Turunge and the saleswoman.

“Thank you very much. I feel guilty accepting this, I really do.” Embarrassed, she nodded ‘goodbye’ to Turunge and led her son toward the exit, as if trying to get away from the stranger as soon as possible.

The mother and son left, leaving Turunge by the counter. She approached the saleswoman again and, as if in a trance, asked for another identical notebook, then silently handed her three kopecks and hurried out of the store.

The saleswoman watched the peculiar customer, mouth agape, then shrugged and walked over to another section to share the story of with a coworker.

Later that night, at home and alone in her room, Turunge took out the notebook, opened it, and realized that the last time she had used a notebook like that was in evening school, where she met Erzol. They shared a classroom, and sat at neighboring desks. Turunge never would have thought that this broad-shouldered fellow would become her husband. Turunge shook her head.

“Not all memories of the past are bad after all,” she said out loud, remembering how their homeroom and geometry teacher, Nadezhda Magomedovna, taught them to draw perfect squares.

Turunge smiled and began to inscribe dates in columns on the graph paper, counting days and months to end up with a calendar of the remainder of her sentence.

From then on, she would open this cherished notebook every evening and check off a day. It was a fight against time. The opponent kept retreating – the number of crossed-out days

grew larger, as the number of days until her reunion with her kids shrank.

As an extension of this ritual, she would go to the mailbox to check if a reply came from Kislovodsk. The letter, however, was never there.

## XX

**T**rips to the market with Mama Havo were truly educational experiences for the children. She never bought anything right away, or impulsively. She would first walk through all of the aisles and take a look. She looked happy and festive while doing this, as if she could see right through the vendors and knew in advance which goods were a rip-off and which were worth the asking price, without bargaining. The produce aisle would be perused and everything – tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant – would be carefully examined and squeezed. The offerings would be appraised and narrowed down according to unrevealed criteria, and only then a decision would be made.

When the groceries made their way from the vendor's hands to Havo's giant basket or bag, the money would glide toward the smiling salesperson with a gentle rustle in a truly theatrical ritual. Finally, the groceries would make it home, in a manner similar to ancient victors bringing back the spoils

of war. Havo would first show her findings to Nahamye, who always marveled at her skill, perhaps humoring her a little. The kids would follow, and then, at last, Erzol would appraise the groceries.

“Look at the tomatoes I got! And the cucumbers! And the herbs! Come on, take a look! So fresh!”

Erzol never doubted the quality of what his mother bought – her decisions were immune to critique. When Erzol would go to the market, however, Havo would always complain about the quality of his purchases. She’d sigh, shake her head and toss around disappointed looks, as if to say ‘Look at the cucumbers they slipped you. Were you even there? And the tomatoes... Look at the bruised sides!’

Father would only laugh as he listened to this. He had his own philosophy. In order to get it over with quickly, he would rarely bargain, but tried to buy in larger quantities in order to drive down the price.

“Son, why do you do this? Why did you buy so much?” Havo would complain. “What were you thinking? Don’t go to the market again.”

Havo would get genuinely offended when her son ruined her fun. Going to the market after Erzol’s trips didn’t make any sense, but looking at shriveled, small or unripe vegetables was even more upsetting. She knew for a fact that the neighbor of that Ibrahim who sold Father the produce – Havo had some sort of sixth sense for accurately determining the exact vendor Erzol purchased sub-par goods from – had incomparably better cucumbers and tomatoes.

As far as the competition between speed of purchase and quality assessment went, each of our childhood idols – Erzol and Havo – taught us their own philosophy. Father taught us how to drive down the price by buying in bulk, while Havo taught us to be mindful of quality. Still malleable habits were being honed and tuned to discernible external cues, providing

the brain with secret knowledge, which helped develop immunity towards defeat, set the goal on victory and prosperity, and create a yearning for critical thinking and success. A good purchase at the market was akin to triumph, either over a vendor's greed or fortune's whim. Tipping the scales in one's favor by getting the salesman to sell the fruits of his labor at a lesser profit required skill.

We didn't know this yes, but the seeds of success were already sprouting, as we developed a knack for intuitive accounting which drove both Father and Havo to strive for the vendor to accept their terms. Our family instilled in us the universal principle of solving any problem, be it the purchase of a bundle of greens or global political negotiations: the ability to steer a situation your way was key. This was our university.

Havo once returned from the market to find something in the mailbox. Erzol subscribed to Pravda and Izvestiya, which Nahamye read, but here it was, a corner of a rectangular envelope – a letter.

Havo looked at the envelope. There wasn't a single word in Tat, and she could barely read Russian. It must have been for her son. She carefully put it into her apron pocket and opened the gate. Back at home, she plunged head first into housework and forgot about the letter. It wasn't until evening that she remembered, gasped and went to Erzol's room.

"Erzol, I completely forgot," she said, handing him the envelope. "It came this morning."

Erzol skimmed over the address, as wrinkles came over his forehead. Havo noticed this.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's from her," our father answered coldly.

Then, saying nothing else, he gave it back to Havo.

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Can you read it?" Erzol replied.

“No.”

“Well, neither can I. Put it somewhere. You know how letters are – they often get lost.”

And so it went with the letter. None of the children ever learned about it. Only years later, while I was preparing this book, did I decide to answer it – to write from my heart, just like Turunge did years ago.

In the meantime, life went on. We grew older and found new forms of entertainment, one being the love for long walks.

This was a different Caucasus than the one we saw in Dagestan. We were in the midst of green lands fed by mountain rivers. The landscapes of Kislovodsk and its surroundings evoked the female body. Every hill and valley tempted us, future men, with its utter beauty, feeding that special hunter’s fervor that urged us to conquer it.

Masses of leaves – dark green, bluish, black, platinum gray – individually indistinguishable from one another in the sea of color and expressed as one common, complex tone, were like paintings by an artist driven insane by the inability to depict the beauty around him.

The snow, donning a shade of blue in crevices’ shadows; the mountain peaks’ gray teeth turned unsettling by their enticing distance; green valleys nestled between imposing hills; the cliffs, sharpened by the wind’s sharp blades that formed an impenetrable ring of stone around Kislovodsk – these were all landscapes of our childhood.

The ancient caves, whose formation was attributed to the winds, resembled Martian landscapes. It seemed impossible that air alone could have formed them – that a stronger force would be required. Appearing before our own eyes as indisputable evidence of miracles, these caves and cliffs awoke the desire to conquer them, to descend to the very bottom of the chasms and see the fountain of life flow from the boundless depths. Whenever we entered the caves, we couldn’t help

but think that this is where the mystery of creation would be revealed to us, where we would experience that quivering delight that accompanies discovery of lands where man's foot had not yet set.

The outskirts of Kislovodsk were home to many Karachai people. They were horse thieves and rakish dzhigits, unwilling to give up their way of life under any authority. Their entire world consisted of riding, grazing and training horses to bend to their will. Whenever they rode in on their bay stallions, it seemed to us that the horseman and the horse became one and the same. We'd watch in astonishment whenever the Karachai swept past us like a whirlwind.

And, naturally, we – Erzol's oldest children – looked for an opportunity to meet them. This was partly due to the fact that the Karachai brought their horses to graze on the very ridge at the edge of which our house stood. We soon befriended the leaders of the Karachai adolescents, our peers, and began to spend time with them. We watched as they harnessed their horses and learned to do the same. Staying atop a horse, however, proved to be more difficult. But the Karachai were friendly and helpful, and soon taught us to handle the beasts so well that soon enough we were galloping alongside them at full speed, hooting and hollering with joy. The Earth's turning itself struggled to keep up with us as the wind whistled in our ears. Those moments were unforgettable.

Along with the Karachai, we would build makeshift dams across mountain streams using clay and stones, then swim to our hearts' content in the shallow pools we created once they've been warmed through by the sun. No one ever worried about us – we felt extraordinarily safe. We were masters of our own domain and could go wherever we wanted without fear of involvement in something unpleasant. This was true freedom, which none of us appreciated at the time.



Once tired of swimming, the guys would get on their horses and ride off toward distant pastures. The majestic Elbrus towered in the background.

Summer passed, and autumn moved in. The third autumn without our mother.

## XXI

**A**utumn came early to Makhachkala that year – the summer was unusually hot and dry. The trees were scorched and the leaves faded.

Turunge sat home alone. She was getting the evening shift more and more often. The management knew that she was alone and without children, and assigned her a most inconvenient schedule. Turunge didn't complain.

That day, she had been cleaning the kitchen since morning. She had a day off, and Anya promised to visit in the evening. Zachar and Daniil were at work, as always, while Panovich was fiddling with something in his workshop.

The clock struck noon. Suddenly, the dog started to bark, quickly switching to a happy whimper. There was a knock on the door.

Turunge opened it. Two figures stood on the stoop. Seeing those before her, she covered her mouth with her hand,

and started wailing, as if she was in terrible pain, tears flowing from her eyes.

“Mama, Papa... I’m so sorry...”

Hezgie and Melke had returned home.

Later, after some time had passed, the Abramov children sat with their parents for hours, wondering and asking how the couple managed to come back together. Indeed, there was something mystical about their simultaneous return. What exactly happened to yield this result will always remain unknown.

The court’s parole board always had a quota. Considerations included, first and foremost the nature of the crime – political or non-political – the age of the convicted, the state of their health, as well as a number of other situations that could alleviate the sentence, such as the work done in prison, praise from labor camp management, and so on.

Due to their ethnicity and age, neither Melke nor Hezgie belonged to any convict groups. Neither of them had been penalized. Adding the fact that they regularly did the work assigned made them optimal candidates for sentence reduction even in the worst case scenario. Moreover, Melke had gotten seriously ill, and her medical file carried a doctor’s mark of a goner – a patient on the brink of death. Having no desire to kill elderly people, the members of the court commissions unanimously put a thick checkmark by the Abramovs’ names. They would be released.

The irony was that the old folks themselves knew nothing of this and didn’t even get a chance to notify one another about this tremendous change in their fates. They were released suddenly, on the very same day, from camps located seventy kilometers apart.

The verdict announcement procedure had been honed over decades. They were called to the camp supervisors, read the necessary resolutions, and ordered to gather their things.

They were then issued whatever little money they earned while in prison, which would allow them to get home. Unlike the majority of such cases, all of this took about a day.

One had to see the old folks, who, upon finding out that they were free, suddenly refused to leave the camp without notifying their other half. They pleaded in vain to be detained for a little bit longer, but were, of course, denied and told to leave. They only had time to write a brief letter to one another. These letters went back and forth between the men's and women's camp, while the elders found themselves at an unfamiliar train station, the name of which they didn't know, griping and complaining. The train to Moscow stopped there once a week.

Melke approached the ticket counter, noticing some old man in front of her. Hezgie, on the other hand, was first in line, and noticed someone take the spot behind him as he pushed money through the slot in the window.

"A ticket to Moscow," Hezgie said quietly.

He felt the person behind him holding her breath as he said this.

"Same for me," she suddenly asked the cashier over the old man's shoulder.

Hezgie turned around. In front of him – Melke. His Melke.

They stood there, baffled, looking at one another, like resurrected ghosts, then stepped back.

"Melke?" Hezgie whispered.

"Hezgie!" Melke replied.

Frost and hunger had muffled their once loud voices, the camp had hunched their figures, but their eyes – the eyes remained the same. They carried the same fire that lit up when the rabbi broke the ritual glass by their feet under the chuppah and they kissed one another for the first time. That fire warmed and guarded their union since the moment Hezgie told Melke these simple words: "Be mine in misery and joy, in sickness and in health." It warmed their home, warmed their children,

and ultimately saved their lives in the remote taiga, bringing them back together contrary to all laws of logic and probability. Here, at this ending point, where they were supposed to die, their lives gained a new impulse. Their suffering had not been in vain after all. Like newlyweds, they ran to one another.

Snow fell. The cashier watched the scene through her tiny window, periodically crossing herself subtly and whispering under her breath: “The things that happen! Oh Lord! The old man found his woman! Oh, my.”

A week later, Turunge’s parents were home.

Turunge had already worked at the foundry for two years. The work was difficult and harmful, but Turunge didn’t give it a second thought. She worked her assigned six days a week without break or respite, from whistle to whistle. Not once during this time was she concerned with the search for someone, be it a man or a friend, to be at her side. She was only driven by the desire to see her children.

Finally, the formalities that prevented her from doing so were no longer an issue.

## XXII

**W**e, Erzol's children, were growing up, and our father didn't remain idle either, widening his network and honing his communication skills with anyone and everyone. He was becoming a noticeable figure in Kislovodsk, pointedly pulling the world that surrounded him into his domain. He was a true earner. Business at the Karl Marx Co-operative, which was essentially managed by him, was on the rise. Occasionally our father would get involved in unpleasant situations, risking robbery and even death, but he emerged unscathed every time, as if protected by either a guardian agent or the sheer power of the principles he never betrayed.

In the meantime, I had turned ten. This was when father received a second letter from Turunge, written, as the first was, by Anya. My mother's sentence had concluded. The last day in her prized notebook had been crossed off, which meant that she could leave Makhachkala and visit her children. She said all this in the letter, which made Turunge's intentions very clear.

For the entire night, Havo was gloomier than a storm cloud. Erzol noticed this and sulked, but said nothing. After dinner, the mother and son were finally alone in the kitchen.

“Can she try to take the kids away from us?” Havo went straight to what was bothering her. Erzol stayed silent. “But she’s crazy!” Havo continued, flushed with anger.

“It doesn’t say that on her forehead.”

“How will she support them? You need to do something.” Havo looked at Erzol, shaking her head. “She wouldn’t be able to feed and clothe them right. Do what you want, but my children should stay with me. For their own sake!”

We were being cared for twenty-four hours a day and didn’t remember our mother. Havo, however, suddenly reminded us of Turunge on her own. It began when peculiar phrases started to enter her lectures.

“Oh, what would you be without your father? By God, if he hadn’t taken you then, what would have happened?”

These words may have been directed at the ether, but stuck in our fragile, immature souls like splinters. We didn’t notice the tender poison that was mixed in with the genuine care, and took all her words at face value.

At times, when Slava and I returned from playing football and Father sat down with us to check our homework, Havo would stand behind him and listen, mostly silently but with an occasional, seemingly casual mention:

“What kind of school would they be in if they stayed there?” The ‘there’ was never specified. “They’d be urchins, roaming the streets.”

Erzol never reacted to these remarks, while we were confused about this hypothetical peril that hung over us. We could only construe one fact from Havo’s words: Father was our only source of protection and support. At the dawn of our lives, he saved us from some terrible catastrophe. Days and weeks of this verbal meddling with which our souls were

being worked over by the incessant repetition of the phrase ‘crazy woman’ ultimately did their job. By the time Turunge received official permission to see her children, we were sure that we needed to beware.

As the potential time of Turunge’s visit drew near, Erzol and Havo, occasionally joined by Nahamye, would gather in the kitchen more and more often for long conversation about the topic of concern. Havo said that they had no choice but to welcome Turunge and set a date for the visit. Our father silently agreed. He never defied his mother. While he could sometimes let Nahamye’s words go by the wayside, this was impossible with Havo. Like a beacon, she always put him on the right course. She never interfered in his work affairs, restraining herself from giving advice regarding issues she didn’t understand. But as far as the home, her children and her grandchildren went, she demanded unfaltering agreement with her opinion.

This was when Havo directly mentioned Turunge and said that she wants to see us. The notion of the ‘crazy woman’, whose face we have pretty much forgotten by then, will see us, and may even want to touch or kiss us, scared even the older grandkids, and Havo was apparently not planning to save us from that encounter.

“You’ll see her,” she’d say. “Don’t be afraid.” There was a strange happiness with which she brought attention to the fear in our faces. “Havo will protect you. Yes she will. Havo won’t let anyone harm you. She’ll come, and she’ll leave.”

From the Abramov side, Anya took care of the arrangements, getting in touch with Nahamye and sorting out the details of Turunge’s visit. Anya gave her younger sister detailed instructions for what to do. The family was reluctant to send Turunge to another city by herself, and it was decided that Sveta would accompany her. Turunge had no doubts about this long-awaited reunion having a happy outcome, and planned



to use it as a starting point for a new life, filled with joy and happiness.

Turunge approached her supervisor at the plant and hesitantly explained the situation. She was granted leave and began to prepare for the journey. She ran around stores looking for gifts for the children, then packed everything in individual bags: one for Igor, one for Slava, one for Gena and one for Ella. Having gathered everything, she looked around the room and saw a toy car at the head of the bed, which she had once bought for the boys. She shoved it into her simple bag. Packing was done.

Here they were, in Kislovodsk. Turunge and Sveta stepped off the train onto the platform, and the flow of the crowd picked them up, carrying them forward. As always, the crowd confused Turunge. Good thing that Sveta was there – like a tugboat, she grabbed her and dragged her through the sea of festively dressed vacationers.

Turunge was wearing her best dress, even if that meant one that had been washed a thousand times and even patched here and there. She was visibly nervous, repeating the address over and over, like a chant: “Katyhin 111.”

Her sister forewarned her that they wouldn’t see the children right away, but find a place to stay first. They found room at a Balneology Institute dormitory. The rooms housed ten to twelve people at once, and for that very reason they were able to rent beds.

When Turunge asked Sveta the next day if she would come with her, she flatly refused.

“No way! You need to see the children on your own. There’s no reason to frighten them with an unfamiliar aunt. I hope to God they remember their mother.”

Turunge shakily nodded in accord, licking her chapped lips. She was worried.

“Calm down, I beg you,” Sveta whispered. “Havo won’t be there – I asked. Maybe she’ll come out at the very end,

but only if you want to say hello.” She pointed at a house by the road.

“You’ll walk through the gate. There are two homes on the property. You’ll pass the first one and see a bench under the apple tree. There, you’ll see the children.

A vein pulsated on Turunge’s forehead. What if she had aged so severely that the children won’t recognize her?

“Sveta, give me a mirror,” Turunge said in a voice that wasn’t her own.

“Why?” her sister asked.

“Tell me, did I get too old?” Turunge asked under her breath. “Will they recognize me?”

“Of course they’ll recognize you. They’re your own children. Go and don’t be afraid of anything. The truth is on your side.”

The sisters parted ways, and Turunge approached the gate. It was open. She unsteadily entered the yard. Not a sound.

‘What if they don’t let them out?’ she thought. ‘Havo’s capable of anything.’

Turunge, afraid to look in the windows, sat down on the bench under the apple tree, like Sveta instructed. She sat there, sensing her utter dependence on the Babaevs, not knowing whether to worry or hope.

“So? Is she here?” Havo asked her daughter Mila, who watched the yard through the window.

“Yes, she’s here.”

“What did she say?”

“Mama, what could she say? She’s in the yard. I haven’t talked to her.”

“Eh...” Havo waved her off. “Could anyone expect anything good from those Abramovs? Children, come here!”

We herded around her.

“Listen to me carefully. You’ll take turns walking out into the yard.”

“Why? Why?” our questions followed.

“Don’t make a ruckus. It needs to be done.”

Those words made us quiet down. Havo looked us over carefully.

“Be careful with her. She’s capable of anything.”

Silence hung over the room.

“You’ll go first,” she told Slava, who was taken aback. “Don’t be afraid, got it? Everything will be fine. I won’t let anyone harm you. You know I’m right here, behind the door.”

Slave nodded. Havo fixed a button on his shirt, frowning, and adjusted his hair. The kids needed to look good so ‘that one’, as she liked to call Turunge, couldn’t even think that they weren’t being taken care of.

“She’s also our mama, right?” Gena suddenly asked.

Havo frowned.

“You only have one mama, and that’s me,” she said sternly.

“I saw her through the window!” Ella suddenly shouted out. “She’s out there, in the yard.”

The children all rushed to the window.

“Be quiet and come back here,” Havo said angrily.

The kids compliantly returned to their previous positions. Havo looked them over again strictly. Suddenly, Ella started fussing.

“I don’t want to go to her.”

“What do you mean, you don’t want to?” Havo asked sternly. “You’ll go and you’ll like it.”

We recalled venomous words we’ve heard about Turunge – how she’s capable of pouncing on a person, grabbing them by the hair, and dragging them around. This filled us with fear.

“Alright, Slava. Let’s go,” Havo ordered.

The boy’s lips trembled. Havo had never seen him this helpless. It was almost as if he regarded the meeting with Turunge to be a test of courage.

Slavik took a deep breath and walked out into the yard.

Turunge sat where she was told to: between the first and second house, on the bench under the big apple tree. Tense, like a violin string, she sensed that she was being watched through a window and meticulously studied. Long-forgotten feelings of alternating pain and anger suddenly danced around in her soul. She breathed heavily and turned around, as if looking for the best route to retreat. Suddenly, she heard a child's voice behind her back.

"Good afternoon!"

She abruptly turned around mid-breath. Slavik was standing in front of her. She hadn't seen him for five years. Her son had grown so much, well on the way to being as tall and slender as his father. She looked at him befuddled, as if she was a child and he was already grown. All that she had been so afraid of and went to prison for – the fights, the hatred, the struggle – seemed insignificant in comparison to the joy of being near her son.

Turunge lost control. Such moments happen. Even a concrete dam can at times give way to the pressure of meltwater, and this was a dam whose supports had been wobbly for a while. Now, the sight of the boy dressed in shorts, socks and a blue shirt stripped her of strength. Why? She herself couldn't explain. Her child looked as helpless, lonely and abandoned as she did. The interchanging thoughts and moods swept over the face of the miserable woman, like shadows from the wings of a large bird.

Turunge rushed to Slava.

"Slava, my darling," she said, her voice trembling.

"Yes," the boy replied uneasily.

She slowly squatted in front of him, but lost her balance, wavered, grabbed his shoulder and started crying.

"I... am your mother, my son..."

Slava opened his eyes wide and froze, as if he had just been told something terrifying.

"Do you remember me?" The woman sighed, shivering, and looked like she was about to cry, but restrained herself. "I'm your mother," she repeated very quietly. "Do you remember me?"

Slava remained silent.

"You lived with me in Makhachkala. Do you remember Makhachkala? Grandma Melke's house?"

Slava shook his head, showing that he forgot, and tightened up, as if expecting to be struck. Turunge suddenly saw that her son was afraid of her.

"Everything's fine," she whispered. "I won't hurt you. I brought you presents. Here, take this."

She reached for the large string bag that lay on the ground next to her and took out a bag, 'For Slava' written on it. Slavik looked at the bag that the woman was holding, then at her face.

"I'll visit you very often, all right?" Turunge suddenly asked. She was nearly pleading, though the boy didn't understand that. This was a home where an adult's word was law, and here was a woman who was asking a child for permission.

As Turunge tried to hug Slava, he got even tenser. It was as if she was embracing a wild animal that was ready to escape at the first opportunity.

"Come on, don't be scared," Turunge whispered, growing more nervous in desperation.

She tried to look deep into the child's eyes, trying to find a hint of past memory at the bottom, but saw nothing, as if it was all covered by a sheet of ice. No recollection of happiness, no childhood babbling when he bent his head over her chest. Nothing.

"May I go?"

Turunge felt like someone electrocuted her. This was a question that one would ask a governess at a day care center. A deep sadness came over her. She forced a smile, which felt like it was slicing through her face, and pleaded:

“Just remember that I’m your mother. I beg you, please remember. Can you promise?”

Slava said nothing in reply, just turned around and left.

“Wait!” Turunge suddenly called out. “Wait up!”

She ran toward Slava and grabbed his hand.

“I’m sorry, son. I’m so sorry!”

Slava just nodded silently, like a soldier, and ran back into the house at full speed.

Havo carefully observed what was going on in the garden from behind the curtain. She couldn’t hear anything, but saw it all. Turunge was a stranger to the children – at least to Slava. Their meeting was so short that Havo couldn’t resist and scoffed, pleased.

Slava flew into the house with a happy yelp.

“I said nothing to her.”

“What did she ask you?” Mila inquired.

“She told me that she’s our mama!” Slava blurted out and looked at Havo inquisitively. All the other children heard him. Gena gave his older brother a peculiar look, and begun demanding that he explain how this mama differed from Mama Havo.

“Don’t listen to him,” Havo said angrily. “That’s Turunge. She’s crazy. She’s not your mother. Not your mother. She’s capable of anything.”

Havo looked at me.

“So? Why are you still here. Go to her.”

The door creaked open and I walked out into the warm freshness of the sunny day.

I understood that I had to be wary of this lady, and cautiously approached the bench, trying to seem older and manlier so that she wouldn’t even think of hurting me.

Turunge, upset by the reunion with her oldest son, felt lost and lonely. If only Sveta had been here – that would have been easier. Turunge saw a boy walking down the path. Her boy.

A black forelock, a high forehead, eyes, shining like beads. Her son. Her blood. Igorek.

I stopped about a meter away from Turunge. The woman, whose face I had forgotten, looked much scarier in my imagination than she did in person. Her face was haggard and her eyes filled with tears.

"Igorek!" she whispered.

Turunge looked at her second son. It was as if their five years apart had never happened. How could he have grown so much? She reached for him.

"Come here!" She wanted to say something else but couldn't muster anything except: "I'm your mother."

Those words carried the meaning of her world.

I couldn't understand what this woman was saying. I was confident that I had a mother – Havo – and I couldn't understand why this woman would be lying to me. Alarm came over her face.

"I'm your mother. I'm..."

She held a bag made out of newspaper.

"This is for you," she said, sighing and handing me the present. "This isn't all. Here's more."

She bent down, and got a bright green toy car out of her bag. I carefully picked it up, then looked at Turunge again, inquisitively.

"You don't remember me?"

I didn't know what to say. Turunge was also silent. Who could help the fact that we had forgotten her?"

"I'm... your... mother..." she repeated.

I turned my head to at least somewhat escape the awkward situation. I didn't want to look at the eyes of the woman who gazed at me with increasing alarm.

A mountain eagle soared above the city. This was not a frequent sight. It hung, nearly still, over our house. The giant bird then vanished as soon as it had appeared. I lowered my gaze and saw a red apple hanging high above us.



“Look – an apple.” I said, happily, pointing upward.

“Where?” Turunge laughed and looked up as well, examining the tree’s canopy and trying to spot the fruit amongst the leaves.

“Here it is! Here!” I replied.

Turunge pretended not to see the apple, markedly looking for it and unexpectedly bringing her son against her shoulder.

“Where is it?” she laughed.

I felt a forgotten feeling of warmth surround me, so fleeting that I couldn’t consciously pinpoint it. I relaxed a bit. The shroud came down from my memory. I remembered – not even her face, but the touch of her hands.

Turunge dropped to her knees in front of me and looked into my eyes.

“Do you get along with your brothers?”

I nodded.

“Why can’t you say ‘yes’?”

I instantly scowled and shot her a sullen look. Turunge smiled kindly.

“Do you play with your sister? Ellochka?”

I shook my head.

“Come on, give me a smile,” Turunge asked. “I don’t bite.”

She tried to hug me again.

“What? Is something wrong? Don’t be afraid, I won’t do anything bad to you.”

Turunge suddenly grabbed my shoulder and I stepped back, scared.

“What’s wrong?” Turunge asked, surprised.

I frowned and looked at the ground.

“What are you looking at?” Turunge asked.

“Nothing.”

“Fine,” Turunge replied sullenly.

Amidst the brightly colored flowers under the crystal blue sky, Turunge’s gray skirt and jacket made her seem like a tragic character in a fairy tale, suddenly transported into our yard.



"It's time for me to go," I said.

"Home?"

"Yes. Mama's waiting for me."

"Mama?" Turunge asked, in surprised alarm.

"Yes," I repeated.

"I'm your mama." Turunge looked at me in confusion for a few moments, then smiled tenderly. "Fine, go," she said quietly. "I'll come visit you soon. I'll visit often. Will that make you happy?"

I barely heard those last words, as I was running away along the path, holding the green toy car tightly in my hand. When I finally reached the stoop, I turned around. The woman remained in the same place, except now she was covering her face with her hands and convulsing.

"Mama, I didn't say anything to her either," I proudly announced as soon as I stepped into the room.

Havo walked away from the window.

"Good boy. What did she tell you?"

"She asked about Ellochka. But I was quiet."

Havo was amused by how the children reacted to their reunion with Turunge.

"Mama, I was scared at first, but then I wasn't," I continued.

"That can happen after you haven't seen someone for a long time. Don't think about it."

"She said that she'll visit us again..."

"No, she won't," Havo interrupted. "That I can promise you."

At that moment, Slava ran into the room, slamming the door behind him.

"So – what did she give you?"

Slava noticed the toy car.

"Show me!"

"No."

“Come on, show me!” my older brother demanded.

“No!” I repeated stubbornly.

The spark of envy shimmered in Slava’s eyes. We started shoving one another. Slava turned out to be quicker and got the toy out of my hands at an opportune moment, but I managed to grab it and pull it back toward me. The car fell onto the floor and Slava jumped after it. I kicked it to the side, and the toy briskly rolled away – just like a real car. Slava sprang into action first. He jumped in its direction, but miscalculated and landed on it with his foot. Crack! The malleable metal of the car’s body snapped.

This was probably the happiest and most difficult day in Turunge’s life. She returned to the dormitory from the house on Katyhin Street completely exhausted. Everything turned out to be different from what she imagined. Her older children didn’t accept her.

At least Gena and Ellochka somewhat remedied the situation. Much like her brothers, the girl approached her mother cautiously. She was filled with fear, Havo’s words resounding through her ears: “Crazy woman, crazy woman. She’s capable of anything.”

“As the dzhigit rode his horse...” Turunge sang tenderly. It was the same song that she used to sing to Ellochka to get her to sleep. “I’m that same dzhigit, remember?”

“You don’t look like a dzhigit!” her daughter said in mistrust, a smile coming over her face.

“So your grandpa’s the brave dzhigit?”

They laughed in unison, and it was wonderful. Turunge suddenly felt the warmth that radiated from the child.

The same thing happened with Gena. Turunge hugged and kissed him, and he didn’t resist like Igor and Slava. Her youngest son kept smiling and wrapped his arms around her neck.

Only then did Turunge feel like a mother. This instantly rekindled her confidence. She was a mother! That meant that

her older kids would come around and remember her. Not everything was lost – their heart would show them the right way. After all, Gena didn't forget her, even though he was only three when she left.

Amidst all these thoughts, Turunge didn't even notice as she reached the dormitory, where Sveta worried and waited for her.

She ran to her sister.

"Why are you back so soon?"

Turunge attempted to tell her sister about the visit, but the result was chaotic, her story jumping haphazardly between thoughts. Did the visit go well? Turunge herself didn't know. In order to find a foothold, she started from the very beginning, trying to highlight the positive and hopeful aspects in order to be able to lean on them and keep going.

She told Sveta about the garden, the children, the birds. She told her how the children have grown, that Igor looks like her and Slava looks like Erzol. However, she felt like she couldn't convey the most important fact: how distant they have grown.

But that didn't matter! She could change this. She would visit them again and again! After all, she could now do that as often as she wanted.

"And Havo?"

"What about Havo?"

"Did you see Havo?"

"No."

"Good."

"You know, they're as beautiful as flowers," Turunge whispered.

"See? They're all right, and together." Sveta hugged her. "Who else was there? Was the grandfather there?"

"No, I didn't see Nahamye."

"What about him?"

"Whom?"

“You know, Erzol...”

The spark in Turunge’s eyes went dim. She wanted to lie to her sister, but couldn’t.

Indeed, she had seen Erzol. He appeared suddenly, as she sat on the bench with Gena. Turunge was occupied with her son, telling him about herself, grandma Melke, thrilled with the fact that the boy seemed interested. Her son radiated such warmth, that she had nearly calmed down and started laughing with him over some joke.

Suddenly, Gena turned his head and smiled at someone, waving his hand and not listening to what Turunge was saying. She turned to see who had made the child so happy, and saw Erzol. He passed them as he walked along the path. He hadn’t changed at all, aside from perhaps growing a tad thicker. Other than that, he had remained the same.

Turunge’s initial perturbation over the sighting quickly turned to surprise. Who does this? Erzol looked straight ahead, seeming to notice neither Turunge nor their son. It was as if he was trying to demonstrate that she meant nothing to him. That thought stung Turunge. The things she had endured were all his fault! For a second, she forgot that she was sitting next to her son, holding his hand.

“As far as he’s concerned, I don’t exist, Sveta. Do you understand?” Turunge said hollowly, finishing her story. Tears welled up in her eyes. Sveta gasped and ran to embrace her. Turunge lost control and started crying.

A woman behind them, who was in the city on a business trip, staying in the dormitory – the only place in the resort city where one could find a room without bribing anyone, politely complained.

“Would you let me sleep?”

“Sorry, sorry!” Sveta’s whisper echoed across the room. “He didn’t say a single word?” she asked, turning back to her sister.

“No. I don’t think he would have turned his head even if I was being slaughtered in front of him.”

“Why’s he like that?”

“I don’t know. Havo hates me even more,” Turunge replied, suddenly calmer.

She looked around to see what time it was, and saw that it was already dawn. She sisters didn’t even notice that they had talked through the night.

There was no point to remaining in Kislovodsk. In a few hours, they were already at the train station, trying to buy any ticket – even in a shared compartment – that would get them back to Makhachkala.

Something unexpected happened to Turunge during the train ride. For the first time in many years, a traveler tried to introduce himself. The man sat down across from her and started asking about something. Turunge was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she didn’t realize that he was talking to her. When she finally noticed it, she interrupted him, said that she has four children and that everything is going well. The man’s eyes widened, he went silent, grumbled something and changed seats.

“I told you that everything would be fine!” These were the words with which Anya greeted her sister, when she stepped over the threshold, instantly saying: “I saw them!”

Her mother, father and brother surrounded her and dragged her to the kitchen. Turunge started her story for some tenth time. Lights were on at the house on Suleiman Stalsky Street until late at night.

“So no one remembered you?” Melke asked.

“Only Gena.”

“What could he possibly remember?” Melke wondered. “He was so little when you were parted.”

“I’m surprised too, but he remembered,” Turunge said proudly.

“Ellochka was even smaller. Wouldn’t she then remember you better than the rest?” Anya noted.

“Why didn’t you go the following day?” Hezgie asked, who couldn’t make sense of whether the trip to Kislovodsk went well or not.

“They didn’t forbid you to see the children, did they?” Melke asked.

“No!” Turunge replied, shaking her head tiredly.

“No?” Anya wondered. “So why did you leave so soon.”

“I couldn’t stay there any longer. They aren’t used to me anymore.”

“Nonsense!” Anya retorted. “They’ll get used to you again! You’re their mother.”

“Did they at least ask you to come in?” Hezgie asked quietly. He worried about his daughter and periodically grabbed his chest, suspecting that she was omitting something.

“No! And I wouldn’t have asked,” Turunge replied.

“But they could have at least asked you to come in!” Melke said.

“Stop it. Like you don’t know Havo,” Hezgie chimed in.

“Of course we know Havo. But Nahamye... Was he looking the other way?” Anya asked.

“He wasn’t there,” Turunge replied. She was tired of this argument. She wanted to lie down and be alone with her thoughts. But her parents and her siblings were insatiable.

“What do you mean, he wasn’t there? She probably sent everyone away, so that she could control everything. I know Havo,” Melke scoffed.

“So how much time did you spend talking to the kids?” Anya asked.

“We talked for a while, then the kids left.”

“Yes, for a while...” Anya’s tone was doubtful. “Sveta told me... No more than ten minutes each, right?”

Turunge didn’t respond.

“What – they couldn’t let you speak to them longer?”  
Anya continued angrily.

“They themselves didn’t want to.”

“Who?”

“The kids.”

“Never mind, I think I get the picture. You couldn’t even handle this by yourself.” Anya was always categorical with her judgments. Her admonition opened the floodgates, and Turunge burst out in tears.

“I’m not their mother. I’m not their mother!” she shouted at Anya, bawling. “She taught them to be afraid of me! She did! It was all her!”

Turunge’s emotions were going numb. The parents and Anya stood silent, not knowing how to handle such a tumultuous reaction, then went to comfort her.

“Stop it. You need to go back to them as soon as possible and try to fix the situation.”

“How? How would I do that?”

Anya lit a cigarette.

“Your heart will tell you. You’ll take a vacation, understood? You’ll try to spend a day with them as if nothing had happened.”

“Alright,” Turunge nodded, calming down.

“And quit raging. That’ll fix it.”

Alas, Turunge wasn’t able to visit her children until late autumn. By that time, many events had taken place within Erzol Babaev’s family that could only be described as life changing.

## XXIII

Erzol was always consumed by a feeling of unfulfillment. He was convinced that he was capable of accomplishing much more than the current circumstances allowed him, and if fate set him in front of a roulette wheel, he would surely win.

Additionally, Father needed to socialize with his friends and a beloved like he needed air – of this he was confident. This was a way to rid himself of daily stress and restore the energy he lost at work.

The first woman who remained at Father's side for an extended period of time and whom we remembered well was Olga Annenkova. She was older than Father and worked as an accountant at the cooperative, raising a son by herself. We learned of her existence when Erzol brought her into the home through the main entrance. Havo looked at her skeptically. We, on the other hand, liked her. She was a stately woman, strict and serious, like a teacher. She probably transformed when she was



alone with Erzol, becoming funny, crafty and charming. In any case, she was the first one who was able to influence Father's decisions. Their relationship, however, was short-lived. A mere year passed, and Olga stopped appearing at the Babaev home.

Soon after, fate introduced Father to another woman. Valentina was eleven years his junior. She was only nineteen when she came to Kislovodsk from Saratov, a baby girl in her arms. It was 1959. Erzol entered the workshop, and his colleague, a tailor named Koshevoy, pointed out the young girl.

"Go introduce yourself. This is our new apprentice."

Erzol looked at the new girl indifferently and nodded. She was bashful, but nodded back. She wasn't little. She was tall and plump – one of those whom men would refer to as 'sweet', or full-figured. She was right in line with the times, which welcomed everything sturdy, curvy and blushing. Valya was a true Russian beauty: enormous eyes, a straight nose, proud poise and a luxurious blond braid.

She was assigned to study under Erzol Babaev. He himself did not request it – the director did. What was it like to be a tailor's apprentice? It meant daily interaction, eight hours at a time. Now imagine that the parties involved are a strong, lonely young man and an enchanting young woman.

The workshop was located in an in an ordinary two-story building. It looked plain during the day, but dusk made it mysterious, enigmatic and completely deserted. This impression was deceptive, however: Father's workplace always seethed with life.

That day, Erzol dismissed his workers early and headed home himself. Only Valya remained, intending to cut the fabric. Erzol had no doubt that the girl was a quick learner, handling assignments masterfully and honing her skills. Once home, he had dinner and checked our homework. It was fifteen minutes to eight, and stars were starting to light up in the twilight sky. Some sort of power drew him back to work.

For some reason, his heart beat quickly, so he decided to walk slower to calm down. A spicy aroma of some plant wafted from the park. Streetlights had already come on, but their light was dim. Untimely thoughts snuck into his mind. Everything he did always raised questions from someone, either close or distant. Some disapproved of his actions, some thought he was being rash, or too independent. The ancestors didn't live like this, the elders would think.

Erzol was convinced that his inner voice was the only one worthy of listening to, and that he had to live in the moment, not in the past. He also knew this for a fact: no matter what mysteries rabbis and scientists uncovered, they all needed pants. Consequently, they needed him. Why, then, did he have to subscribe to their theories instead of living by his own wisdom? He was raising his children, leading the life of a lone gunman, pointedly trying to distance troubles from himself. He did not intend to remarry. Why would he? Why wear those shackles again? His existing responsibilities were more than enough.

He continued to walk along the park, which seemed to go on forever. When would it end? In the dark, everything seems larger than it does in daylight.

There was no one else in the workshop – only Valya working on her cuts. Erzol silently stood behind her. She was very attractive, with exceptional grace to her movements. Valya was using chalk to outline the contours of a dress on the fabric. Erzol coughed. She jumped and looked around, frightened, her cheeks flushed.

'I scared her,' Erzol thought. 'They all like to get scared, those good girls. What a strange nature. They get scared, but they've already folded up their wings, standing still, waiting to be swept up by a strong hand and dragged away somewhere.'

"Your outline is wrong," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he covered Valya's narrow wrist with his, grabbing it, like a lion grabbing his prey, so that her hand was completely

within his. He squeezed her fingers tightly, and begun to outline anew. Valya's hand compliantly followed his. She smelled like field flowers and something intoxicating. Thoughts vanished. Only desire remained.

"Now trace to the left. Keep the line fine – don't get the fabric all chalky."

"I'm trying," Valentina said timidly.

"Not hard enough," Erzol replied. "The lines need to be crisp, exactly like the sketch. Then the dress will fit correctly. Understand?"

The young woman nodded.

"Why didn't you go home?"

"You didn't tell me to."

"I didn't tell you to," Erzol said, teasing. "What is this – a slave camp? You have a small child, don't you?"

"I do. But Mama's watching her."

"It's good that there's someone to look after her."

A pause hung over the room. The silence suddenly became unbearable. It seemed that if they stayed quiet any longer, some unknown force would emerge and they would do something stupid. The mannequins on which the jackets and dresses hung seemed to shrink in size. The man and the woman stood next to one another, seeming to listen to the desire conveyed by accidental contact.

Valentina suddenly lifted her head and looked at him.

"We shouldn't," she whispered.

Erzol, pretending not to hear her, brought her close and lunged at her lips.

He didn't walk home, but glided on invisible wings. Nothing had changed. They haven't even transitioned to the informal 'you'. But wheels were in motion, spinning in an unusual direction, and no matter where he was and what he did, his thoughts would come back to Valya.

Sometimes, when they were left alone at the workshop, they would stop in their tracks in front of one another for a

second, then merge in a long kiss, as if competing for who would run out of air first.

"I don't want to start our relationship this way," Valentina once whispered.

"Like you don't like it!" Erzol replied brashly.

He reached for an embrace, but suddenly a spark of static electricity came off Valya's silk dress. She yelped, shaken, as if this was a bad sign.

"What's wrong."

"Oh, you know..."

"Only chickens breed like this," Erzol laughed. "You're scared."

"I am not scared."

She stayed silent, as if to provoke him. Erzol didn't want to talk any longer. He pinched her side, laughed, and went back to his work, whistling and looking around. Valya stayed where she was, looking at his back, until Erzol disappeared behind a corner. Unlike other men, he had an essence to him that attracted her with animalistic strength.

Erzol liked Valya a lot, but didn't feel any love in his heart. He offered his woman protection, not some mythical feeling, only demanding one thing in return – obedience. The expression of his feelings didn't imply sweetness, awe or admissions of love. Touching her body, however, was truly amazing. Erzol could feel life returning to him, melting the glaciers that covered his tired soul.

The very next day after the memorable evening at the workshop one of Valya's colleagues pulled her aside at lunch and asked, jokingly:

"Do you really think he'll be with you for long? Do you know how many others like you he has?"

Valya huffed and said nothing in reply. At home, however, she told her mother everything and burst out in tears. She implored herself not to lose sight of what's important. She came

to this city with a child, and knew the implications of the phrase ‘hit it and quit it’ from personal experience. Her mother repeated the same. The main thing was not to behave irresponsibly. It was better to be alone than to be lied to.

At times, she’d look at Erzol and wonder: was she lucky to have met him? Valya didn’t know the right answer to that question. She just kept living, going with the flow. Erzol was very overbearing – she understood that right away. If she wanted to be with him for a while, she wouldn’t be able to contradict him. Only then would he remain in peace. Valya never asked about Erzol’s first marriage. He would tell her in due time, she thought – no reason to dwell on it now.

She was not ashamed of her relationship with Erzol. Why would she be? They were both young and available. So what if each had children already? Why not start life anew?

One Friday, Erzol approached Valya after work and told her that she’ll come to dinner at his home tomorrow. This wasn’t an invitation – it was an order that couldn’t be defied. Valya didn’t care for his tone. He acted as if he knew for a fact that she’s fine with every single thing he wanted her to do. Valya looked him straight in the eye and said nothing.

“What’s with you?” he asked.

“I’m uncomfortable.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Erzol chuckled. That constant fear that a young woman has of the mother of the man that possessed her.

They met at the workshop and took a taxi, which didn’t go unnoticed by Valya’s friends and coworkers. Erzol and Valya arrived and walked up to the house. The door opened and a short, slightly stooping woman stood on the threshold. To Valya, Havo appeared short and compact, nothing like what she expected to see having heard Erzol’s brief remarks about his mother. She had Erzol’s eyes, and the oval shape of his face. Havo smiled at the guest and nodded slightly in greeting. Valya bashfully reciprocated.

“Well – come in! It isn’t customary for our guests to keep standing at the door.” Havo ushered her amicably into the house.

The introduction was strangely easy, though one would be hard pressed to call it an actual introduction. Everyone sat down at the table, and Havo instantly proceeded to serve one dish after the other. Half of them were things that Valya tasted for the first time. Erzol entertained everyone with anecdotes. Then, they took a walk at the park.

The evening concluded with a somewhat insane, passionate kiss and the expectation of absolute happiness.

## XXIV

**T**urunge was frenzied when she returned home from work. Luckily, Anya, who supported her sister in all situations, was home. Turunge ran to hug her from the doorway, as if she could solve all her problems.

“Anya, I can’t do this anymore. I want to see my children. I’m going.”

“Fine,” Anya sighed. “Go.”

This time, Turunge set out to Kislovodsk on her own, without notifying the Babaevs. Yet again, she bought a whole pile of presents, and decided to stay at the same college dormitory.

Turunge remembered the directions to the house on Katyhin Street from the first visit and arrived around noon. The gate was open, so she entered. Without looking around, she headed straight for the bench by the apple tree, where she ran into Nahamye.

He worked at the October Revolution Decennial Health Resort, right in the center of Kislovodsk. This Stalin-era es-

tablishment was one of the best resorts in the city frequented by people of high standing. There, Nahamye managed a workshop that handled minor clothing repairs. If a guest needed to mend a rip in the pants, raise the slip of a dress, or adjust a waistline, which happened quite frequently, he always provided a quick fix, along with the requisite good wishes.

There were more clients that he could ever ask for. The pay was good, not to mention the tips, and Nahamye was happy. And when he'd get a knowledgeable customer, they could even chat about global Zionism and Golda Meir. After all, she was a child of the Russian Empire and managed to put together quite a country.

His knowledge about Israel and the specifics of its establishment weren't coincidental. We had an antenna on the roof of our house, which allowed us to listen to 'enemy voices' from all over the world: Voice of America, BBC, etc. Grandpa preferred Voice of Israel – he trusted them. This was his hobby, his passion, his worldly need. After returning from work and finishing dinner, he would go upstairs and turn on the receiver. He would then recount what he heard to Erzol, keeping him up to date on the course of global politics.

Grandpa subscribed to newspapers and was generally very well read. He discussed global current events with the same passion that Erzol had for textiles and business. His curiosity was far from casual. This was a man who had endured two revolutions and three wars, and believed that he could advise his son how to act and where to flee should danger strike.

"Father, why do you listen to all of this?" Erzol would ask, laughing. "Where are we compared to Golda Meir?"

Nahamye would look at his son sternly and reply:

"Eh, you're young and naïve, Erzol. You just don't understand... It's my fault. Information is power. Whoever has it, rules the world. Those are words of a wise man. You need to know this, Erzol!"



That's what a fascinating man our Grandpa Nahamye was.

Coincidentally, he stayed home that day. At first, Turunge was taken aback upon seeing her former father-in-law. In her mind, he had always distanced himself from what had happened. He had always stayed the way she remembered him from the start of her time in the Babaev household: a simple, sincere man. Perhaps running into him now was a good thing.

Nahamye knew about the previous meeting, and how the children had received Turunge. He never expected her to show up again, without any warning.

"When did you arrive? Why didn't you let us know? I would have met you!" Nahamye blurted out.

"I didn't want to disturb anyone. I just came to visit the children. Where are they?"

"Either playing at home or running around somewhere. You think I can keep up with them?"

Fussing about, Nahamye grabbed Turunge's bags and started carrying them toward the house.

"Wait. This is strange. I should probably wait here."

Turunge felt uneasy, but Nahamye would have none of it.

"Come on. You aren't a stranger to us. After all, you're the mother of my grandchildren.

The effect of Turunge and Nahamye's appearance at the door on Havo was akin to that of a bomb exploding. The shadow of fear and hostility swept across her face. Turunge was also fazed, having been tense enough to begin with, and now barely able to keep her knees from trembling. The two women stood there, silently examining one another. Turunge was no stranger to this. The main thing was not to lower her eyes and hide them from the enemy. Havo broke first, pretending that she had something to do at the stove.

"Well – why are you just standing there?" she grumbled. "Come in."

That's when Turunge saw Slava at a doorway, the other children's curious faces peeking out from behind him. Not sure what to do, Turunge rushed to grab the presents out of her bags and handed them to the kids.

"This is for you, Igorek. That's for you, Slava... Gena, Gena – come here. This is for you, my little one."

"I crushed your car," Slava blurted out.

"What?" Turunge didn't quite register what her son was talking about at first, but then it came to her. "Don't worry about that. I'll buy each of you a new one."

The meeting was brief. The children sat at the table and the conversation was awkward, despite Nahamye's efforts to diffuse the tension. The kids were quiet, uncomfortable and aloof.

Nahamye said something about how they're going to see each other more from now on. He said that Turunge should visit whenever she wants. Suddenly, something inside Turunge broke down. She saw that the children lived good lives, and were well cared for, clothed and fed. All while her world was collapsing.

"Well, I gave you the presents," she said in a peculiar, distant voice. "It's time to go."

The older kids approached Havo, while Gena sat as still as a statue, staring into space somewhere between his mother and his grandmother. The room stayed silence. After the awkward pause, Turunge kissed each of them on the cheek and asked them to walk her to the door.

"I'll find a way to bring you back!" she declared from the threshold. "Know that."

## XXV

**A**nya met Turunge at the Makhachkala train station.  
“I’m not a mother to them. The kids are afraid of me.”

“Enough of this nonsense!” Anya snapped back, and they went home.

Upon arrival, they sat down at the kitchen, as usual.

“Tell me what happened there,” the judicious Anya asked, kindly.

“Things...” Turunge replied.

Anya poured tea for both of them and prepared to listen. Haphazardly jumping from one point to another, her sister told her the story.

“They want to take them from me – altogether. Forever,” she insisted. “I can feel it. Havo treats them as if they’re her property.”

“How so?”

“Don’t you remember? She raises them with hatred towards me in mind. I need to stop this. I need to get them back. I’m their mother.”

Anya lit a cigarette.

“Don’t do anything rash. What can you give the children that Erzol can’t?”

“They’re my kids! I need to take them back,” Turunge kept repeating over and over.

“Did you think about where they’d be better off?”

“What do you mean? I’m their mother!”

Anya didn’t contradict her, just smoked.

“I’ll call Nahamye and let him know that you’re coming again.”

As promised, she called the Babaevs. She found Nahamye at the health resort where he worked and told him that the past is the past, and that they need to build a life anew. The children shouldn’t be without their mother, who, conversely, shouldn’t be without her children.

Nahamye listened to this silently, bitterly sighing into the receiver from time to time. Anya was asking for the impossible: to let the children go for a walk with Turunge.

“I don’t know what to say. Erzol will be against it, and Havo isn’t happy that Turunge showed up whenever she wanted, with threats, no less,” he interjected.

“I don’t know and I don’t care, Nahamye. She’s their mother. Do you hear me? Those are her children. Have a heart.”

Nahamye only sighed in response. Every time his wife raised her voice at him, he agreed. Women had an unexplainable power over him.

Havo was always in charge of their home, but now Nahamye decided that it was his turn. Perhaps Anya’s words had an effect. Perhaps he felt guilty. In any case, Nahamye demanded for the Abramovs’ request to be honored, and Havo had no choice but to comply, perhaps for the first time in her

life. 'Crazy' Turunge would once again be allowed to visit her children.

Ever since the former daughter-in-law's first visit, a nervousness hung over the Babaev home. Her sudden arrival had baffled everyone, even the seemingly imperturbable Erzol. The children sensed this and treated the woman who they barely knew with animosity.

## XXVI

Fira, Liza and Havo extensively discussed the potential outcome of Erzol's passion for Valya. These discussions always ended with the phrase: "Time will tell." In her mind, however, each of the women felt that the relationship would be short-lived.

But that didn't keep Havo from worrying. What if her son's untamed energy would lead him astray and into the clutches of some Russian? If not Valya, then another one. There was only one antidote to these heavy thoughts: she needed to urgently marry Erzol off.

Erzol himself laughed at the idea, but didn't dare to defy his mother. Conversations, much like the following, became more and more frequent.

"What are you thinking about?" Havo would ask.

"I'm not thinking about anything."

"I know, you're thinking about your Valentina."

"What makes you think that?"

“Son, you need to get married!”

“Why, Mama?”

Havo would either get offended or change the subject. Occasionally, however, she’d call Fira to inquire about something.

One time, shortly after the beginning of the relationship with Valentina, Havo told me that she, my father, and I would travel to Derbent the following day. I was woken early in the morning, cleaned up, and dressed in holiday clothes. We got in the car and set out.

Father’s reply to my question – “Why?” – was simple.

“I’ll show you where I was born. It’s beautiful there, you know!”

I will always remember my first impression of Derbent, and how the city seemed like a giant canvas. Its crooked narrow streets reminded me of a snail. The clay walls of the buildings, the narrow windows – everything had an air of unimaginable antiquity. When our car entered someone’s yard and Father got out, he was instantly surrounded by people patting his shoulders and back in a joyful din.

Father’s greeting party included one of the most colorful individuals in the locale – Misha Gilyadov. He had a most memorable voice: a low timbre punctuated by unexpected high notes. Gilyadov was the director of a restaurant in Derbent. He was also a distant relative of Havo. This was where the mystery surrounding our trip laid, though it would not become apparent until later.

More and more people would arrive in the courtyard, everyone pulling Erzol toward them with exclamations of “Remember this!” and “Remember that!” Each received a unique greeting from Father: “My God, you’ve changed!” or “Look who’s here!” The rumors of Erzol’s thriving career had already reached Derbent. People treated Father with reverence and respect.

Tables were set right there in the yard to celebrate Erzol's arrival. The party was attended by everyone without exception. Toasts were said – the first, the second, the third... The celebration grew larger and larger. It would have probably gone on forever, if Havo didn't approach her son and whisper in his ear:

"Did you forget why we're here? Come on, let's go," she nudged. "People are waiting."

"Mama, stop it," Erzol objected. "We just sat down."

Nevertheless, he got up and started walking, as if on a leash. Havo led the procession, without as much as turning around.

We walked down narrow streets, which seems like they've been the same since a hundred years ago, when my forefather Illazar walked down them. We entered someone's home, where worried women scurried about. Father paid no attention to them. His attention was focused on the table, where two girls, seemingly sisters, sat.

Erzol curiously looked them over and respectfully greeted the master of the house. We sat for as long as proper manners dictated, speaking of the weather and other innocuous topics, then got up, bowed, and returned to Misha Gilyadov's yard. The party resumed with renewed ardor.

This was but a small chunk of Derbent's Jewish community, composed of some hundred thousand people. Erzol was happy to sit in the company of his native people, to see familiar faces from his childhood, and to speak his native language.

"I'm happy to be here, and happy that my son can see the place where our mother was born," said Erzol, commencing his toast.

Havo seemed tense, as if awaiting something important. At an opportune moment, Erzol leaned toward her and asked, tenderly:

"Did I heed your request?"



Havo nodded and smiled. She was smiling much more than usual anyways, being in Derbent, the city of her youth.

“I went, and I looked.”

Havo looked at her son suspiciously. What was he hinting at? Suddenly, he burst out in laughter.

“Can you please not bother me with this anymore? I beg you. That’s not my path. Let’s stop with this search for a bride. I’m not going to marry anyone anyways.”

And so the reason for the trip was revealed. It was a bridal visit, arranged by Havo. But her failure didn’t upset her one bit. If he doesn’t want to, he doesn’t want to. At least she was finally confident that Erzol won’t do anything stupid. As long as no one would drag him under the hupa – or into the wedding registry – things would be fine. As long as her son was unmarried, and his heart didn’t belong to another woman that Havo would undoubtedly dislike, her stature at the home as his mother and her superiority would remain immovable. As long as her son remained unmarried, one could say that she was a queen, the possessor of the reverent role of the one in charge of raising his children and running the household. The fact that he didn’t want to tie himself to another woman was not a catastrophe. He had children, which meant that he had fulfilled his duty to the clan, so putting another shackle on his neck was unnecessary. The question of Erzol’s marriage was never broached again in the Babaev household.

Strangely, Erzol himself thought that his sons must only marry Jewish women. Much later on, when thinking over what I saw during my childhood, I noticed a trend: while Father grew up in a Jewish family, knew the native tongue, and was, in a sense, a carrier of Jewish tradition, he, himself, always went for Russian women. Why? That remains a mystery.

It wasn’t long at all before we started regarding Valya as a good friend. She always cared for us, checked our homework, and went to parent-teacher meetings, as Father was al-

ways busy. We trusted her with our secrets, which she never betrayed. She also took care of many other important tasks, which remained inconspicuous. It wasn't until after she left that we fully realized how much warmth she brought into the lives of the Babaevs.

Valya always regarded Havo amicably and respectfully, and she returned the favor. There wasn't even a hint of the scandals and arguments that would constantly erupt between Havo and Turunge. Valya was different. She never asserted claim to anything, always knew her place and was always a servant, helper, friend and advisor to our father. Erzol gave Valentina a high salary: five hundred rubles a month. This was comparable to what a director would make, and far more than a simple tailor could expect. She whom Erzol loved was always provided for.

Food, which Valya's mother always insisted on, was always provided for. Valya, however, couldn't help but dream of their future and wedlock. But Erzol had already concluded that he doesn't want another wife, and stuck with his decision.

Valya's relationship with father was unique in one respect. Throughout their entire relationship, the only present she received from Erzol was a diamond ring. That was it. There were no expensive clothes or lavish gifts. She always had money, but it was earned, not given.

This was Erzol's principal position. He knew of the temptations that came with large amounts of money. It could easily change others' interactions with Erzol, even if they loved him. Wealth starts pressing on one's psyche sooner or later. People begin to mentally 'put money in their pockets'. After all, it's plentiful, as are everyone's wishes. Erzol understood this and had his own way of dealing with it.

For that every reason, he never gave Valya gifts – to guard her from the temptation of envying his money. This was not a matter of greed, but rather a vaccine against harmful seduc-

tion. Erzol wanted their relationship to be built on mutual independence. Valya needed to provide for herself, to value what she had without desiring more.

This happened to be Erzol's universal rule. His sisters did not receive help from him for that very reason.

## XXVII

As Nahamye had promised, the Babaevs were properly prepared for Turunge's next visit. A table was set and everyone ate lunch together. Erzol, of course, was absent. Nahamye took the head of the table, and Havo served the food, as usual.

But Turunge still couldn't help feeling like an outsider. She saw how warmly the children regarded Havo, and how she treated them. Such care and tenderness could not be faked. Turunge's heart overflowed with envy, pain and hurt. She now had no doubt that she wouldn't be able to take the kids back that easily. Perhaps she was fated to be content with the charity of being allowed infrequent, brief visits with her own children; fated to always depend on Havo's consent. The mere thought of that was unbearable, as was sitting in the midst of people who regarded her as an enemy.

Worst of all, Turunge's children were so close – within arm's reach, ready to be embraced. But would they return

the affection? They had clearly all been trained to steer clear of their own mother.

Havo quietly approached the cupboard, took out a candy dish, and put it on the table. We instantly pounced on the desert, yelling and arguing over who would get what. Turunge watched us on the verge of tears. What had the Babaevs done to her life? Why were they convinced that she wouldn't be able to care for her own children?

Little Ellochka was the only one that didn't participate in the happy commotion. She sat there, under a large wall clock, and watched Turunge curiously, as if trying to guess her mood.

"Ellochka?" Turunge asked, smiling at her tenderly. "Are you okay? Let me feel your forehead."

She touched the child's forehead with her hand. Ellochka smiled, and Turunge felt as if a warm waft of air caressed her. There it was: a mother's happiness.

"My little girl!" Turunge moved her chair closer to her daughter and sat the little one on her lap.

Ellochka asked about something, but Turunge was so absorbed in her miserable thoughts that she didn't hear her.

"What?" she asked, feeling the child tugging on her sleeve.

"Do you have pink balloons at your house?"

"Balloons? What balloons?"

"These." Ellochka took a deep breath and exhaled into Turunge's face, mimicking a balloon's inflation.

"Do you want me to buy you lots and lots of balloons?"

"Yes!" Ellochka answered, her eyes growing wide.

Turunge saw the situation in a different light. No one was paying any attention to her and Ellochka. Fine then – they didn't have to pay attention to them either.

"We'll be back in a little bit," she said quietly. No one replied. It seemed that no one even heard that Turunge has said anything. Havo only threw a glance at her from the kitchen –

how was the ‘crazy woman’ doing? Is she trying to pull something? She returned to her chores without saying anything.

Turunge covered her mouth with her hand and giggled quietly, like a child. For a moment, she imagined that she and Ellochka were the same age, their only mission being to escape their tormenting governess. This thought warmed her. Indeed – why not run away from this place and go somewhere where they would be happy? As long as her child was next to her. Turunge got up, came up to Nahamye, and whispered to him in order to avoid the boys’ attention:

“We’re going for a walk in the garden.”

Nahamye smiled absentmindedly, grumbled something, but didn’t object. Havo wasn’t in the room. Turunge winked at her daughter. Ellochka, expecting something interesting – a game or an adventure – laughed at the top of her lungs. Turunge nervously brought her index finger to her lips.

“Shush, Ellochka! Quiet. Let’s go.”

“Where?” the girl whispered back.

“Let’s take a walk.”

Turunge picked the child up and they went to the other room.

“Can you show me your toys?” she asked the little one.

Ellochka, perched on her arms, silently pointed toward the door that led outside.

“Your toys are there?”

The girl mischievously nodded and smiled, her eyes twinkling.

“How interesting. Let’s go outside then,” Turunge replied with a conspiratorial smile.

They went into the sun-drenched garden.

“My little girl... My little girl...” Turunge started showering Ellochka with kisses while she smiled. Then, Turunge’s voice turned to hysterical chanting. “Don’t they show you any affection here? My poor girl. Let’s get out of here.”

Ellochka only nodded in accord.

Turunge looked around. All she had to do was take the last step. To leave this hateful yard, and hide from its masters at the opposite end of the world.

“How long am I supposed to endure this?” she said aloud. “They’re mine! My children.”

Turunge looked around, frightened. None of the Babaevs were watching her. Just the unmerciful sun, emerald leaves blindingly shimmering under it. She felt like a blade of grass, tired of ceaselessly reaching for light. She wanted warmth for herself and her children – nothing else. No one could keep her warm besides Ellochka. And no one would keep Ellochka warm besides her mother.

Turunge didn’t notice that she nearly ran down the garden path. Away from this yard – quickly – before anyone noticed.

Turunge ran into the street and caught her breath. Carrying Ellochka was becoming more and more difficult, but she wasn’t about to let her go. She was her mother. One’s own burden isn’t heavy.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be good from now on,” Turunge whispered. “Your mama is with you. Understand?”

Ellochka nodded.

“Now we’ll always be together. Forever and ever!”

Suddenly Turunge caught herself – where were her purse and documents? She frantically patted her coat pocket, suddenly realizing that her purse was in her hand. When did she even grab it? Must have been womanly habit. She forgot her other bags. Oh well. The Babaevs can keep them. She had a bit of money – enough to take her daughter and go someplace where no one could find them.

The sun was merciless, so Turunge unfastened her coat. A gust of wind threw a cloud of road dust at her face. Turunge kept going. She reached an intersection, got her wallet out. Tax-is waited by the corner, and Turunge approached one of them.

“I need to get to the station. The train station.”

Her mind was shrouded in fog. The driver nodded indifferently and Turunge got in. The last time she was in a passenger car may have been during her last visit to Raya’s in Moscow. They drove past houses and trees. Turunge bit her lips nervously. If only they reached the train station sooner. Ellochka fell asleep in her arms, lulled by the motion of the car.

“We’re here,” the driver grumbled.

“How much do I owe you?” Turunge asked.

The taxi driver raised two fingers. Turunge shoved two rubles into his hand and climbed out of the car, careful not to wake Ellochka. The train station square was relatively quiet. She ran to the ticket counter. As always, there were no tickets to Makhachkala. But Turunge’s main goal was to leave this city – on any train, even a commuter one. Turunge bought a ticket to Mineralniye Vody.

Some forty minutes remained until departure. Ellochka work up and started to fuss. Turunge started rocking her, but she wouldn’t calm down. Turunge suddenly realized that she’s completely unfamiliar with her daughter’s personality and mannerisms.

“Why are you crying, Ellochka?” she pleaded. “Let’s find the cafeteria. You’re probably hungry.”

Turunge bought Ellochka a cheese pastry at the cafeteria, and she quieted down. Now, they only had to reach Mineralniye Vody. There, Turunge hoped, she’d be able to get tickets to Makhachkala. Everything would turn out fine.

She stepped onto the platform. Boarding had already begun, and passengers were getting on the train. Turunge found a seat in the rear of the car, by the window. She didn’t notice as she fell asleep. Suddenly, something rumbled, she opened her eyes in fright, and looked at Ellochka. The child was asleep. Drowsily, Turunge tried to figure out what’s going on.



At the opposite end of the car, two drunken men were swearing at someone. Turunge looked around and saw two policemen standing in the aisle. Someone's face flashed behind them. Turunge was in disbelief. Erzol? It couldn't be. At that moment, Ellochka woke up and started complaining unusually loudly.

"I want to go home!"

The crying caught the attention of the police. Turunge looked around nervously and locked eyes with one of them, a large man with a coarse, black mustache. Her face was suddenly covered in sweat. She remembered that time a few years ago when the captain and his deputy walked through the train at the Makhachkala train station in the exact same manner, her holding the crying Ellochka in her arms.

Turunge squinted and started mumbling a prayer that Hezgie had taught her.

Someone's hand touched her shoulder and she opened her eyes. The man with the mustache and his young partner stood before her.

"Your documents, citizen," the mustached man rumbled.

"What documents? I'm going home. With my daughter!" Turunge replied nervously.

"What your last name? Do you have papers for the child?"

"This is my daughter! Ellochka!" Turunge protested. "Leave me alone!"

She turned around to see Erzol standing in the door. She wasn't hallucinating. A deathly pallor came over her face.

"That's her," he told the policemen.

"Alright, let's go," said the officer, dragging her by her sleeve.

"Leave me alone!" Turunge screamed.

Ellochka started crying and the whole train looked in their direction.

"Quiet, citizen!" the officer warned, frowning. "Don't get hysterical. Otherwise, we'll cite you for resisting."

Not letting go of Ellochka, Turunge rose and started moving toward the exit on shaky legs.

“Papa! Papa!” Ellochka yelled happily upon seeing Erzol.

He instantly ran over to his daughter. She reached for him, but her mother wouldn’t let her go from her embrace.

“Let her go,” Erzol whispered angrily.

Turunge started breathing heavily and holding her tighter.

“You have no right!” she said in a shaky voice. “This is my daughter!”

“I certainly do have the right,” Erzol replied. “I’m her guardian. Let her go peacefully, and this will all be over.”

“Do you know her?” the police chief interjected.

“This is my ex-wife. Tatyana Babaeva. That’s her Russian name. The family calls her Turunge.”

The term ‘ex-wife’ brought Turunge back to earth. She gave up. Compliantly, she loosened her grip and Erzol grabbed the child.

“Come on, Ellochka. Let’s go home.”

“Let’s go,” Ellochka replied, almost happily. “Bye, Turunge!” She waved to her.

The officers silently looked at Turunge. She just stood there, staring into space, as if she had lost all interest in the world.

“Thank you, officers. You saved the day,” said Erzol, smiling glumly.

“That’s our job.” The younger one saluted him.

“Sorry, but... Are we free to go?”

“Of course – go! What do you want us to do with her?” the officer asked Erzol. “Would you like to press charges against your ex-wife?”

“No,” Erzol grumbled. “She can go wherever the hell she wants.”

“Well then,” said the officer, turning toward Turunge. “I advise you to head home and resolve your family issues in accordance with the law.”

They saluted and exited the train. Turunge felt herself blushing with shame. She was short of breath. She ran off the train and ran down the platform, away from the station. The platform eventually ended and she found herself standing confused amongst railroad tracks, in what seemed like an endless desert devoid of love and warmth.

And so the story of Ellochka's kidnapping came to an end.

## XXVIII

**T**urunge decided not to say anything to either Anya or her parents. Nevertheless, news of the incident with Ella reached them. Nahamye called Anya at work and, excusing himself a thousand times as usual, warned that if Turunge shows up at their home again, they'll call the police and a mere explanation won't solve the situation. Anya was horrified.

"Are you insane?" she screamed at Turunge. "Do you understand what you've done?"

Turunge kept repeating, in vain, that she is the children's mother and has the right to see them. Anya retorted that, while that's true and she is, indeed, their mother, she's been stripped of custody and her ex-husband is their legal guardian and has the right to turn to the police if another person touches them, be it Turunge or anyone else. She said that she should thank God that everything ended the way it did. Turunge flared up and screamed at Anya, telling her to mind her own business, then broke down and started crying.

“And yet Nahamye calls me, not you,” Anya cautioned. “You do understand that you could have landed back in prison?”

“But what am I supposed to do? They’re my children!” Turunge bawled.

Anya didn’t know how to object to that.

“Calm down. Let’s think this over together. But we really need to keep this legal. Do you understand? Le-gal! The court took away your custody, and the court is the only place to get it back.”

“I can do that?”

“Of course,” Anya replied, embracing her. “But let’s put it aside for now.”

While Anya ran around government offices, trying to figure out her sister’s chances of regaining custody, Turunge kept sinking deeper into misery’s abyss. Caring for her aging parents became her responsibility alone, as the other Abramovs had their own families to tend to. Anya was happy with this development, hoping that the work would distract Turunge from the heavy thoughts that plagued her. That, however, didn’t happen – nothing seemed to make Turunge happy. Everything seemed pointless: education, career, romantic relationships, household chores. She was only driven by her desire to be near her children – to be able to see them and be able to touch them every second. Turunge felt that if she heeded Anya’s words and complied with the Babaev’s forbiddance to see her children, life would lose its point.

And so Turunge began taking trips to Kislovodsk, kept secret from everyone, even her parents and Anya, so that she could at least catch a glance of her children from afar. Turunge spent hours upon hours on the street, waiting for the gate to open and for her beloved children to come out. She cautiously kept her distance.

There was no way for such behavior to go unnoticed. One of the neighbors told Havo about the scary woman, and she,

in turn, complained to Erzol. From then on, the gate to the house on Katyhin Street was always kept locked.

But there was no force on this earth that could have stopped Turunge. Several times, she managed to secretly follow Gena to school. She even called in his direction once. The boy turned around. He was thrilled to see his ‘real mama’, as he called her, and spread his arms and was about to yell something. Turunge, however, put her finger to her lips – ‘Shush!’ – and left.

Next day, she bought some candy. She approached the school fence, waited for the kids to pour out into the yard during recess, found Gena in the crowd, and started waving to him. It was an ordinary schoolyard, surrounded by an iron fence. When he saw Turunge, her son ran to her as fast as he could. She was drawn to the fence like a magnet, sticking her arms through the grate in attempt to reach Gena.

“My boy,” she said. “Come here and let me give you a kiss.”

Gena ran toward the fence but stopped short, torn between his desire to hug Turunge and Havo’s strict ban on being anywhere near her. He ultimately couldn’t resist, grabbed Turunge’s arm and started kissing it.

“My mommy! I know that you’re my real mama.”

Turunge listened in disbelief, as if her greatest wish had come true.

“Tell that to the others, you hear? Tell Slavik and Igorek that I’m their mama. You hear?” Her pleas grew more and more frenzied. “Do you hear me?”

“They don’t believe me, Mommy,” the boy whispered.

“I brought you some candy. Here – take it.”

She hurriedly reached into her purse and took out a paper bag, which had already lost its shape. The bag tore and the candy spilled onto the ground. Turunge started picking it up and shoving it through the grate toward Gena.

“Take it, my dear. Take it all.”

Her fingers were shaky and the clumsiness became contagious. Gena suddenly got nervous and started dropping the candy as well, rushing to pick it up and shove it in his pockets.

“Why aren’t you taking it? Take it, take it,” Turunge kept repeating.

Tears glistened in her eyes. And so the son and the mother cried, exchanging brief touches through the fence, like gold coins. Suddenly, someone screamed.

“What are you doing? Babaev! Gena! Who are you talking to?”

The boy froze in place, like a thief caught red-handed.

“Come here this minute!” the stern voice repeated.

Gena turned around slowly. A teacher was headed straight for him.

“This is an educational institution, not an alley!” she yelled from afar. “Who are you? Leave the school grounds at once!”

Turunge just stood there. After all – she was on the other side of the fence. Why did she have to leave?

“Babaev! Did you not hear me? I’m going to tell your father that you’re talking to strangers. Come here!”

Gena was baffled, shifting his confused glance between Turunge and his enraged teacher.

“Why are you yelling at a child?” Turunge suddenly yelled out in anger.

The teacher ran up to the child and dragged him away. Gena turned around, his sad eyes pleading for help.

“Let him go!” Turunge yelled. “Let him go! You hear me?”

She started shaking the fence. The teacher stopped, turned around and scowled.

“Get out of here!”

Turunge gasped.

“I am his mother!”

“We know mothers like you. We all know. The police are itching to catch you. The boy’s father warned us. Get out of here, lady, I’m not kidding!”

“That’s my mama!” Gena said, trembling with anger.

The older teacher looked the boy over sternly and noticed the candy in his hands.

“Who gave this to you? You can’t take things from strangers!” She grabbed one of the caramels and threw it to the ground. “Throw it out – immediately!” she commanded, as if the boy was holding a rat. “What if they’re poisoned? Do you hear me, Babaev?”

She struck the boy on his hand and the candy spilled onto the grass. The teacher started diligently crushing it, mashing the brown filling onto the fertile soil.

“Don’t you dare take anything from strangers!” she warned.

“She’s not a stranger, she’s my mama!” Gena yelled. He jumped at the teacher, flailing his fists. “That’s my mama’s gift!”

Tears streamed down his face. He sensed his mother standing behind the fence, staring at him, unable to do anything.

Turunge was unaware that Erzol had warned the teachers that the school might get a visit from the kids’ mother, who’s been stripped of custody and is sick and dangerous. It was better to keep an eye on the children to prevent any incidents. What if she decides to do something bad, like kidnap a child? She had already done it once. The teacher only listened to him, wide eyed, and nodded, painting horrifying scenes in her mind. She liked this handsome man who had found himself in such a complicated life situation.

“Of course – I’ll warn all my colleagues. We won’t let any harm come to the children.”

And so the teacher kept a watchful eye, especially on young Gena. And this time around, she had spotted clear danger.

“If you ever approach the school again,” she said, turning toward Turunge and taking a cautious step back, “you’ll be dealing with the police.”



## XXIX

**T**urunge changed drastically after the incident at the school, torn by conflicting feelings. On one hand, she ached to see her children; on the other, she feared running into Erzol. She remembered well what he was like when he got angry.

Tears filled her eyes constantly, for no specific reason. Turunge cried, unable to stop until the moment when cold emptiness would fill her soul, as if striving to reach a distant frontier where the absence of emotion and long-awaited peace reigned. A fair bit of time passed like this. One day, the crying stopped, as if the well that fed her tears had run out. She decided that it was time to take action and, once again, set out to Kislovodsk.

She headed to Katyhin Street straight from the train station, not even bothering to stop at the dormitory, where everyone already knew her and greeted her with sympathy, and took her usual observation spot some hundred meters away from the familiar gate.

It was drizzling, but Turunge would not be moved. Erzol stepped out on business several times and returned. Slavik and Igor went back and forth twice. Then Havo walked out and locked the gate. By Turunge's calculations, Gena and El-lochka were the only ones at home – no one else. Alik, Erzol's brother, could have been there as well, but Turunge didn't account for him. She looked around and headed for the gate, her heart beating loudly.

"Gena will open the gate, as long as I call him into the yard," she repeated under her breath. "Gena will listen." She needed nothing more – just to hug and kiss at least one of her children.

Here she was, at the gate. Turunge stopped, breathing heavily. She looked around. As before, there wasn't a soul on the street. She yanked the latch toward her, but it wouldn't budge. Turunge tried to reach around and open it from the inside. Suddenly, a face flashed in the window of the Babaev home, which stood right by the road and someone walked out onto the stoop.

"Who's here?" a voice sounded.

Turunge was petrified. Someone approached the gate from the yard.

"Turunge?"

It was a familiar voice. Turunge straightened up, the gate opened, and a beautiful, statuesque woman with a full head of red hair stood on the other side. It was Liza!

Turunge frowned. Out of all people she expected to see, this wasn't one of them. She had heard that Erzol's younger sister had moved to Kislovodsk, but had no idea where she was staying. And here she was, like a ghost of the part of her past that Turunge had tried so hard to forget.

"Turunge..." Liza repeated.

Turunge remained silent, not knowing what to say. For some reason, looking at this beautiful young woman in-

spired her to feel the full extent of her hatred toward the Babaevs. She had specifically tried to banish her – Liza – from her memory. And here she was – Liza – standing between her and her children. Liza, the pure soul that she was, didn't comprehend the anger and didn't even want to hear the details of the recent tragic complications between the two families. She just stood there, looking indifferently at the one who had wronged her in the past, without as much as a shadow of fear or a hint of reproach.

"Why are you just standing here?" she smiled. "Come into the house. I'm happy to see you."

Turunge looked at her, confused, unsure whether or not this angel in the flesh was trying to torment her.

"Your children aren't here right now. Neither are Mother or Erzol. So come in, we'll drink some tea," she said in an almost singsong manner.

Could she really have no idea what had happened? Could she really not be in cahoots with Havo and Erzol? Turunge shakily nodded and followed Liza into the house. Every bit of its décor had a woman's touch to it, creating an air of comfort and warmth.

Liza hugged Turunge tenderly, which confused the guest even more.

"Come into the kitchen. There's no reason to stand here," Lisa insisted with genuine affection.

"No, it's alright. I'll just sit here and catch my breath."

"What do you mean, catch your breath? Let's go to the kitchen. You've come a long way, so you must be hungry and tired. I'll make some tea."

Liza nearly forced the guest to follow her.

"How are your parents? Melke, Hezgie?"

Looking at the young woman fussing about her, Turunge felt guilty of some unconscionable action that she couldn't recall.

“They’re all right, thank you,” Turunge replied, trying to smile and falling silent, not knowing what else to say. She suddenly wanted to find a flaw in Liza, to make her guilty and not feel embarrassed by her kindness and hospitality.

“I’ll bring you some cookies – I just baked them. They’re your favorite – I remember.”

Turunge continued to be amazed. Liza remembered what kind of cookies she liked...

The cheery housewife looked upon Erzol’s wife with sympathy. Strangely, Liza had always liked this young woman who had endured so much. Maybe she wasn’t as bad as her mother kept telling her. In any case, Turunge deserved at least a smidgen of warmth from the Babaevs. Liza warmed her with her words, touching in their simplicity, and in response to such kindness, Turunge’s soul started to melt. She even took three sips from the teacup.

“And how are you?” Turunge asked, her voice cracking.

“Isay and I moved here. We’re settling in, he’s working. You know, it isn’t that bad,” Liza smiled.

Turunge looked at her, so carefree, and remembered herself, young, beautiful and pure, walking into Erzol’s house. She was so full of hope for a happy life with the man that fate had chosen to be her husband. That happiness was taken from her. Who would answer for that?

“Yes... Isay will be home soon,” Liza continued. “He’d say the same thing.”

What he was supposed to say, Turunge didn’t know.

Isay’s name unearthed memories that she wanted to forget forever: her children being taken, her being convicted along with her parents. Isay had his hands in all of this. What – did this redhead not know this? How dare she torment her like this?

Suddenly, Turunge saw everything in a different light. The person in front of her wasn’t Liza – it was the girl who

stole her happiness. Instead of the warmth of her words, she felt a web that she was weaving, meant to tempt, flatter and confuse her, in order to degrade her even more later on. She heard vile mockery in Liza's words.

Liza continued to talk, but Turunge heard nothing. She only saw the lips of a lying scoundrel, opening and closing silently, like those of a fish washed ashore. She felt disgusted.

"What a terrible time that was for all of us," Liza went on, but broke off, noticing how her guest's mood had changed. "Turunge, everything is okay now. They're your kids. Thankfully, this is all behind us."

"Behind us," Turunge echoed back, staring at Liza hatefully.

"Now you can see them," Liza babbled, growing more and more frightened. "Everything's settled..."

These last words pushed Turunge over the edge.

"Nothing is settled."

Wave after wave of hatred swept over Turunge. Here was Liza, tending to her. Making cookies! Happy! She had everything: a house, a husband, hope for future children. What did Turunge have? Where was her house? Her husband? Where were her children?"

She felt the forgotten touch of Erzol's palm on her face, but it carried no warmth or tempting tenderness, just the piercing pain of a resounding slap.

Some evil force came over Turunge and dragged her after it. She stood up, walked up to Liza and grabbed her hair. Liza yelled out of shock and fear. The woman's screams were like a catalyst for Turunge's wounded soul. She pounced on Liza in uncontrollable rage, as if she was carrying out a difficult but useful task that would refresh her tired body and free her soul from the pain and desperation that filled it.

Liza screamed and fell to the ground, and Turunge saw a clump of fiery-red hair in her hand. Her rage evaporated.

Turunge came to her senses, like a suicidal person who rushes toward the water's surface at the very last moment, reaching for that breath of air, and ran to the door, away from this house, away from this horrible world that transformed the kind and tender Turunge Abramova into an angry monster.

It seemed that Isay's reaction to Liza's beating didn't go unnoticed by anyone in Erzol's family, even his children. Anger and rage overtook him when he saw that Erzol's ex-wife did again. Even the Babaevs' neighbors discussed Turunge's actions. Everyone resented her. The thirst for revenge filled every corner of Isay's heart.

"She's insane," he screamed, "do you hear me? Insane! I'm writing a police report this instant, so that they can arrest her."

"Calm down. Liza's fine," Erzol replied.

"Fine? She nearly killed her! Ripped out a chunk of her hair. Liza's whole head was bloodied. Didn't you see?"

"It'll grow back."

"I don't understand why you're defending her! If she shows up here again, I'll definitely kill her. I'll kill her – you hear me?"

"I hear you," Erzol replied calmly. "And then what? You'll go to prison." Erzol sulked. "I'm telling you: she's not herself. And the police will do nothing to help that. That's not what their responsibility."

"Not their responsibility?" Isay raged. "Then whose? She's hurting people! Who will answer for that?"

"Turunge is getting revenge on you, not Liza," Erzol remarked.

This drove Isay into a frenzy. He ran around the table where his brother-in-law sat several times.

"Are you trying to say that she's getting revenge on me alone? I'm the only one at fault for your family feuds? So what – she can show up here and do whatever she wants?"

“She’s not going to do whatever she wants! I assure you. She’ll get what’s coming to her.”

“Get what? A bed at a mental hospital? Fine, let it be so.” He went silent, as if a thought had come to him. He sat back down and his anger subsided. “I’ll give her what’s coming to her.”

“Did you think of something?”

“I will, if you can’t.” He raised his index finger, as if reciting a solemn oath, and went home.

Isay had declared war on Turunge, and there was no hope for a truce.

## XXX

**I**n the meantime, Anya found an attorney who promised that he could arrange for custody to be returned to Turunge. After he familiarized himself with the case, he laughed:

“You’ve been tricked. In your case, there is no reason not to trust her to care for her children. Conviction of an economic crime does not pose a basis for custody revocation. We just need to approach this case from the right angle.”

He instantly started reciting a long list of letters, declarations and affidavits that needed to be gathered and brought to court. The sisters listened to him, perplexed. Anya would nod upon hearing familiar wise words like ‘jurisdiction’, ‘custody of children per civil right’, ‘legitimization of motherly rights’ and so forth. Turunge just stared at him, not understanding anything. It was as if the man whom her sister brought into their home was speaking a foreign language. When he finished, she looked at her sister nervously, wondering what all of this meant.



Anya paused, gathered her thoughts, then opened a drawer, took out a pack of cigarettes, and lit up. Only then did she look at the lawyer.

"My dear Murad Ivanovich. Can we make an arrangement? We..." she stammered, gathering her words. "We can pay you according to your billing chart, whatever you charge."

"A ruble an hour – for however many hours it takes."

"That works. It can be two hundred hours, for all I care. Please start gathering all the necessary papers, and let's get this case going."

"Of course, Anna Hezgievna. That's exactly what I was going to suggest. If you don't have the time to do it yourself and you trust me, I promise I'll handle everything superbly."

"Please, Murad Ivanovich," Anya smiled with anguish. "In turn, we promise we won't let you down."

"I have not a doubt in the world," the lawyer said playfully, and they parted ways.

## XXXI

A month had passed since Liza's savage beating, and Turunge hadn't paid the Babaevs any more visits. Peace and quiet reigned in Erzol's Kislovodsk house. Ellochka and Gena stopped fussing and demanding to learn more about Turunge. Slava and I also stopped discussing the peculiar woman, who Havo continued to insist was crazy.

Havo had a complex and contradictory personality. Her kindness mysteriously coexisted with sternness – even callousness – toward those for whom she didn't care. Perhaps this was because she considered love to be the highest of gifts, deserved only by a select few. Those who strayed off God's chosen path even once weren't worthy of it. What this path consisted of was a question only Havo could answer. Essentially, it consisted of her intuitive assessment of something as being 'good' or 'bad'. Anything she considered good, remained that way forever; if she disliked something, that verdict was also unalterable. This was a trait that Erzol had inherited. Whatever

he perceived as ‘wrong’ even once, remained that way for his entire life. But that aspect of his character didn’t become apparent to us until much later. We were concerned with completely different things when we were children.

Havo put her whole soul into her cooking, as if the fire that burnt under the stove warmed her heart as well. One only needed to watch her to understand that cooking skill goes far beyond following a recipe and mixing ingredients in correct proportions. Havo knew what any ingredient would taste like before it even made it to the kitchen. For example, she could look at two identical tomatoes and say, with absolute certainty, which one was ripe and which one would taste bland. She could tell which eggs would hatch chickens and which were unfertilized. These were not things taught in schools.

Watching Havo skillfully juggle boiling pots and sizzling pans, one could easily forget that they’re in the kitchen and not witnessing some sort of ancient ritual intended to please a benevolent deity. Havo didn’t cook meals – she performed religious rites.

She could intuitively guess which dish would make a man brave, which spice would brighten a woman’s cheeks, which dessert a child would be especially fond of. She had a whole list of inimitable dishes that I remember to this day, and even if she wrote down the recipe and provided meticulous instructions, you could still be sure that you’d never be able to imitate her culinary works of art.

The kitchen was her kingdom, and cooking made her very happy. It may have tired her out, but she never gave the impression that she couldn’t handle it. Father only needed to mention that we were expecting guests for her inner volcano to stir from its slumber. The kitchen came to life, flames cracked ferociously, butter sizzled and dough rose so fast that you’d think someone was inflating it from the inside. In a half hour, the table would already be on the verge of buckling un-

der the weight of food. The aroma that spread across the house portended father's arrival with some friends.

Aside from her suspiciousness and confidence that no one but her could handle household tasks, she was an ideal grandmother and mother.

Such was the course of affairs in our family.

Havo's willingness to forgive any and all of her son's sins was rooted in a deep love that she lavishly poured on her son without even a hint of it running out. Whatever tenderness was left over went to the kids – almost solely to Slava and I. Ellochka and Gena only received the tangible benefits of being a Babaev, knowing no material need but lacking simple human warmth. Perhaps this was because my younger brother and sister were born at a time when an unmendable cleft had already formed between my parents. Sensing where the relationship was going, Havo wasn't particularly happy to learn about Gena's, and later Ellochka's, imminent arrival.

## XXXII

One would have thought that the lawyer's hopeful promises about Turunge getting custody of her children back would loosen the grip of her sadness and misery. That did not turn out to be the case. A gnawing pain remained at the bottom of her heart, and it needed an outlet. Anya insistence for her sister to cease the secret trips to Kislovodsk and explanations that it's better to wait until after the trial were in vain.

Turunge would rather die than forego seeing her children. Night after night, she would see her kids running down the street toward her in her dreams. She'd run to them, hug them, kiss them, as they happily shouted 'Mama!' Sometimes Turunge dulled this depression with arduous work. But even when she was absolutely exhausted, her grief over the inability to touch her children rivaled physical pain. Both will and common sense surrendered to that insurmountable desire, and all of Anya's wise advice lost its significance.

Some two weeks after the lawyer filed a petition with the Pyatigorsk Court, Turunge set out to on another secret trip to Kislovodsk. On the way, she kept thinking of the trouble she'd get into with Anya. She had just promised her that she would stop with the trips, and here she was again.

The weather was spectacular. It was sunny and the birds sang, as if trying to reassure Turunge. From the train station, she went straight to Katyhin Street.

Regardless of what had happened with Liza, Turunge decided not to hide from the Babaevs and go straight to their home in attempt to at least see one of her children. She tugged on the gate – it was locked. She stood by the fence, not sure what to do next. Suddenly, a figure flashed thorough the gaps in the fence: seemingly a child's figure – perhaps Gena or Slava. Turunge tugged on the gate more strongly. A splinter lodged in her finger, as if trying to warn her to stay away. She stubbornly pursed her lips and started shaking the gate with more strength.

"Hey!" she called out. No one replied. Turunge got on her tiptoes, trying to spot someone beyond the fence.

"Slavik!" she called. "Kids!"

Silence.

A woman came up behind her. Turunge felt her stare and turned around, uneasy.

"Did you come to visit the Babaevs?"

"Yes, the Babaevs," Turunge answered in an inflammatory voice.

"I'm their neighbor. I don't think they're home."

Turunge ignored her words. In a minute, she heard a gate slam at a house next door, and everything went quiet. Thoughts started crawling through her head. If the gate is locked, then they must be hiding the children from her. What right do they have to hide the children from their mother?

Turunge tugged on the gate with more power, but it wouldn't budge. Confused, she started pacing along

the fence. The neighbor... She would know. Turunge ran to her house. The woman greeted the unexpected guest cautiously.

"Why won't they let me in?" Turunge demanded.

The neighbor was baffled.

"I told you, they must have gone somewhere. Don't worry, these things happen. My name's Tonya. You can wait in my house."

But Turunge had no intention of calming down.

"Where could they have gone? They're just children!"

The woman shrugged.

"If you don't want to wait, go try again," she said, mockingly, to Turunge's astonishment.

Turunge ran back out onto the street and started shaking the gate, then started calling:

"Gena! Igor!"

Her screams got louder and louder. Soon enough, she drew the attention of other neighbors besides Tonya, who observed her through the windows.

Turunge suddenly realized that she was surrounded by unexplainable silence. She could hear the creaky shutters of the neighbors' homes. The whole neighborhood seemed to turn into a giant ear, which greedily gorged itself on the sounds of her misery. Turunge then heard the rustle of tires on the gravel behind her. A car stopped abruptly, right in front of the house.

"Citizen," a raspy voice said from behind her. "Why are you making all this noise?"

Turunge said nothing in response. All kinds of people roamed these streets. She stood by the gate, waiting for the men to leave. But they didn't. Turunge turned around. Before her were men in long gray robes – just like the ones that the orderlies wore in the prison hospital. The third one, an older bespectacled man, appeared to be in charge.

"Why are you making all this noise? Where are you headed?" he asked Turunge once more.

"I'm going into the house," she answered curtly.

"Is this your house?"

"If it were my house, I wouldn't be knocking. I'd open the door with my own key!"

The man started laughing, his glasses glistening in the light.

"So why do you keep knocking? Maybe the people are asleep."

"My children are there," Turunge replied, sensing a dupe. She felt uneasy.

The bespectacled man nodded understandingly.

"Please don't worry. What's your name?"

"I don't have one. What do you want from me?"

"I asked you not to worry. Worrying is harmful," another man in gray chimed in.

"My children are there," Turunge repeated, pointing at the Babaev home. "I came to them. I'm their mother." At that moment, she must have seemed like a helpless little girl. "Leave me alone, why don't you?" she nearly yelled. "I came to see my kids. You don't believe me? Everyone around here knows me. Babaeva... Turunge... Here's my passport. Look!" She handed her passport to the doctor, then pointed at the fence. "And those are my children, also Babaevs."

"Your nerves are shaken. You need treatment. You need to stay with us."

"I don't need to stay anywhere." Turunge's tears suddenly dried up. She was deathly scared of these people.

The bespectacled doctor nodded to his minions. The orderlies noticed the signal and walked apart, like predators surrounding their prey. One of them winked at Turunge and shouted:

"Look over here!"

Turunge looked his way. At that moment, the other one grabbed her firmly by both wrists.



“Calm down! You’re coming with us,” he hissed in her ear.

“Help! I’m being murdered!” Turunge screamed at the top of her lungs. No one responded. No one came to help.

“The shot! Now!” The doctor remained composed.

One of the orderlies rushed to the car and grabbed a bag off the seat. The doctor opened it in a rote motion, took out an already full syringe, and plunged it into Turunge’s thigh, right through her clothing.

She felt a sting – a slight one. Ignoring it, she screamed even louder, feeling like a little extra effort would free her. Then everything got blurry. It was as if she was being crushed by a boulder. Her arms and legs went numb. She tried to move them, but couldn’t. She tried to scream, but only noises came out. Then the boulder started dragging her down. She felt that she was falling into a warm, safe darkness she’s been in before. From the very bottom of this darkness she could still hear her children’s voices singing a lullaby: ‘As the dzhigit rode his horse...’

Turunge came to at a hospital – she could tell that from a familiar pain that made it impossible to move. Without lifting her eyelids – a trick she had learned in prison – she tried to determine where she was. Her last memory was of her children’s faces. She ran towards them until someone struck her in the back. Then – silence.

But where did this happen? And when?

The green gate that she was shaking came before her eyes. Suddenly, her memory rushed in with lightning speed: Erzol’s house, the ambulance.

Turunge opened her eyes. She saw hospital walls, a dim light bulb on the ceiling, bars on the windows, and instantly understood everything. She was in the nuthouse. She tugged at her hand – it was tied down. She tried the other – same result.

Turunge filled her lungs with air and screamed in desperation.

An old man ran into the room right away – a doctor, accompanied by two orderlies whom Turunge had seen before.

The old man sat on the edge of her bed.

“Babaeva?”

Turunge nodded feebly.

“What’s your name?”

“Turunge.”

“Turunge,” the doctor repeated. “So why are you screaming? There are other patients here besides you, you know. We won’t do anything bad to you – just make you feel better. Okay?”

Turunge blinked. Tears started streaming from her eyes.

“I’m not crazy. I came to visit my children. And she put me in the nuthouse.”

“Don’t be nervous,” said the doctor, attempting to calm her down. “And don’t worry about the children, they’re fine. You’ll get better and them see later. Until then, what’s the use in frightening them? They’re still little, right?”

Turunge didn’t respond. The doctor’s words sounded like lies. He was talking to her like he thought she was stupid.

“You’ll stay here for a week or two, then go home,” he concluded.

“I need to go home. I need my children,” Turunge mumbled glumly.

The doctor shook his head. Anger and rage awoke in Turunge’s heart.

“Lies! All lies! You’re a liar!” she cried, trying to free herself “Ah! Let me go! Let me go to my children!”

“Well, now we’ll definitely have to take measures,” the doctor said, discouraged, and turned to the nurse nearby. “Galina Sergeyevna! Give the patient one haloperidol, and enough for today. Let her sleep.”

He mechanically fixed Turunge’s blanket, got up, and left without saying goodbye.

So began our mother's second stay at the hospital.

"You're only making it worse for yourself," said the nurse, stroking her arm. "They aren't going to let you go until you behave yourself. They won't! Do you understand?"

Turunge nodded compliantly. She quickly realized that the only way out was to pretend to be calm.

Gray days of her new hospital confinement followed. When despair filled her soul, Turunge would cry and become indifferent to everything, as always.

She didn't know that Anya roused the entirety of Kislovodsk, was able to reach Nahamye, and learned of the terrible news – that her sister was taken away by a psychiatric ambulance. This was exactly what Anya had feared. Turunge had lost it. Anya didn't know exactly what happened and the circumstances that landed her in the hospital. All she could feel was pain for her younger sister. Oh, misery.

## XXXIII

One day, while Erzol was getting ready for work, Havo entered his room holding an envelope.  
“A letter came for you. The mailwoman brought it.”

“What letter?” the son asked.

“Like I said, a letter!” Havo replied. “How should I know?”

“Give it to me, I’ll read it,” Erzol said happily and opened the envelope.

Below a crested letterhead that read ‘Pyatigorsk City Court’, the text informed that a citizen Babaeva petitioned for the return of custody of her children born from her marriage with Erzol Babaev. He read the official documents twice, then called for Mila, who was visiting at the Babaevs’, and asked her to run over to Isay’s and get him – that this was urgent. Havo’s guard instantly went up upon hearing Isay’s name. The mother’s heart knew that the crested letter has something to do with Turunge.

“She’s taking me to court!” Erzol said, sitting down. “She wants to take the children back. Raise them herself.”

“What? Our children? When does she want to take them? Didn’t they strip her of custody? Do they really allow people like that to raise children?”

Erzol shrugged, not knowing what to tell his mother.

“But they’re terrified of her!”

“Mama, I understand . We’ll discuss this calmly. Don’t panic.”

“I’m not panicking. I’m just wondering why you’re so calm,” Havo said bitterly.

“I’m just thinking of what to do.”

There was a knock on the door and Isay entered. He still had a breadcrumb stuck in the corner of his mouth. Mila had seemingly dragged him away from the table.

“What happened?”

“It’s a disaster!” Havo shouted. “From her...”

“Mama,” Erzol cringed. “Don’t exaggerate. Read the letter.” He handed Isay the envelope.

Isay noticed how exhausted Erzol looked, blushing brightly at his cheekbones. Carefully, like a sapper diffusing a bomb, he picked up the letter and read it twice, amusingly moving his lips.

“How am I to understand this?” he said, placing the letter on the table. “Turunge wants to take back the kids and raise them?”

“Exactly,” Havo replied.

Sparks of rage started dancing in Isay’s eyes. The days that had passed since Liza’s beating had not cooled his hatred for Turunge. She had finally declared war, aiming at what was most holy for Havo – her grandchildren. Perhaps he was thinking of something else, but the fire in his eyes was a testament to the fact that he hadn’t forgotten.

“What chances does she have?”

“Given that she’s their mother – they’re significant,” Erzol replied calmly, though it was apparent that his indifference was forced. “If she can prove that she can provide the children with the necessities, she’ll get them back. I asked.”

“Can she prove it?”

Nahamye entered the room, smiling warmly.

“What happened?”

Isay said hello, and Havo looked at her carefree husband angrily. Her soul had always been tormented by the suspicion that Nahamye secretly sympathized with the Abramovs. She briefly updated him on the situation.

“She made a big move!” Isay exclaimed, grinning ominously. “Figured out that she should go to a lawyer.”

“It wasn’t her. It was Anya Shcherbatova,” Havo protested. “Do you really think that dolt could put a case together so well?” she added, looking at Nahamye angrily.

“Mama, it makes absolutely no difference whose idea it was,” Erzol said. “What’s important is what we do now.”

“Is there any question about that?” Havo replied, flailing her arms. “Who’s going to give her back the children?”

“What do you mean ‘who’?” Erzol scoffed. “Soviet law says that the mother has a greater right to raise her children than their father. Everyone knows that.”

“But she can’t do this!” Havo protested.

“Who knows what she can or can’t do?” Erzol replied, doubtfully. “She doesn’t have a label on her forehead that says she’s crazy.”

Those words seemed to pique Isay’s interest.

“What if she did? Would they give her the children then?” he asked suddenly, his eyes once again illuminated by evil flames.

“Of course not,” Erzol replied.

Isay excitedly paced around the room, then turned to his friend, who looked back at him contemplatively. This was

the way football players look at one another while planning for a stealthy pass.

"I suppose they wouldn't," Erzol confirmed.

Isay's face was that of a poker player who thinks he has a chance for a comeback.

"When's the trial," he asked, pretending not to notice the silent question in his friend's eyes.

Erzol picked up the letter and read it once more.

"In a month."

Isay thought about something pointedly.

"Fine, we'll see what happens. After all, we should probably consult a lawyer," he concluded, squinting and looking off into the distance.

The friends talked about this and that for a while longer and parted ways.

Two months of involuntary hospitalization passed before Turunge was released from the hospital. Her sister Rosa made the trip to help her pack up and take her back home.

Turunge was back in her native Makhachkala. She returned to her old job at the foundry. She was back to counting days – this time around, until the trial, her heart's only source of hope.

She visited Anya time and time again, asking whether she had any news. She just shook her head and shrugged. One day, however, her sister came to meet her at the end of her shift and happily announced that the hearing would take place the following week. Anya had received notice that the case would be heard in Pyatigorsk. Turunge asked her to repeat the encouraging news, then started crying in disbelief. It was the sweetest sadness. She rushed back to Melke and Hezgie's house, giving her mother the good news from the doorway.

The next day, she shared the news with her coworkers: soon – very soon – she would have her children back. The women oohed and aahed and shook their heads. Though

they had worked right near her all along, many didn't know about Turunge's miserable circumstances until this moment. Everyone wished for her to win her case. Turunge listened to them and the load atop her soul grew lighter and lighter.

"They court will take care of everything! The court knows the truth! A mother can't be without her children. She just can't!" she kept insisting throughout her shift while taking care of her usual work at a job that fate had sentenced her to.

The stately courthouse building basked in the golden sun. Turunge showed up with Anya, who refused to let her sister go alone. According to the lawyer, a woman would be presiding over the hearing. Anya said that this was a good thing. Turunge looked around at the unfamiliar faces of woman around her, trying to guess which of them would be deciding the fate of her children.

It was five minutes to eleven when she and Anya entered the sparsely filled courtroom. As the plaintiff, Turunge took a seat to the left of the judge. A familiar sadness overtook her again. She gathered the remainder of her strength in attempt to remain calm, but something was going awry in her simple plan, her troubling memories rushing forth in an avalanche that threatened to overwhelm her consciousness. Anya had assured Turunge that everything would turn out well, and now she sat here, subsisting on hope alone. She was, however, afraid to see her children – to see the fear in their eyes. However, the kids weren't in the courtroom. That became apparent to Turunge right away.

"I don't know if I'm ready to see them," she whispered to Anya.

"Stop it!" Anya snapped back. "The main thing is for you to remain confident. Remember what I told you: the truth is on your side."

She adjusted her sister's collar. Turunge looked very good.

"You need to make a good impression," Anya insisted beforehand. Turunge nodded in accord. She knew that every-



thing now depended on her sanity and ability to control herself. Anya and the lawyer assured her of that.

Erzol entered the courtroom. Turunge was shaken. How was he able to do it – to look like the victor in any situation?

Erzol did not look at Turunge. He sat next to his attorney, a very nervous overweight man, who was constantly whispering something in his client's ear. Erzol just nodded silently. Everything about his demeanor indicated that he was confident in his strength and rightness.

The hearing began with the judge's entrance into the courtroom. As Anya had said, the judge was a pleasant-looking woman of about forty. Turunge felt comfortable with her right away. Everyone stood up, sat down, and the process begun.

The plaintiff's declaration – the product of three hours of legal work – was read by the judge herself. Turunge didn't particularly try to comprehend the words – they all sounded cryptic to her. 'Plaintiff's declaration,' 'priority rights' – it was all gibberish, even though the case was so simple. Children should live with their mother.

As if reading Turunge's thoughts, the judge looked at her sympathetically. She then announced that both sides: the father and the mother – have an equal right to custody. These words made Turunge tense up.

"However, if the father does not have substantial grounds for the children to remain with him, it is preferable for custody to be awarded to the mother. This is worldwide practice." The judge put special emphasis on the word 'worldwide'. Erzol's attorney squirmed in his seat. "The court also takes into account the wishes of the children, if they're capable of expressing them, about who they prefer to live with," the judge concluded.

It was Turunge's turn to speak. She rose from her seat, and everyone's eyes became fixed on her. The audience curiously compared the husband and wife, whispering amongst themselves about who they believed would win.

Turunge felt awkward and scared, as if she had shrunk under the gazes of the crowd. Simple words felt heavy as iron. Her mouth was dry. Her speech was straightforward, filled with concealed hope that the court would understand her pain – the pain of a mother left without her children. What could be scarier?

Turunge said that she suffered because of what the Babaevs did to her. Yes, she had broken the law. But she didn't do it lightheartedly; she did it because, at the hardest of moments, she was given a treatment that an enemy would hesitate to bestow on his most dire opponent. Once freed from prison, she got a job – here was an affidavit. She worked hard and earned enough to support the children. As far as her health went – yes, she had a breakdown. She was driven to desperation. But now, she was absolutely healthy.

"I'm healthy, despite it all – despite everything that the Babaevs did to me by taking away my children. I ask the court for only one thing. I want my children back."

Turunge stopped talking. The courtroom hummed.

The judge angrily looked over the 'sympathizers' but didn't pound her gavel. Something flashed across her eyes, as if she identified with Turunge's misery as a woman and wanted to help her.

"Are you finished, Comrade Babaeva?"

She emphasized the word 'comrade', and it seemed to Turunge that the question was asked with sympathy.

"Yes," she struggled to answer.

"You may sit."

"You did well. We did it," Anya whispered to her happily.

Turunge sat, dumbstruck, in disbelief over her own happiness. Her fate was being decided.

At that moment, Erzol's lawyer got up and asked to speak.

"May I ask for a slight clarification?"

"What is it?"

The attorney asked for permission to read an official medical report. The judge nodded. The room went silent. The lawyer read a psychiatrists' conclusion that Turunge Babaeva was unwell, and incapable of supporting and raising children. The lawyer handed the declaration to the judge. She frowned, her face growing perplexed.

Turunge listened to Erzol's lawyer in silence. She no longer saw anything around her, just heard a monotonous male voice.

The judge ordered to summon Turunge's children. They entered. They were clean, neat and well dressed – as if for a holiday. And very frightened. The judge, picking up on their nervousness, turned to each of them with one simple question: "Who do you want to live with?" The children seemed to all answer on the same beat: "With Father and Mama Havo." This was said four times. Even by little Ellochka.

It was a complete disaster.

Noise filled the courtroom, and the judge called for order. Her assistant announced that the court is adjourning for deliberation. They were not gone for long. Sternly pursing her hips, the judge read the verdict: "To leave the children with their father, Erzol Babaev."

Only then did Turunge lose control and started bawling. The judge finished reading and looked at her.

"Citizen Babaeva..."

Turunge's shoulders shook.

"Turunge," the judge said, as softly as possible. "I'm asking you to calm down. I would like to assure you, that Soviet law grants you the right to appeal this verdict in civil court after a set deadline. You can still get your health in order and get your children back. But that requires time."

She brought the gavel down. The hearing was over.

The audience began to disperse. Only Turunge remained in the courtroom. She didn't have the strength to get up, as if understanding that what had occurred was irreparable.

Another chapter of Turunge's life had concluded. She had lost her children once and for all.

## XXXIV

**E**rzol told us about the way the world operated, citing examples from his eventful life. Not all of these examples were positive from the commonly accepted point of view, but he wasn't particularly concerned with that. It was as if he was sharing the heft of his burden with us, his children. He was upfront about nearly everything, aside from, of course, the extent of his wealth. In turn, we soaked up this knowledge like sponges.

We saw Father as a rock – a cliff that couldn't be challenged, at least not logically. Perhaps this was the exact quality for which we loved him, regardless of how excruciating this love could get at times. Subconsciously, we took on Erzol's life philosophy, which, in turn shaped our characters. Respect for the head of the family is rooted in our people's genes. This commandment has been passed on through generations of Mountain Tats for centuries – from father to son, from grandfather to grandson. It was my kin's guarding charter, its way of surviving and preserving its originality.

No matter what path our destinies took in the future, no matter how far apart life scattered us, we understood that we were tied to our father with the Mountain Tats' impermeable code. And each of us would always look for ways to prove to Father that he was better – more worthy of his praise.

Erzol always thought that his fatherhood was tainted by his disdain for our mother. But, as years went on, I think that something else gnawed on him from within. The reason for this unease was something that he neither attempted to explain to us or even comprehended himself.

Erzol never talked about Turunge with anyone. It was simply a topic he wouldn't discuss, one that he tried to erase from this memory. The damage that this outlook did to our spirits was not taken into account. There is no doubt, however, that this state of affairs affected our fates and characters.

We did not cause Father much trouble, aside from Gena, who was a terrible student. Erzol refused to admit that his son's failure to excel was a result of the lack of understanding that kept growing between them. Gena was the only one among us who felt genuine attachment toward Turunge, which father couldn't possibly be unaware of. His third son's behavior was, in Erzol's eyes, reproach – a silent reminder of what he had done. This resulted in a rivalry between the all-powerful father and a little boy who refused to yield his ground.

Things were different with us, the older sons. The words about Turunge being insane and dangerous gradually did their work. Only shadows remained from our image of our mother. We felt neither love nor pity toward her. Moreover, we were already approaching adolescence, a time when children grow apart from their parents even in families where the father and mother live in love and harmony.

Havo was the only real mother for Slava and I.

## XXXV

What happened to Liza did not go unnoticed by us. We couldn't understand or explain why Turunge did this to our favorite aunt. She was close to us for as long as we could remember: playing with us, helping with homework, solving difficult math problems, explaining difficult Russian participles and gerunds which didn't exist in the Tat language. We adored and admired her. And here she was, beaten... And by whom? The woman who called herself our mother. Perhaps Havo was right, and Turunge was indeed crazy?

This handling of events 'protected' us, the older brothers, from any sympathetic feelings toward Turunge. I would very much like to forget how the adults' stories about our mother made us recoil and try to distance ourselves from her as much as possible. There's nothing more bitter than these memories. But such is the reality, and there's no way around that.

What's noteworthy, however, is that while Slava and I were wary of Turunge, Gena became more and more drawn

to his mother as he got older. Perhaps this was due to the difficulty of his relationship with Father. The more neglectful Gena got about his education, the more he got scolded by Father, which only made him want to be closer to his mother, whom he remembered as being kind, gentle and able to shield him from punishment.

In third grade, Gena yet again collected an array of ‘twos’: a failing grade in Soviet school system. The thought of inescapable punishment and the looming spanking scared him. Gena wandered the city, getting more and more wound up. He walked until he reached the walls of a summer resort. He climbed a nearby tree and, from there, made it up to the building’s roof, heated by the sun. Finally feeling safe, he fell asleep.

Evening came, and the whole family gathered for dinner. Gena, however, wasn’t there.

Havo waited for a little while, questioning all of the other grandchildren, even Ellochka. No one knew anything. Havo then found Erzol and told him what happened. He never even entertained the thought that something unpleasant could happen to his children, but motherly concern was passed on to him nonetheless.

Erzol went to look for Gena around the city, taking Slava with him. Dusk descended on the city, reducing visibility to half a block ahead. Father frowned the whole way, nervously chewing on a blade of grass. After returning home, he went to the kitchen, talked to Havo about something for a long while, calming her down, then told all of us to go to bed.

“He’s not going to go anywhere. We’ll find him,” he said, as if reciting a spell, his eyebrows angrily converging on the bridge of his nose. Perhaps he felt more than he wanted to express with words.

In the morning, the family got on as usual: the kids went to school, Havo went to the kitchen, Erzol went to work. How-



ever, he did not go to the work directly, but followed his children. He found a secluded spot by the school gates and waited. From there, he could see all the roads that led to the educational institution. In ten or fifteen minutes, children started filing into the school – some in groups of two or three, some alone.

Suddenly, Erzol tensed up, like a predator – Gena appeared before him, haphazardly swinging his book bag. Erzol grabbed him by the collar and gave him a smack.

“Where were you hiding, you little scoundrel? Answer me!”

Gena didn’t even let out a peep.

This incident carried no repercussions for Gena. He continued to study with no enthusiasm, collecting ‘twos’ and ‘threes’, and father continued to punish his son’s negligence with scolding and his belt.

Once, after yet another spanking, the boy waited for his father to leave for work, ran to his hiding place, and emptied his piggy bank. He ran to his grandfather, got some ‘ice cream money’ from him, and ran to the train station. He bought a ticket to Makhachkala, got on a train and left.

By some miracle he found the right street. He didn’t know the exact address, but asking can get one anywhere. Makhachkala is a small city, and people tend to know the others in their surroundings. He asked several people how to find Turunge Abramova, and got directions.

An elderly woman opened the door. Gena stepped back.

“Who are you looking for?” Melke asked, squinting to compensate for her poor eyesight.

“I’m Gena,” the young guest replied.

“What Gena?” Melke asked, confused.

“Turunge is my mama.”

Melke’s lips quivered. She clasped her hand.

“Turunge, my God! Run over here quick!” she yelled.

Turunge jumped up. She saw her son on the threshold and froze.

“Son?” he asked, befuddled.

The boy nodded, not sure what to do next. Turunge ran to him and hugged him tight, but then caught herself.

“Who did you come here with? Your father?”

“No,” Gena replied, a shadow of fear sweeping across his face. “I came alone!”

“What do you mean, alone?”

“Well, alone... I came to you. For good. I’m going to live with you.”

The mother and the grandmother looked at one another doubtfully.

“Are you saying you ran away from home?”

Gena nodded glumly, as the women gasped in unison.

“What did you do! Where did you get money?” Melke asked.

“Grandpa gave me some, and I broke my piggy bank.”

“Oh my!” Melke replied.

Fear and doubt flashed in her daughter’s eyes, but Turunge quickly composed herself. There was no time for fear. It was a miracle that her son was standing before her.

Gena wouldn’t take his eyes off Turunge, confusion and happiness apparent on his face. She seemed to have gotten shorter and older! But here were the gray eyes – a mother’s eyes – that he remembered right away, glowing with a strange light.

The mother looked upon her son with the same astonishment. Gena had grown. He had big black eyes. His shirt was torn at the elbow. His neck stuck out of an unbuttoned collar – skinny, like a chicken’s. And the same shy smile that everyone in their family had.

“A true Abramov,” she said, turning to her mother, “right?”

“Let’s go get your grandfather!” Melke said, worried.

Embracing Gena, she led him into the house, to Hezgie. The boy smiled happily, following his grandmother. He had

only heard about Grandpa Hezgie, but had never seen him. By then, his grandfather had gone nearly completely blind and had lost a lot of weight. Other than that, however, he had remained the same.

When Melke told him whom she had brought, Hezgie didn't believe his ears. He called the boy over to him, grabbed his hand, and ran his palm over his face, as if trying to paint the picture that his sick eyes couldn't, and fell silent. Gena broke the pause. He grew tired of standing still and squirmed, trying to put a stop to this peculiar introduction ritual. The old man shuddered, smiled and started asking the boy about what miracle brought him to Makhachkala.

Gena told the story of his escape. He added a few more details, and concluded with the admission that he's hungry. The women instantly ran to the kitchen. In mere minutes, the boy sat at the head of the table before a full bowl of porridge packing it away, telling about his adventure once again.

"They checked my ticket twice," he said, "And also asked why I was alone. I said that I was going to my mother's and that you were going to meet me at the train station."

"Good job. You're a smart boy," Turunge nodded.

"But does your father know where you are?" Melke asked, but then answered her own question. "Of course he doesn't. You ran away."

Gena looked at his grandmother, frightened. She exchanged glances with her daughter and their faces grew serious.

"This isn't good," Melke whispered.

"We'll figure it out. Don't worry, we'll figure it all out," Turunge tried to comfort her.

The boy pushed his plate away, huffed and looked at the adults. He looked absolutely happy and satisfied. A sleepy haze came over his eyes.

"Are you tired?" Turunge asked, smiling.

Gena nodded silently. His adventures had drained all of his strength.

“Come on, I’ll put you to bed.”

Turunge tried picking her son up, but instantly put him down.

“Oh my, you’re heavy. A real warrior.”

She took Gena to the bedroom, where he instantly fell asleep. Turunge sat by the bed, looking at the sleeping child, still in disbelief over her own happiness. Here he was, her blood, so lovely and dear. She choked up. She always knew that her children wouldn’t forget her, never turn away from her. Her desire for revenge stirred again, boiling in the corner of her eye, but Turunge took control of herself, kissed her son tenderly on the forehead, and went to talk to her mother.

“Mama! The Almighty is helping us!” Turunge exclaimed, sitting down at the table.

“Oh, don’t say that, lest He turn away from us.”

“Nothing bad will happen,” Turunge protested.

Melke shook her head.

“You keep saying that... What are we going to do with him? We need to let Erzol know.”

Frightened Turunge grabbed Melke’s sleeve.

“Wait. Give me at least a day with him, then we can decide what to do next.

Next morning, Turunge woke Gena up at the crack of dawn. She made him wash up and gave him clean and ironed clothes. The boy looked at his mother curiously.

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Come on, come on – get dressed. Quickly.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you later. Get dressed.”

Turunge sat by him and helped him put on his pants. She combed the boy’s hair, then led him to a mirror that hung over a table. She looked at him silently, for a long time, calculat-

ing and contemplating something in her mind. She sat the boy on her lap, then told him to get up again, each time meticulously examining the reflection in the mirror.

“Mama, what are you doing?” Gena wondered.

“I’ll tell you later, son.”

Turunge was absorbed in her thoughts. She took Gena to his grandfather’s room, and went to get dressed.

They left an hour later, when the sun was already high above the horizon. The mother held Gena by the hand. They walked along the familiar street and neighbors looked and marveled at Turunge, surprised that she could look that good. She was wearing her best dress and her face glowed. Her purse, its handle mended with electrical tape, along with her worn out shoes, was rendered nearly invisible.

They stopped at a corner of one of the street. The sign to the left of the door read ‘Photo Salon’.

Turunge squeezed the child’s hand tightly.

“Let’s go in!” she said happily and dragged the boy after her.

A bell rang and they found themselves in a cool, dark room with velvet curtains draping all of the walls. Gena stood silent. The proprietor of the salon walked out. He was an elder Kumyk with a pointed, spiky mustache. He looked at the mother and son silently.

“Can we make a photo?” Turunge asked in a chipper voice.

“Sit,” said the man, nodding toward a chair.

Turunge complied and sat down, but instantly jumped up. She approached the mirror, examined herself, then sat next to Gena again. For some reason, the tension grew with every second. She got up again, this time taking Gena to the mirror with her. She started fixing his hair, trying to pat down the already compliant curls.

The photographer looked over the commotion with silent amusement. Something about this woman struck him

as strange – perhaps the frenzied spark in her eyes. He stood behind his camera, put a black shroud over himself, and, after yelling “Here comes the birdie!” took a picture. A flash of blinding light lit up the room. Gena squinted.

“Ready!” said the photographer, emerging from under his cover. “Come back in three days. You’ll have a photo.”

Turunge listened to him, grinning ear to ear, as if she was being promised mountains of gold. She left the photo salon feeling like a happy little girl.

The sun was blinding. She and Gena stood for a while, adjusting to the light, then walked where the eyes could see, as if led by some mysterious force.

As Turunge bought Gena ice cream and candy, she couldn’t help but feel that everyone is looking at them. For the first time ever, this didn’t scare her. She was no longer afraid of gossip and what people were saying behind her back. She simply enjoyed the happiness that filled her. Turunge imagined that the other children were there as well, not just Gena. She was buying them toys, cotton candy and firecrackers, without anyone screaming ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘What right do you have?’

A deafening whistle struck her ears. A truck was headed right toward them. Turunge and Gena managed to jump aside, and the five-ton freighter swept by.

“What’s wrong with you, citizen? Didn’t you see it?” yelled the policeman running at them at full speed.

“I’m sorry, comrade,” Turunge replied. “I didn’t notice.”

“Didn’t notice!” the civil servant scoffed. “And you call yourself a mother!”

Turunge said nothing in response, just squeezed Gena’s hand tighter and dragged him after her. He could barely keep up. It was five minutes before they stopped, by a bench.

“That’s it – let’s go home,” Turunge said. “Enough for today.”

“Are we going to go for another walk tomorrow?” Gena asked hopefully.

Turunge smiled and nodded.

In the evening, when her son was already asleep, she went on to excitedly tell Melke about every tiny detail about their day together. She told her how Gena carried himself in the city, how well behaved he was at the photo salon, and even how they were nearly run over by a truck.

Melke listened attentively, shaking her head.

“Think about it...” she said suddenly.

“What are you talking about, Mama?” Turunge asked, looking at her curiously.

“You’re thinking about taking all of them back? How are you going to feed them?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it in your eyes: ‘What if I took them all back?’”

Turunge looked at her mother, frightened.

“What are you thinking? Don’t you understand that you can’t support all of them? Huh?”

Turunge’s smile dissolved. She got up with a guilty look on her face and started doing housework, putting an end to the conversation.

In the morning, they were woken up by a knock on the door. Not sure who it could be at such an early time, Turunge answered it. It was Anya.

“What the hell are you doing?” she said right away.

“What?”

“Like you don’t know.”

Anya walked inside the house, opened the door to Turunge’s room, and saw Gena, sleeping peacefully.

“Makes sense,” she said loudly.

“Quiet! You’ll wake the child!” Turunge protested.

“He should have been woken up a long time ago,” Anya replied without lowering her voice.

Turunge dragged her into the kitchen.



“Do you at least understand what you’re doing?” Anya asked, waiting for her tea.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re asking me what’s wrong? Nahamye called me – said that Gena disappeared. Then someone from Makhachkala called them, said they saw you on the streets with the child. Erzol asked to tell you that no one will ever allow you to take the children. You’re forbidden. Got it?”

Turunge listened silently. She recalled yesterday’s day-dreams about walking around with her children. Apparently, none of that would ever come true.

“You need to send him back to Erzol!” Anya insisted. “Do you hear me or not?”

Turunge sat there, indifferent to Anya’s screams. The price of naïveté turned out to be quite high. Now, Erzol would have no trouble stripping her of visitation rights. The Babaevs’ generosity went over her head. After all, they could have easily called the police instead of sending Anya.

“I understand,” she whispered. “I’ll fix everything. But I’m going to be the one to tell him, alright?”

“To tell whom what?” Anya asked, unable to understand.

“To tell Gena that it’s better for him to return to his father.”

“You do what you want, little sister! Just don’t let this escalate into a scandal. I already made all the arrangements with Nahamye.”

“What arrangements?”

“Mila will take Gena to Kislovodsk.” Mila was Erzol’s sister. She studied at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the Makhachkala Pedagogical Institute and regularly visited her mother in Kislovodsk. “She’ll accompany him,” Anya reassured Turunge. “You didn’t think of sending him there by himself, did you?”

Turunge didn’t answer, just paced around the room, like a sleepwalker. Anya didn’t even understand until later that



her sister was gathering her son's things. In an hour, Turunge walked into the bedroom.

"Good morning, Mommy."

"Good morning, son."

"I had a beautiful dream. We were on a big ship, going somewhere far, far away, so far that you couldn't even see land. The ship had waves around it, the wind was whistling, and we were standing on the deck, no care in the world. What if that really happened? Huh? Mama?"

Turunge smiled in exhaustion. She sat on the edge of the bed and tussled his hair.

"Of course, Genochka! We'll definitely do that someday. Now, you have to listen to me carefully."

This set off the boy's suspicion.

"You're going to get dressed, eat your breakfast, and we're going to go to the train station."

"Why?" Gena asked. "Are we going to go somewhere? What about the photograph? I want to pick up the photograph."

Turunge lowered her head. Looking at those bright, trusting eyes was impossible.

"Please understand me, Genochka." She shivered and sighed. "You have to understand, son. You need to go back to Kislovodsk. To your father."

The child was silent, a dark shadow coming over his face.

"Just don't yell or get upset. Listen to me. Do you understand?"

"What?" Gena asked in a whisper, propping himself up by the elbows.

"Look..." the mother traced the outline of the bedroom with her hand, stopping at the rickety table in the corner. "See how we live? I won't even..." She paused. "I won't even... be able to feed you."

"Mommy..."

“Don’t say anything... Listen to me... Here’s the thing... You can’t live like this, like I do. You have everything in Kislovodsk. Understand? It’ll be better if you go back to your father.” At that moment, Turunge’s last bits of strength were exhausted, and she broke down in tears, plunging her face into the child’s shoulder. “I’ll come and visit you... I promise. You’ll see – I’ll visit. And you’ll be better off at your father’s. Understand?”

“What about the photograph?” Gena suddenly remembered. “Will we go get the photograph?”

The mother shook her head.

“We won’t have time, Genochka. Aunt Mila will be here soon. She’ll take you to Kislovodsk. Your father’s waiting. I’ll make sure to pick up the photograph. You’ll see. Then I’ll send it to you,” Turunge whispered. “Just don’t cry.”

Gena stayed quiet and started gathering his things. For the rest of the time, he didn’t say a word and didn’t look at his mother once.

Turunge picked up the photograph he wanted so much the following day. She treasured it, occasionally showing it to people, crying and telling them that she had children as well.

A happy and carefree woman started at the world from that photograph. Next to her, a squinting boy, still in anticipation of wonder. One of her sons.

## XXXVI

Everything returned to normal. The kids were, once again, together under one roof, arguing, fighting and competing with one another. Little by little, they learned the ways of life by imitating their father. Erzol was sure that personal experiences provide life's best lessons. He didn't find it necessary to conceal anything from his sons, nor was he planning to raise them according to the false examples provided by widely accepted textbook life norms. He considered everyday reality in itself to be the best source of education that covered all the bases: happiness, disappointment, courage, adventure and foolishness. While the Babaevs were the first of their kind to settle in the neighborhood, some hundred other Jewish families moved in throughout the next five years. They settled into the new place, bringing their traditions and rituals.

For Passover, a rabbi would be brought in from Dagestan. He butchered fowl and lambs that Havo bought at the market. The meat was parceled out according to the Kashrut. Havo

would go on to make matza, grind walnuts and mix them with honey – for dessert – and the holiday would begin. She would give the matza treats to our Russian neighbors. In turn, they would bring over colored eggs and sweet cheesecakes come Orthodox Easter.

Havo's culinary delicacies left a permanent mark on our memories. Her rury – or 'flutes' – were particularly unforgettable. With the help of all the children, who took turns at the meat grinder, she'd make filling out of kosher meat, onions, garlic and pepper, stuff it into intestines, then hang it to dry in the shade. From then on, the sausages were aged by wind alone. They hung in the drafty hallways, letting off a subtle yet tempting aroma. Rury were made in November, and were usually ready by the New Year. Before serving them, Havo would roast them over a fire. The drippings, which collected in a special bowl, would be later mixed with tea – an ancient recipe passed on by Tat women throughout generations.

Tara was another essential dish. The same kosher meat would be either ground or minced, mixed with onions, and made into little meatballs.

There was also hingarpol. Young onions would be finely chopped and mixed into dough, then made into little dumplings and cooked in chicken soup made with dried apricots, garlic, young walnuts and a little vinegar.

For New Year's – that holiday of disobedience – we, the children, would be sent to the store to get champagne. Father would normally give us ten rubles. One of our 'games' would be to try to turn those ten rubles into more money by 'investing' them. A crowd of friends would already be waiting for us – the Babaev brothers. We would play seka – a card game – for money. Once, we got our capital to as much as thirty rubles, though luck ran out and we lost all of our gains, ending up with only seven rubles at the end. To be fair, that was

more than enough to buy the champagne, sweets and mandarins for the New Year's table.

It was a joyful and happy life.

## XXXVII

**G**ena once found an actual revolver. Lucky guy! Life had bestowed a magical present upon him. He told me about his acquisition, stammering with excitement.

“Where did you get it?”

“I found it!” his childish eyes burnt with glee.

The fervor was contagious, passing from one of us to another. While Gena stayed with his treasure, I ran to find Slava and tell him about the discovery. My older brother’s eyes lit up as well.

“Let’s go!” I called. “I’ll show you.”

We raced over to where Gena was playing. He sat in a philosopher’s pose, studying his prize. Occasionally, he would squint and aim, pretending to be an audacious bandit or a courageous policeman. He was ready to melt into the black steel. It was as if the gun’s barrel, which he would look into from time to time with one eye, contained a chute that sucked him into an imaginary whirlpool of danger.

Slava and I enviously walked around Gena, who refused to let the gun go, understanding that if we, his older brothers, got our hands on it, we would never give it back. Unable to get the gun from Gena, we ran home, eager to tell our father about the discovery.

That Sunday, Erzol was sitting home and napping after a tasty meal. I ran into the room first.

“Dad! Get this – Gena found a real revolver! At the quarry.”

“What?” Erzol opened his eyes.

“A gun!”

“What gun?” The last bit of Father’s tiredness seemed to vanish.

“A real one! About this big,” I said, showing the length of the barrel with my spread hands like a true fisherman.

Erzol sat up from the sofa and listened to me attentively, then sighed and frowned.

“Igorek...” He paced around the room, stretching his shoulders and looked out of the window. “Listen – go find Gena and try to carefully take the gun away from him. But remember – be careful. Bring it to me.”

In a few seconds, I turned around and ran back to the quarry as fast as I could. My little brother, however, wasn’t in his previous spot. Slava and I swept the surroundings before we found him at a distant empty lot. Gena looked at us cautiously, but didn’t run away.

“What do you want?”

“I just want to look at it,” Slava said casually.

“Cool, right?” Gena asked.

Enchanted, we watched our brother, who showed us the gun from all possible directions.

“I’m strong now,” Gena said proudly. “I can make anyone listen to me! Got it?”

Slava and I could do nothing but agree.

“Let me hold it,” Slava asked at some point.

“No,” our younger brother shook his head, looking at us distrustfully.

“Oh, come on, let me hold it,” Slava insisted.

“What will I get in return?” Gena asked.

“Um... I’ll give you twenty kopecks.”

Gena mulled pros and cons of the proposal over for a second.

“Fine. But only for a little.”

He handed Slava the gun – reluctantly, as if still deciding whether or not to let it go. But Slava had already grabbed the barrel and yanked it toward himself. The struggle only lasted for a second. Slava won, grabbed the weapon out of Gena’s hands, and ran home as fast as possible without a second thought. Gena chased him. I, in turn, chased Gena.

And so the three of us ran, until we reached our house and burst into the room, where Father sat at the table by the window listening to the radio. Seeing us, he got up and extended his hand in our direction. Slava obediently handed him the gun. Erzol silently took the weapon and carefully examined it from all sides. He was filled with anger.

Gena watched Father in horror as he left the room, went out into the yard, and then started whacking the gun against a rock with all his strength. Crack, crack, crack! The kids stayed silent, hunching their shoulders. Soon enough, father returned into the room, his face glum and focused. He sat back down in his chair.

“Well? Why are you standing around?” he asked, as if nothing had happened. “Go play.”

We ran out into the yard. The remnants of what used to be our most fascinating toy only five minutes ago lay by the rock. Gena started crying. Father, on the other hand, sighed in relief. Danger had passed his children by.

“Don’t you think you’re too strict with them sometimes?” Hava once asked her son.



“Strict? Mama, you don’t know what strict means. Children don’t understand what they want. The world is like a kaleidoscope to them filled with colorful bits of glass – fascinating no matter which way you turn it. But half of it is a lie. They need to learn to tell the difference between what’s useful, and what’s dangerous. The same goes for school. Unless they’re first in line – they won’t succeed. Do you know how hard it is for Jews to get ahead these days? You need to be the best of the best if you want everything to be fine and dandy. That’s why I’m so hard on them.”

The only thing that Erzol didn’t account for was that his children inherited his very own volatile character – a character that didn’t want to submit to his strict, rational discipline. We never noticed when and how Father expressed interest in our affairs, but he always kept his finger on the pulse.

“How are they behaving?”

“The same way all children behave! Don’t you remember how you behaved?”

“I was as rowdy as I could be. But you spoiled me.”

“And yours should be spoiled as well.”

“Don’t spoil them completely.”

“Don’t worry – that’s why they’re children.”

“Be strict with them. Don’t give them too much leeway.”

“As if your father and I were that demanding of you!”

Havo scoffed, flipping a pancake.

“They don’t know what they want.”

“Well, son – what can you do? Not everyone’s a quick learner. All kids are like that.”

“Then we need to hire tutors.”

Havo nodded in accord. She pitied us, knowing how tough academic pursuits can be.

## XXXVIII

Our father traveled all over Southern Russia, making introductions and building bridges. He would often have such amounts of money in his briefcase that if the thieves and robbers – no society is without such scoundrels – knew about it, he'd be hunted like the collector of a savings bank.

The rumors, of course, were plentiful, but the exact extent of my father's capital always remained a mystery kept under lock and key. At the time, a new form of socialist management experienced unexpected growth. The government, upon observing the dire state of the growing scarcity issue, allowed cooperative enterprises to form under collectives. Instantly, a horde of enterprising individuals swarmed in to take advantage of the opportunity. They manufactured all kinds of things: portraits of famous actors, satin products (which were especially popular at the time), clothing, even shoes. Sales were good, and everyone was happy. The collectives finally had sta-

ble capital, and factory owners who made black market product made incredible profits. Along with them came the ‘hunters’. The new type of scammers didn’t target the government – they were too dangerous to mess with – but private industry, which was considered to be easy prey. Their tricks didn’t work on my father, however.

At one point, Father discovered of a new service industry that came about in Leningrad – half-manufactured apparel. This was clothing that was intentionally left a bit unfinished. The cost of custom tailored clothing was prohibitive, and finding something that fit off the rack was often problematic. Household sewing machines, however, were prevalent, and allowed people to adjust the almost ready items to their figures. As long as the fabric was fashionable and well made, the half-manufactured items sold like hotcakes.

Father saw this idea as promising, and wanted to see it in person. He decided to take Slavik, his oldest, with him so that he could see the famed Northern Capital. Perhaps the idea of exposing his children to business whenever possible had already taken root.

They set off to Lenin’s city along with Isay and a tailor named Kam. Kam was invited for a reason: he had an influential relative – the deputy chairman of the Leningrad Executive Committee.

They were picked up at the train station, taken to the then-fancy Oktyabrskaya Hotel, and Father went to work to find out what’s what. Everything that he’d heard was true. The half-manufactured goods were real and attracting customers, and the notion of manufacturing similar product in places like Kislovodsk and Yessentuki was very tempting.

Erzol liked to approach business with a focused swiftness. He would pick up the central business premise on the fly, instantly sketch out a supply chain, and produce a business plan ready to be implemented.

He saw work as a battle, and resting afterwards was essential. Lavish parties were his preferred way of recharging. Taking Slava to a restaurant late at night, however, was inappropriate, if only because there was no need for a child to listen to adult conversations. Therefore, Erzol decided to have him stay with Kam's relative – the deputy chairman himself. The masters of the house were notified and arrangements were made.

Given that the times were safe and peaceful, Father decided that Slavik was old enough to make it there on his own. He wrote the address and telephone down on a piece of paper and sent his son into the city, while he, Isay and Kam headed to the restaurant. There, two girls caught Erzol's attention. Saying that they were interesting meant saying nothing at all. They had everything: figure, youth, fire in their eyes. Erzol couldn't take his eyes off the beauties. The ladies noticed him as well and started winking back, eventually ending up at the same table with Erzol and his entourage. They called the waiter, ordered more champagne and delicacies, and started talking about nothing and everything at once. One's name turned out to be Ilona; the other's – Sveta. The names could have easily been made up, though no one was particularly concerned about that.

The girls threw back champagne glasses, becoming more and more talkative.

"No, no and no," Sveta said, playing with the pendant that hung from a gold chain on her neck. "It was my idea to come here with my friend. Why not have some fun tonight? How are you doing?"

She poked Isay with her finger. He fidgeted, not knowing what to say. When it came to vice, Isay was quite innocent.

"Look my dear," Ilona said laughing. "You can't hide from me – my eyes are like an x-ray. If you're going to be so quiet, we won't get along. I have fire in my soul!" She burst out in laughter.

Isay blushed as Erzol burst out laughing. He poured everyone some more vodka and said a toast.

He started telling tales about his native Dagestan, and the more he talked, the harder he laughed. Erzol's energy was his key asset, and flirting with Ilona replenished it, gradually freeing him from mundane worries. Erzol quickly caught on to the fact that these girls' breath was taken away by the mere mention of money and started taking advantage of that fact by casually steering the conversation toward the topic. For instance, he would say that he's been known to take girls he likes to Sochi or Crimea on the very same day he meets them, which was essentially the height of luxury at the time. As Erzol promised to fulfill all of his companions' wishes, he could feel their admiration grow.

At some point, the girls said they needed to go to the powder room. As soon as they stepped away, the maître d'hôtel approached the table.

"I'm very sorry," the elderly man began, "but there's a bit of an issue."

"What is it?" Erzol asked indifferently.

The maître d grimaced uncomfortably.

"I wanted to warn you. You shouldn't get too close to these women."

"And why is that?" Erzol asked, chuckling.

"It could be unsafe for you."

"Unsafe?" Erzol and Isay buckled over in laughter. "What exactly makes them so dangerous?"

The maître d shrugged.

"The girl you're sitting with..." he said, lowering his voice.

"What about her?"

"Do you know who she is?"

"She's poison!" Erzol replied, joined by Isay and Kam in uncontrollable laughter. "Pure poison!" This situation was beginning to amuse him.

“Think whatever you want,” the service worker said, shaking his head, “but I know what I’m talking about.”

“Look, they might not be saints,” Isay chimed in, “but we aren’t exactly ones to complain.”

The men started laughing again.

“Do as you wish. It’s my duty to warn you.” The maitre d shrugged again and walked away.

“What’s his problem?” Isay asked his friend.

“I wouldn’t make too much of it,” Erzol laughed. “I’ve seen worse.”

At that moment, the girls returned. Discussing the situation further seemed inappropriate, so the party resumed with newfound energy.

Time flew. As the Oktyabrsky Restaurant’s giant clock struck midnight, Father suggested walking the girls home. It turned out that they lived some distance away from the city. This could have been a problem for many business travelers, but not for Erzol.

“We’ll call a taxi!” he retorted casually.

“But that’ll cost some fifty rubles!” the girls gasped.

“I told you: it’s no problem,” Erzol replied.

The girls looked at each other.

Kam refused to go, saying that he’ll return to the hotel and go to sleep. Erzol and Isay grabbed the girls by the waists and headed for the taxi. They traveled for over an hour to a locale that even the taxi driver didn’t know – the girls had to show him the way.

Finally, they ordered the driver to stop. Erzol exited the car and, perplexed, looked into the darkness. There wasn’t as much as a hint of a residence.

“Where did you bring us?”

“What – are you afraid?” the girls giggled coyly.

“I just don’t see any houses,” Erzol scoffed.

“They aren’t far,” the girls laughed. “Right past those pine trees.”

Erzol paid the driver and he and Isay followed their dates along the narrow path through the woods.

“Almost there, boys,” the girls kept repeating.

A faint light glimmered from a window in the distance. Suddenly, Erzol and Isay’s companions grew nervous.

That’s when Erzol heard a whisper:

“Why are you freaking out? I’ll work them over myself.”

They entered a yard and walked up the steps of a slanted stoop.

“We’re here, boys,” the two girls whispered and lifted their fingers to the lips in unison, as if following a script.

Erzol followed his new acquaintances inside. Through a gap in the door that led to one of the rooms, he spotted five or six men, all covered in tattoos, playing cards around a table. He turned around and asked Isay, loud enough for the whole house to hear, in Russian:

“Do you want to go take a leak?” he bellowed as convincingly as his acting abilities allowed, then followed quietly in Tat: “Isay, we’re about to get robbed! We need to get the hell out of here!” Then, going back to Russian, he said: “Where’s the John?” and dragged Isay by the arm toward the exit before getting a reply.

Once off the stoop, they ran as quick as possible away from the house without saying a single word. The maneuver was unexpected enough to confuse the shack’s inhabitants for a moment or two. Once they realized that their prey was about to slip out of their hands, they scrambled to pursue them.

“Surround them!” the smallest and scrappiest one yelled, and, letting out a piercing whistle, ran after his victims. The larger men followed suit.

“Get the suckers!” one of them yelled.

Isay and Erzol could hear footsteps behind them, accompanied by yells of “Grab them! Grab them!” It’s true that God comes to Jews when they’re on the brink of demise. Erzol



and Isay didn't run through the bushes and gullies – they flew over them. Suddenly, the woods ended and the pitiful suitors found themselves on the dark, deserted Moscow-Leningrad highway.

Suddenly, they were blinded by the bright gleam of headlights.

“Flag the car down!” Erzol yelled to Isay.

Isay started waving his hands and jumped in front of the three-tonner. Brakes squealed. Without waiting for an invitation, Isay jumped onto the running board.

“Drive!” he yelled to the driver.

Erzol jumped onto the other running board, on the driver's side. He held a few crumpled ten-ruble notes in his hand, which seemed to have a calming effect on the driver.

“Step on it, friend, or we're all screwed!” Erzol yelled at the driver at the top of his lungs.

The frightened man stepped on the gas, and the accelerating truck melted into the nighttime mist. The bandits jumped out onto the road after them.

Isay greeted them with an obscene gesture: “Try to catch up, you bastards!”

Erzol and Isay didn't get back to their hotel until four o'clock in the morning. But their adventure didn't end there. The exhausted men walked up to their room, dreaming of one thing only – to collapse onto their beds. But they were out of luck: no one was opening the door. They hadn't brought their keys, and the floor attendant was nowhere to be found. No matter how hard they knocked, Kam wouldn't respond. Erzol sensed trouble. Finally, a half hour later, they found a maid who had the keys, and she opened their room. There was no one inside.

“Where's our friend?” Erzol yelled, losing his patience.

“Your friend slipped up,” said the maid, her lips narrowing to a razor blade.



“Meaning?” Isay asked, gasping.

“Could you clarify that, please?” Erzol’s question sounded more like a demand.

The maid, teeming with justified rage, meticulously looked over Erzol’s wrinkled suit, shifted her gaze to Isay, who had pine needles sticking out of his jacket, then looked up at the ceiling.

“Oh, yeah,” she sighed. “I get it...”

“Just tell us what happened, will you?” Erzol shouted.

The maid’s lips got even narrower, and she told them that several hours prior the People’s Patrol inspected the hotel and caught Kam with two women – a grave ‘amorality’ at the time.

Erzol ran downstairs to the administrator. It turned out that Kam had been locked up in the ‘monkey house’ and needed to be rescued. While Isay settled things at the regional police precinct, using money to prove that high morality doesn’t forbid the company of women, Erzol got ready for bed. At that moment, the phone rang.

“Comrade Babaev?”

“Yes!”

“Lieutenant Ustinov at the Neva Police Precinct.”

Erzol felt trouble coming again.

“What happened?”

“Is your son missing?”

So much for sleep.

“No! He’s staying with my friends!” Father replied confidently.

“According to our records, he isn’t. What’s your son’s name?”

“Slava.”

“That’s right. Last name Babaev?”

“Yes!”

“He’s sitting in front of me at the precinct.”

“What’d you bust him for?”

“No one busted anyone. The boy’s lost.”

“What do you mean, lost?”

“Exactly that. The night patrol picked him up on the street. The child was crying and didn’t know where to go.”

“But I explained everything to him!” Erzol yelled. “Give him the phone!”

“Comrade Babaev, the cord won’t reach that far. Come get your son.”

The lieutenant read him the address.

Erzol jumped up. He wasn’t asleep, but felt like he was dreaming. Nighttime. Leningrad’s central Nevsky Prospect’s dim lights. A taxi. Another driver.

Soon after, he entered the police precinct. Slavik wrapped his arms around his neck, while the policemen looked on at the slovenly father with reproach. Rocking from exhaustion, Erzol and Slava took the taxi back to the hotel.

At five in the morning, Erzol entered his hotel room for the third time that night.

“What happened?”

“I got lost.”

“Why didn’t you call the hotel right away?”

“I did,” the boy started excusing himself. “No one picked up.”

“Of course not. Kam got kicked out of the room,” Isay couldn’t resist noting.

“So what did you do?”

“Walked around.”

Erzol burst out laughing.

“Some night – eh, Isay?”

Exhausted, they finally went to sleep.

So concluded the Tats’ unusual adventures in Leningrad.

## XXXIX

**V**alya put breakfast on the table, sat on the edge of a kitchen stool and looked at Erzol carefully. She didn't want to bother him until he rested from his trip, afraid of evoking his heavy, irritated gaze. It did seem that, having slept, he was back to his old self.

What a character he was! Sitting quiet and glum at one moment, roaring with laughter at the next and telling stories where truth was indistinguishable from the embellishments. If one were to believe Erzol, his whole life was one big adventure. Take the story about Leningrad, for instance! What separated the truth from the tall tale?

Men like him truly were few and far between, and Valya fell in love with him for his uniqueness. Women were drawn to Erzol's power and could even sense it from a distance, which often resulted in him being surrounded by female admirers. Valya had come to terms with this and didn't chide Erzol. He was what he was – insatiable, wanting everything at once, at work, in life, in love, at play. He was strong and de-

void of sentimentality. It seemed to her like he could find a way out of any hopeless situation.

They had already been together for a long time, but, at times, he could touch her in a way that stirred her no less than the first time did. Seemingly by accident, he would tug at her sleeve, pinch her cheek, or whisper something in her ear that would cause her skin to pucker with goose bumps and her body to melt. Or, at other times, he could just get up and disappear. He never gave a reason for his departures. More often than not, it would be work, but he would also visit his friends, whom he found to be no less important than his job.

His manner with his friends was special – tender, almost. With them, he could easily be described as ‘perfect’. He was the ideal friend – reliable and eager to help one out of a fix by putting his connections to use. No one could deny this. His circle of acquaintances was very wide, but he only had a handful of real friends.

He would drink and party with Boris Buglak, trusting him with everything. He knew that Boris would never betray him under any circumstances. He supplied Erzol with fabric: ‘liquid’ and ‘non-liquid’, which my father would turn into beautiful suits. It was an innocent business that the Soviet authorities didn’t encourage, but didn’t particularly punish either. In our day, he would be called a brilliant creative mind.

Another person close to Father was Misha Gilyadov, a skilled and crafty businessman. He got his start in Derbent with a network of cafeterias and graduated to supervisor of a trust. Like Father, he was incapable of letting a lucrative opportunity pass by.

Lenya Bodnev – the third member of their circle – had the most unremarkable profession. He was a watchmaker with a workshop in Krasnodar. What could be more humble? But he pulled off astonishing operations, closely interacting with the big bosses at the Regional Party Committee and the Executive

Committee. Looking at the people at his dinner table, one could believe that the Soviet Union was a true democracy – a mere watchmaker was talking to the powers that be on equal ground.

Erzol's circle of friends formed its own sort of mafia. Each of them did their own work, but together, their connections formed a web that could wrap around the entire universe. Erzol knew how to make himself useful to people – not to everyone, but to a whole lot.

Father's posse would gather in the evenings, sometimes staying late into the night. The friends usually chatted over cards, and, at other times, just sat around talked about life. In the midst of this, they took care of business.

Each of these men, who knew one another like the back of their hand, had token character traits that could be used as talismans and a source of casual mockery without fear of offending one another. One loved boasting about his conquests of the opposite sex, another kept telling the same jokes over and over while still coaxing genuine laughter out of his companions, yet another was overly miserly. The years they spent together bound them better than cement. Card games, drinking, trips to the restaurant, business dealings.

At the card table, keen curiosity marked everyone's voice: "What do we have here?"

Silence would be followed by Lenya Bodnev's laugh.

"A pair of jacks," he would reply with feigned horror.

"I'm drawing three," Gelman would chime in.

"Well," Gilyadov would break the pause that ensued. "I guess I'll only draw one."

"Pour some wine," voices would sound. "Do you remember the snub-nosed bird from the store last night?"

The conversation would shift to the tawdry topic of the men's Don Juan pursuits, all accompanied by laughter and ornate toasts.

So went the evenings.

## XL

**A**t times, Valya regretted getting involved with Erzol. She never felt at peace while she was with him. On the contrary, spending time with him was like standing by a Kamchatka geyser: eruptions happened and were impossible to predict.

Erzol was hot-tempered and jealous. One time, Valya was dancing with Erzol's friend – an older, distinguished gentleman – at some party. Erzol looked on silently, and didn't say a single word about it on the way back. As soon as they stepped through the door, however, he grabbed Valya abruptly by the elbow and asked, lowering his voice:

“Why did you let him do that?”

“What do you mean?” Valya asked, trying to pull away.

“What did you say to him? He was looking at you with such sultry eyes!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about what I saw. And you...” he fell silent.

“Stop it!” Valya burst out. “This is absolute nonsense! Your drunk eyes were seeing things.”

Erzol took a swing. He only intended to frighten her, but his instinct turned out to be harsher. He struck her on the cheek, full force. Valya nearly fell.

“Ah!” She let out a muffled yell and crouched down. “What are you doing, you monster? Have you lost your mind? What are you doing?”

Erzol stood motionless, riled up by his own anger but paralyzed by the regret that quickly replaced it. He got up and left the room, like a sleepwalker.

A minute passed, then an hour. One of them touched the other. It wasn’t intentional – it just happened – but that ordinary touch did more than hundreds of words could. They went back to the bedroom. Tears glistened in Valya’s eyes. They looked at one another for a few seconds, then became one in heavy silence. Erzol planted his lips on hers, and she melted in his embrace.

“Fine, I was wrong. Okay?” she whispered first.

“Okay.”

“Erzol, do you love me a lot?” Valya asked, her voice soft.

“Yes, yes, I love you. I’m with you, aren’t I? What more do you want? It’s all just words.”

Perhaps such an admission was more than enough for him.

Erzol could be terse or even cruel to others, but he was just as ruthless to himself. Those who didn’t see Erzol at work assumed that money fell on him from the sky, but Valya knew what kind of work stood behind his casual demeanor. She was well aware of his fantastic successes in business, but knew to stay quiet, so Erzol trusted her entirely.

It had been a long while since he was a mere tailor. The common specialist had transformed into a successful businessman, his hand always on the pulse of the times. As they said in those years, he was a ‘workshop business organizer.’

While no one would dare to post his accomplishments on a bulletin board, no one considered his activities to be criminal. He didn't rob anyone or steal anything – he just acted outside of his instructions while finding weak points in the planned manufacturing process.

Sometimes, he would ask me:

“Igorek, take a few bundles over to the department store and give it to the outerwear department.”

Ordinarily, there could be seven or eight of these bundles, each containing five suits. My friends and I would grab the stuff and set off around the city with it. Who would ever think of stopping a bunch of boys to see what they were carrying?

Erzol would thank us with a quiet word or a smile. As I've mentioned, he didn't see sentimentality as a necessary part of the pedagogical process. He believed in strictness and practicality, valuing only useful activity and viewing empty entertainment with disdain.

Erzol started working as soon as he had just turned thirteen. He was convinced that the earlier a man learns of money's value, the sooner he learns how to earn it. Being a provider was, to him, a man's main role, and, relying on his suppositions about how the world worked, he became very good at it. This is why Erzol was so insistent on his children learning about his approach to business.

This is how it all worked: the workshop supplied product, which went through all the accountants, was inventoried by the warehouses, and cited in manifests. As soon as the goods left the shelves, they were replaced by identical items, but ones that were unaccounted for. The auditors would think that the beautiful suit had been hanging in the showroom for a while, unable to find a customer, unaware that its hanger would see five or six identical pairs of trousers and jackets before it was officially sold.



Erzol was making a whole lot, and was unencumbered by fear. To him, money was more than a means to a comfortable life. It was his reward for the endless pursuit of elusive happiness, which he strove for as all of us do.

People believed him to be lucky, and as any lucky man, he was surrounded by an army of those who envied him. Erzol was well aware of this, but instead of keeping his distance he turned his enemies into friends.

He accomplished the impossible by bringing all the key players within the local auditing and controlling authorities into his financial whirlwind, including the chairman of the Department Against Misappropriation of Socialist Property as well as policemen, prosecutors and judges all over Kislovodsk and Yessentuki. He surrounded himself with a reliable army of guards who were generously rewarded and never ceased thanking fate for introducing them to such a man.

Erzol had a boxer's beat up nose, which evoked involuntary respect from everyone who met him. He wanted to pass his boxers' savvy onto us – the ability to react promptly and always stand up for yourself. It was all expressed in a single phrase: 'If you stand firmly on your feet, that's how you'll live.' This principle seeped into our blood, settled into our consciousness, and became a foundation for our future decisions and actions.

One evening, we gathered in the common room before dinner. Erzol had come home in a very good mood.

"Mama, set the table!" he said loudly. "I have a gift for you."

Havo looked at her son curiously. He was holding a briefcase and nothing else.

"That's right – it's for you," he said, pretending to be casual and unlocked the bag. "Hide it."

With those words, the buckle came loose and the contents of the dark interior fell onto the table like a heap of autumn leaves.

Money!

It spilled onto the table, as if out of a cornucopia, gradually forming a mountain atop it. We watched this trick in amazement, trying to figure out where it all would lead.

Havo gasped with delight and Erzol scoffed, pleased with her reaction.

“This is yours, Mama,” he repeated. “Today was a good day,” he said, turning to everyone. “A tough one, but worthwhile nonetheless.”

## XLI

**E**rzol's strength manifested itself in different ways, even at times when he felt sick or broken. Demonstrating his power was part of his mode of existence: both appeasing his loved ones and suppressing them, secretly or blatantly.

During one of his innumerable business trips, he went into a store. It was much like any store in the vast stretches of the Soviet Union: a paltry selection on the racks that usually left no hope for a customer to find something decent. With much luck, however, one could get their hands on items of true quality, which had usually been brought from the Baltics.

This time around, Valya was with him. Amidst a heap of rags piled atop one another, her gaze landed on something valuable, like a jewel hunter spotting a fleeting glimmer in the murky muck. Valya didn't say anything – just gazed upon the shelf in delight. Erzol noticed this.

“What – you like it?”

It was a blouse. The knitted masterpiece enchanted Valya: the shape and color were a perfect fit for her figure. Finding something that fit was a tremendous rarity and a cause for great joy. Music played within her soul, muting Erzol's question.

"Are you deaf or something?" she heard as she came to. "They seem to have a decent selection."

Valya nodded hurriedly and went for her purse, pulling out a wallet. She had gotten used to the fact that all of 'life's joys' were to be purchased by her and her alone. This time, however, Erzol acted differently. Perhaps Valya's stupefied expression plucked a string within his heart.

"Wait. Put away the wallet, I'll buy it for you. One for you and one for Mila. I can see that you like it."

Erzol approached the counter. He assessed the quality of the fabric by touch, as well as the craftsmanship – everything that an unfamiliar person would have never noticed – then said, satisfied:

"It take them! Those two!" and pointed out the gray and lilac blouses to the saleswoman. "Ring me up."

Valya smiled in gratitude.

"I'll take the lilac one," she said, reaching for the blouse.

"Stop!"

Valya recoiled as Erzol yanked the blouse out of her hand and tossed it back to the saleswoman.

"Mila will choose her blouse first!"

A blue vein pulsed nervously by Valya's collar. She recognized the hiss of the snake that stirred within Erzol's chest, and this sign of peril paralyzed her. She froze in her place. They stood there, silently for several seconds, as if waiting for a storm to pass. Afterwards, Valya exited the store.

Frowning, Erzol paid up, grabbed both blouses and followed her. Valya stood by the door. She recalled once telling her friend: 'His isn't a soul – it's a fire. Don't get too close or you'll get burnt.'

It seemed that the evening had been irreparably ruined. They sat silently in the hotel room, tried to talk, but the bitter taste of hurt was unavoidable.

The story of the blouse had an unexpected ending. They had come back from the business trip, and the ritual of gift giving began. When it was Mila's turn, Erzol put both blouses on the table in front of her:

"Pick one."

"I'll take the gray one," Mila shouted and grabbed the blouse that Valya had wanted to give her all along.

At that moment, a peculiar smile came over Valya's face, as if she wasn't smiling at all but biting her lip. She remembered the incident at the store and the anger that came over Erzol when she dared to forget for a second whose money she owes her happiness to. He could neither tolerate an attempt on his domain nor any doubt about his authority in a world that he had created. His kingdom had to be his and his alone, even when no one else was even thinking of moving in on it. He acted like a landlord, even with respect to his relationship with Valya.

## XLII

**A**s Erzol watched dozens of his subordinates handle fabric with swift skill, he couldn't help but wonder how many suits they were making out of Buglak's materials. In any case, if he managed get his hands on even more cloth, profits could increase substantially. Erzol knew his business so well that he could weigh all of a potential deal's possible outcomes and pick the optimal path without accounting or economic analysis. He wasn't making any grand discoveries, but he was able to follow the plans he set for himself to the tee. Sometimes, all he needed to do was introduce his first contact to his second, his third to his fourth. Ask the first, give to the second, take from the third, give a gift to the fourth, and then sell everything to the fifth at a very decent profit. Everything was simple – much simpler than it was for Solomon to build the Great Temple. But why, then, were there so few others like Erzol in the Jewish community?

His connections within government organizations, whether on a city or regional level, lent rare support to his enter-

prises. Erzol understood this. But his connections were means to an end, nothing more. True success required keen intuition and willingness to examine possibilities from all sides and determine how to use them in an optimal manner to maximize yield.

One day Boris Buglak himself introduced Father to Yuriy Ivanovich Lobov, a powerful Moscow official who served as one of the high officials at Kurorttorg – the office in charge of commerce in the USSR’s resort cities. Lobov was a tall, portly man who carried himself with great dignity and talked with a measured pace, which added heft to his words. One always needed to keep an eye on an official of that level, as you could never be sure which way business would swing. Dealing with this rank of people was much like fishing: if you’re lucky, you could catch a giant pike, if not, a paltry minnow.

Lobov dressed well: a dark tweed suit, a white shirt, a bright tie, a dandy handkerchief in his breast pocket – one could easily mistake him for a Western movie star. He would always begin by praising Kislovodsk:

“You have such a balmy climate. Breathing the air is a true pleasure. And life isn’t too bad either.”

“The trick,” Borya Buglak replied, laughing, “is that the locals all consider themselves to be hopeless sinners.”

Lobov curiously raised his brow.

“The balmy climate corrupts them,” Boris continued, a sly spark in his eye. “What else are people to do?”

“Become drunkards,” Lobov chuckled.

“Only if they’re dumb,” Erzol objected. “The smart ones selflessly till their own soil.” He paused, allowing Lobov an opportunity to digest his hint.

“I like Kislovodsk,” Lobov continued. “It’s the most attractive city in the Caucasus Foothills. General Yermolov knew what he was doing a hundred years ago.”

"Yes," Boris chimed in. "Both Kislovodsk and Yessentuki get more packed than a streetcar at rush hour – year round."

"Can't argue with that. Getting a spot here in the summer is hopeless," Lobov agreed. "Unless, of course, you're the Secretary of the Regional Committee."

"The thing is that Kislovodsk is good in and of itself," Erzol said, continuing along his previous train of thought. "There's no other resort to rival our good old city."

"And I suspect that each of its residents is full of ideas about doing something unusual," Lobov replied.

"And if ideas have good components, they can yield to very useful things," said Buglak. "In any case, agree with Erzol or not, I know one thing..."

"Tourists are ready to spend their hard-earned money with no restraint," Erzol casually interrupted. "You've vacationed here," he turned to Lobov. "You've seen firsthand what happens. On their second day here, travelers start pondering what else they can blow their yearly savings on."

"So why not help the citizens solve their dilemma?" Lobov laughed. "On a grand scale. Am I on the right train of thought, comrades?"

Erzol felt silent, a film of sweat covering his face. Could it be that he would finally get this sleepy town moving?

"To your wife, Yuriy Ivanovich!"

The guest from Moscow scowled.

"Why did you have to mention her?"

"She must be very well versed in fashion," Erzol replied.

Buglak and Lobov looked at one another.

"That's about the only thing she's well versed in," Yuriy Ivanovich agreed. "No matter where I go, she gives me a shopping list. Buy this, buy that. Go here, go there. I was in Paris recently." The guest paused for a second, inviting his companions to marvel at the inaccessibility of his recent destination. "So she asked me to bring her back a shinel."



“Chanel...” Boris corrected the guest.

“It didn’t click at first,” Yuriy Ivanovich laughed. “She wouldn’t leave me alone! ‘Bring me that shinel.’ Where was I supposed to find it?”

“So, did you get it?” Erzol asked politely.

“If only! First of all, meeting after meeting after meeting. Secondly, can’t take a single step by myself without a KGB agent flanking me. I only managed to bring her back a pen – the one they gave out at the meeting! She nearly murdered me for not bringing her back that shinel. So it goes.”

The men laughed and the party continued. Next day, Erzol gave Yuriy Ivanovich a present.

“This is for your wife,” he said.

The Moscow bigwig grabbed the package and went back to his business.

Erzol turned to Boris, patted him on the shoulder, and said:

“Well – we’ll see if he bites.”

“What do you mean, Lesha?”

“You’ll see,” Erzol said with a sly smile.

A day passed, and Buglak stopped by his workplace.

“Come to the restaurant in the evening. Lobov wants to see you.”

More often than not, meetings took place at Chayka, a restaurant managed by Isay Adamov. In a short time, he managed to graduate from running two shabby dining halls to the director of a restaurant. And what a restaurant! It was a lot like him: small, cozy, controlled by the will of a man who oversaw everything.

Erzol and Boris arrived at the restaurant at the scheduled time. Lobov got straight to the point.

“Thank you for the gift,” the Moscow official said. “The wife is ecstatic.”

“What was it?” Buglak inquired, looking at Erzol, who sat there stone-faced.

“How did you know that this was what she wanted?” Lobov asked instead of answering the question. “Did you get it abroad?”

“No. That’s our product. An ordinary dress.”

“An ordinary dress?” Yuri Ivanovich smiled. “Don’t mess with my head. It’s no worse than that ‘Chanel’ that I wanted to bring back. The wife was very happy. She’s about to come by herself! To thank you.”

Yuriy Ivanovich checked his watch. At that very moment, a woman appeared on the threshold of Chayka. One glance was enough to tell that she belonged to the higher world, if one could call Soviet elite that. The woman of unimaginable beauty and grace approached the table and the waiter politely pulled back her chair. The beauty sat down and amicably extended her hand toward Erzol.

“Thank you for the gift. I truly had no idea that our people can sew like that. My husband kept insisting that you’re bringing it in from somewhere.”

“Not at all. We make them ourselves,” Erzol repeated.

“It looks like an import,” the woman replied, smiling pleasantly. “You’re the best. Can’t copy tailoring like that.”

Erzol nodded.

“I have helpers.”

“Where did you learn this?”

“From my father – in Makhachkala. That’s in Dagestan. As a matter of fact, we can set up mass production for dresses of this quality. And not just dresses – men’s suits, too.”

“An excellent idea,” Lobov nodded.

“And your wife won’t need to go to Paris.”

“Now that’s not good,” Lobov laughed. “Can’t completely cross Paris out. She’ll be upset if she doesn’t have Paris.”

“Then she can visit it as a tourist – but not for dresses. We can make the dresses here.”

Yuriy Ivanovich Lobov became serious.

“Interesting, interesting. What does this require?”

“Your permission.”

“What do I need to permit?” Now Lobov was listening attentively.

“A workshop. Under Kurorttorg. We’ll make the suits there.”

“And who will supply the fabric?”

“I will,” Boris Buglak chimed in. “Yuriy Ivanovich, do you have any idea how much excellent fabric rots in our warehouses?”

“I can imagine,” Lobov sighed. “What’s the reason.”

“Because it’s expensive. Or ugly. Or of poor quality. But we’ll use quality fabric and good templates. It’ll be just like Europe. You know?”

“It won’t fly,” Lobov grunted skeptically. “Do you have any idea how many approvals this stunt of yours would require? We need funds, so we need to go to the Head Committee, which won’t do anything without the State Planning Committee. There will be hundreds of questions, like, ‘where did you get these craftsmen?’”

“So we’ll do it without funds,” Babaev said slyly.

“What do you mean, without funds?”

“We’ll use non-liquid fabric. My tailors can make suits out of anything.”

“Without funds?” the official said contemplatively, looking over at his friend Buglak. “Without funds would work. But we need a sales license.”

“Exactly,” Erzol sighed.

“Well, shall we shake on it?” Lobov said, slapping the table. “You’ll get permission to open a workshop under Kurorttorg.”

A month later, an order personally signed by Yuriy Ivanovich Lobov was on the desk of Comrade Kuznetsov, who ran the Kislovodsk Industrial Trade Committee. The work-

shop was established and started making knit articles and other clothing. Aleksey Naumovich Babaev was appointed as chief.

The workshop, which, in his words, recycled non-liquid material, actually made clothing that flew off the shelves. The reason was simple – markdowns. This was the golden rule of Soviet trade. The rotten logic of ‘what’s cheaper is better’ worked impeccably. But as far as Erzol Babaev’s workshops were concerned, low price didn’t mean low quality, as he employed the best tailors in the city.

## XLIII

**I**t was an ordinary Saturday. Erzol and Valya had just had their breakfast and were sitting on the porch and planning out their day when Havo ran out of the house, terrified.

“Lisa just called. They arrested Isay.”

Valya was speechless.

“I knew it would happen sooner or later,” Erzol grunted.

To understand what happened to Isay, it’s important to tell the backstory.

A few years after moving to Kislovodsk, he became the director of Chayka, the most renowned restaurant in our city. Those years there were the happiest of his career. Under Isay, Chayka became a landmark. Located near the city center, the establishment became a paragon of good service. It was mostly frequented by businessmen, and not just for the food, but also for the respect and fellowship that Isay provided. While there, ordinary customers felt like big shots, important officials felt like arbiters of mankind’s fate, and businessmen simply enjoyed the atmosphere.

The luxurious eatery also had its own football team, also managed by Isay. They had their own equipment and a star player – Alik, Erzol's brother – who worked there as a cook. Alik's kitchen responsibilities were a formality.

But all this was only the tip of the iceberg. Chayka was an empire and had its own 'colonies' – small cafes that opened under its auspices. Each of these establishments had its own director, but the accounting was shared. All revenues flowed to the restaurant, and, from there, to the city treasury. This was the foundation of Isay's financial empire.

His appearance evoked Napoleon. Much like the French genius, he held his chin high and was confident of his own importance. He had a true love for public speaking and would make long, well structured and worded speeches about socialism's victories, amongst other things, all of which went over Erzol's head.

One time, Zhora Tumasian, an Armenian kitchen apprentice in Isay's restaurant, stole half a barrel of caviar from the pantry with the help of his friend. The ever-hungry teenagers couldn't resist the temptation of good food. The fellows were detained after the warehouse chief at Chayka filed a report. Isay was out of town during their arrest. The investigation was quick, spear-headed by a young lieutenant who dreamt of showing his best by boosting crime-solving statistics in the region.

"You're facing ten years in a labor camp, you hear? If you write an honest declaration, we'll inform the court that you cooperated and they'll be more lenient."

The lieutenant didn't think twice about destroying the lives of two young men.

Just before the detainees, their pens already wet with ink, were about to sign their confessions, the door opened and Isay Adamov appeared on the threshold.

Enraged, he looked at the lieutenant and entered the office. His gaze contained not only contempt and disgust, but

also the joy of triumph. The uninvited guest assessed the room with his gaze.

“Your superiors have decided that it’s time for these punks to leave your office,” Isay said, amused, glancing at the lieutenant. “Imagine that.”

“On what grounds?” asked the confused officer.

“I can tell right away that no one cares about you here. They don’t even inform you of their decisions. I talked to your superiors.” Isay mentioned a name that meant a whole lot around the city. “The case is closed.”

“They stole caviar and practically admitted to the crime.” The lieutenant grew concerned, much like a novice chess player about to embark on two simultaneous matches against internationally ranked grandmasters.

“Everything is very relative these days, young man,” Isay said in a fatherly voice.

“They confessed!” the lieutenant insisted.

Isay looked at the office inquisitively, then shifted his gaze to Zhora Tumasian and his friend.

“Almost confessed...”

Isay burst out in laughter.

“You’re mistaken! You know why? I’m the director of Chayka. As the matter of fact, I don’t think I’ve introduced myself. I’m Isay Adamov.”

“I know who you are,” the lieutenant grumbled.

“Well then – I’m telling you that there was no theft.”

“Yes there was.”

“But I insist that there wasn’t. Let’s shed the formalities. I’m leaving and I’m taking these two punks with me.”

The lieutenant didn’t know what to do. He reached for the phone, but stopped himself halfway, likely concluding that he had lost the battle.

“If the superiors said so... then leave.”

The boys jumped up and left the office on shaky legs.



“That’s better,” Isay said peacefully and extended his hand toward the lieutenant, who shook it in disgust.

Isay left the regional investigator’s office with his head held high. The boys were waiting for him on the street. They started walking away from the police precinct and walked a block or two in complete silence, until Isay suddenly erupted in laughter so loud that passersby would stop to look at him.

“Oh, I just can’t. I practically bluffed my way out of that,” he said, as fear came over the youths’ faces. “Don’t worry,” Isay added, “I really did go to the chief,” and went back to laughing. “Do you remember his face?”

The contagious laughter infected Zhora, then his friend, and seconds later all three were in stitches, pointing at each other and muttering “The way he looked at you!” through uncontrollable laughter.

“I thought he was going to crap his pants, he was so scared.”

The next day, the warehouse worker who noticed the theft and caused a fuss was fired, and the two youths were moved to the kitchen. No one at the restaurant ever mentioned the caviar again, as if nothing had happened. From then on, the two guys were committed to the director as if he was their own father.

Why did Isay do this? What was he driven by? Perhaps his love of football played a role, since the two helpers had demonstrated their skill on the field. And the warehouse worker wasn’t just fired to avenge the boys – her unending curiosity and attempts to stick her nose where it didn’t belong had annoyed him for quite some time. This became the opportunity to fix both problems at once. If he acted differently, he wouldn’t be Isay Adamov.

His power within the city was nearly limitless. He knew the Party Secretary – Murahov – quite well, welcomed the city



elite in his restaurant, and, without exaggeration, considered himself to be high-ranking enough to be exempt from the criminal code. Ultimately, this resulted in his demise.

The director of one of the cafes he was in charge of was a fascinating individual – a very attractive woman who possessed a most subtle charm that, while not readily discernible, lingered in the air like the scent of perfume once its wearer has left the room. In addition to her utmost beauty, she had quite a knack for business.

She was the type of woman who pocketed all she could, and she did just that until she had made a sizable dent in Isay's 'reserve parachute' – the off-the-books cashbox that ensured that Adamov would always be kept afloat. Once Isay realized that he was being swindled, his anger knew no bounds. He also skimmed, but from the government, and this witch was stealing from him. The two hungry boys and the greedy manager were, in his eyes, completely different.

After warning the requisite persons in the city administration, he immediately fired the director at fault. Leaving her office, the offended subordinate turned to Isay and allegedly said: "We'll see who gets the last laugh!"

Isay was outraged at the gall of this. He decided to teach her a lesson: to not just fire her, but to do so with gusto – on criminal grounds.

"You see," he told his prosecutor friend, "it's either me or her. There is no third option."

"Calm down. What did she do to make you this angry?" asked the prosecutor.

"You won't get it. And what will she think of me? That I'm gutless?" Isay raged. "That's not an option. She lied to me. She lied to our government. I'm going to be a laughingstock in the eyes of businesspeople if I leave things as they are. How am I going to look if an ordinary café supervisor is able to swindle me? This is unacceptable."

“Well, it’s up to you,” his friend answered. “We’ll help you, but I wouldn’t mess with her if I were you.”

Isay stubbornly shook his head.

Ultimately, a case was kicked off against the former director, and Isay calmed down. But he didn’t anticipate the treacherous blow that would be dealt to him. It turned out that the predatory blonde had influential friends in Moscow, whom she told of Isay’s shady schemes. Her complaints were heard, and the necessary people at the Department Against Misappropriation of Socialist Property were contacted. As a result, Moscow investigators were sent to Kislovodsk on a special assignment. The flywheel of the case started spinning.

Isay’s friends in the local authorities were sternly warned that they’d be implicated if they let out as much as a peep, so everyone remained silent while the investigators dug. Isay was clueless of this. “Nothing in this city is a threat to me,” he would repeat time and time again, and when thunder finally struck right above his head, he couldn’t believe his ears.

“They’re trying to scare me,” he said, and instantly ran to his friends at the prosecutor’s office, asking them to take care of the issue. Moreover, he got Erzol involved. Both were promised help and told not to worry, but then it suddenly turned out that no one could offer any help. The case was managed out of Moscow, and that was serious. People in the capital expected promotions and, perhaps even bonuses. After all, the case was trivial, all cards were on the table, and the culprit had been identified.

Another person would become a bitter realist in Isay’s shoes, but his head continued to float in the clouds. He couldn’t believe that anyone in Kislovodsk could dethrone him, much less his former subordinate. He just needed the time to reach out to the necessary people. He just needed to sit tight, and people more powerful than the bigwigs in Moscow would surely turn up and take care of everything.

“Rest and time, rest and time,” he kept repeating like an incantation.

Those were two things he needed more than air.

“I’ll think of something, Erzol,” he told our father. “You’ll see. Just give me some time. It’s not like this can’t be fixed – it isn’t that serious. I’ll find someone.”

“Where are you going to lay low?”

“At your place, at first.”

“At my place?”

“Are you not fine with that?”

“No, it’s fine,” Erzol replied casually, as if Isay’s request was trivial. “How long are you planning to hide at my place?”

“Until someone in Moscow helps.”

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation!” Erzol paused. “Think hard about where you go into hiding. They’ll check my house first.”

Isay just nodded silently.

One morning, someone knocked on the Babaevs’ door. Havo opened to be greeted by two men in uniforms. She pursed her lips, as she usually did when she was displeased with something, unwilling to yield even a tiny bit of what she had gone to such trouble to conquer.

“Good morning, citizen!” one of the officers said. “May we come in?”

“Do you have papers? On what grounds?”

While she went to get her glasses and tried reading through the document that – to her – was illegible, Isay managed to escape through the backyard into the ravine that lay behind our property. Meandering through untrodden paths along the river, he found a safe spot where no one would look for him.

Meanwhile, the troop of investigators rummaged through the whole house. Havo, the good actress that she was, paced around and ranted about how people have lost their sense of shame and are slandering their neighbors.

“He isn’t here! So what if he’s my daughter’s husband? We’re not responsible for what he does!”

Ultimately, the investigators left the Babaev home empty-handed. Isay hid out in Kislovodsk for a while longer, then made his way to Moscow, where he moved between dormitories and business inns. With the help of friends, he settled in a quiet, inconspicuous hotel on the outskirts of the capital using someone else’s documents. He was acting like an experienced conspirator. Liza was supplied with detailed instructions for what to say if investigators came to their home. “I don’t know where my husband is! If you need him, find him yourself! He didn’t tell me where he was going.” That’s the kind of man he was. From afar, his life resembled an adventure novel.

Soon enough, Isay’s friends informed Liza where he was staying. She visited him in Moscow on several occasions, following all of his convoluted instructions. Upon arrival, she would never go straight to the assigned address but would instead spend hours going from store to store to create the impression of a provincial woman trying to buy anything and everything in the capital.

Isay lived by the hope that he would be able to somehow uproot the investigation and put an end to the case. This thought sat in his mind like a splinter.

This time around, he needed some documents from Chayka. This all seemed like a game of Russian roulette, but he conveyed the message to Liza and instructed her to bring the papers to Moscow. Liza was governed by peculiar logic, often surprised at her own placidity. Being with her husband made her ready for anything, as his life was full of unexpected twists and turns, throwing him at the crest of the wave every time. Would this time be different? She had trouble believing that.

“Luck, luck, and more luck” Isay kept repeating to himself. Meanwhile Liza wandered around the GUM – the Soviet

Union's largest shopping center – yet again trying to assess if she was being followed and coming to the conclusion that she was no longer afraid of much. Fright was replaced by courage, as if none of what was going on concerned her.

Liza walked around the city until she felt cold. It was time to head to the hotel. She took the metro, then the bus. She passed the desk clerk, giving him a dry nod. No one stopped or asked her where she was going. Liza sighed in relief.

She tapped out the secret knock on the door, and Isay opened up.

“How was the trip here?”

“Okay.”

“No one followed you? Did you check?”

“Of course I did. Just like you told me.”

“You're a smart girl.” Isay gave her a kiss.

“How are things here?”

“They're alright. Just like home. What's new? Tell me. You've lost a little weight. Just you wait – it'll all be over. We'll go to the South – on vacation.”

“South? What South? Where?”

“Whichever South you want. We have money.”

And so they sat and talked. Isay called room service and asked for some coffee and tea. After some time, there was a knock on the door.

“There's the tea. Hold on a second.”

He opened the door. The light smell of scarce instant coffee wafted in from the hallway. Two men stood right before him. He spotted four more behind them. His reflexes acted faster than his brain, and he threw his entire weight at the door, trying to slam it shut. He nearly succeeded, with but a centimeter to go.

Liza heard a strange noise and went to see what was going on. Isay struggled with the door, his face red from the confrontation. Then the door was struck so hard from the outside

that he flew to the middle of the room. The strangers burst into the suite.

“Isay!” Liza yelled at the top of her lungs as the policemen swarmed her husband and brought him to the ground. The rest was a formality. A maid showed up, though without the coffee, then another. The agent in charge, who wore a blue overcoat, introduced them as witnesses. After they quickly signed the necessary papers, Isay was escorted out. The last thing he heard was Liza’s voice:

“Forgive me, Isay! I tried to be careful!”

Did Isay fault Liza for this fateful end? Perhaps. In any case, his partisan epopee had reached its end.

The trial followed – a triumph of Soviet justice. Isay was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in a penal colony.

Was this divine retribution for the pain that our mother suffered or a mere coincidence? From an average observer’s point of view, it simply looked like the simple revenge of the director that Isay had decided to throw in jail. Then again, who knows?

Isay was ultimately sent to Arkhangelsk, where Erzol visited him several times. Even in prison, Isay did pretty well. He organized an amateur art collective by creating a convict choir, which, while not as professional as Pyatnitsky’s, was just as loud. Talk about an enterprising personality! After serving half his sentence, he got a conditional release.

One could say that Isay survived prison unscathed, and even came out with new skills. In any case, upon release, the same man emerged: restless, adventurous, and full of incredible ideas.



## XLIV

**I**n the meantime, we kept growing, making our father ponder our future more and more often. Having us make independent decisions wasn't an option. One can only be confident of something if he does it himself. Therefore, Erzol would be the one to decide who his children would become.

One day, amongst friendly company, Lenya Buglak introduced our father to a high-ranking man.

"Meet Stas Belyakov."

Erzol liked Stas right from the start. He was the rector of a branch of the Union-Wide Correspondence Institute of Soviet Trade. If that wasn't enough, he was an excellent guitar player. Their acquaintance quickly grew into friendship.

Theirs was a circle of people linked by common interests: Lenya Bodnev, Stas Belyakov, and Boris Buglak. They gathered as often as their work allowed. One would be pressed to call their parties leisurely, as entertainment was always accompanied by work. It was during one of these parties that Stas discovered that Erzol had no higher education.

“Is that true?” Stas asked, picking a fat olive out of the jar. Erzol nodded. Stas’s eyes bulged out.

“That’s a mistake. You’re a grown man, handling such business! You need higher education.”

“I don’t even have a high school diploma.” Erzol sounded like he was bragging.

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s not right!” Stas said curtly. “Go enroll at a night school. You’ll get your diploma, then come to me. I’ll take care of everything. If you become a party member, even better.” Stas paused. “Got it? You’re a manufacturer – it’ll be easier for you to enter the party before you become an executive. Actually, you pretty much need Party membership to become one of those anyway. There’s no way around it.”

Father scoffed, but the thought of moving upward took root. After some time, Stas brought up the subject again in friendly company:

“Look – all your friends are studying with me!”

This was a call to action. Indeed, half of Erzol’s acquaintances were students at Stas Belyakov’s Correspondence Institute. It should be mentioned that these people were less concerned with knowledge, which they already had – at least as far as their professions were concerned – but with higher positions, which required higher education in those years.

“You’ll enroll, and everything will be fine,” Stas insisted.

Finally, Erzol started going to night school. This decision took certain courage, though there turned out to be plenty of grown men like him behind the desks. The War had stripped their generation of the ability to obtain timely schooling.

He took Valya to class with him. He needed her like a talisman, a helping hand, as well as a companion. Who wants to go to school alone? What are women for? Valya agreed without protest, even though she already had a high school diploma.



## XLV

**F**rom then on, Father started to view his children's education differently. Every Sunday, we would approach his chair, where he sat like a stern judge, and present the daybooks that contained our grades. Before heading for 'the carpet', we would wish each other luck. Gena, who continued to fall behind in his studies, had it hardest of all.

However, in tenth grade it became Slava's turn to feel the heat of Father's admonition. To be fair, it was as much about his progress as it was about Father's plans. At some point, Stas Belyakov had mentioned that if Slava got a gold academic medal, he wouldn't have any trouble enrolling in the winemaking faculty at Krasnodar Polytechnic. This is when the seeds of Father's plan were planted. However, Slava's daybook was a clear testament to the fact that the guy wouldn't be able to pull off a gold medal on his own, and that was the honest truth.

"You need to push yourself," Father would tell Slava whenever he saw 'fours'. "Otherwise, you won't win."

The oldest son was a decent student, but a medal required much more.

Erzol didn't bother to torment Slava over his grades at the day school. Instead, he made a move with his knight – he arranged for his son to be transferred to the same night school that he was attending. Slava received perfect grades on all the exams and graduated night school with a gold medal.

That day, Slava felt like the happiest man in the world. When he showed Father his certificate, his eyes spoke eloquently: 'Papa, I did what you wanted me to.'

Father was satisfied. Nothing is as inspirational during youth as the approval of one's idol, and the fact that Father was our idol was undeniable. We deified him.

Now that Slava had won the first round, he began to think that his trials were behind him. That wasn't the case.

So father had picked the winemaking faculty for Slava. Erzol knew how much winery directors were making, and not by mere hearsay, and concluded that he was assuring an optimal future for his oldest son.

Slava never argued with Father. When he sat before him, his extremities would go numb and his thoughts would evaporate. Father's advice was always perceived as an order, arguing with which was senseless.

What exactly went wrong in Father's plans this time was unclear, but Slava, the gold medalist, took a hit on his very first entrance exam and received a 'four'. Pulsating pain filled Erzol when he learned of this, caused by both his unwillingness to abandon his plans and the feeling that he had been betrayed. He was not ready to come to terms with this. If he were destined to become a loser, this would not be the catalyst.

He listened to Valya, who explained that it wasn't Slava's fault, and couldn't believe his ears. This couldn't be. His tactical assault was not supposed to end in defeat. The crows who

prophesized victory had screamed too loudly. There was still hope for fixing it all.

He had praised his son's successes so much, that his friends were forced to believe that Slava could handle everything on their own, without their help. And here was this misfire. He needed urgent help. Despite it being the middle of the night, Erzol called his friend Stas Belyakov and told him of the blunder.

"This needs to be fixed," he insisted. "It's just a misunderstanding, you know? The boy can study."

Belyakov promised Father that he would approach the rector of Krasnodar Polytechnic and do everything possible – that everything will be fine and that Erzol can sleep calmly. Stas followed through on his promise. He pulled all the strings, Slava passed all his other exams with flying colors, and Erzol Babaev's oldest son was enrolled in the winemaking faculty.

And so, for the first time in his life, Slava was outside our home, facing himself and treacherous 'freedom'. I couldn't wait until it was my turn.

## XLVI

Father decided that it would be good if two of his sons went to the same university. I, however, was assigned a different career path. He had decided to enroll me in the canning technology faculty. At the time, it was a promising field that was experiencing rapid growth.

As I began my tenth and final year in school, Father made an appointment with the principal. He was only curious about one thing: his son's chances at receiving a gold medal. Erzol's visit to the school was highly regarded: the principal interrupted his class in order to sit down with the important guest.

"We'll take a look at how Igor is doing," he said, taking out a grade book. Dragging his finger along the lines, the teacher started making silent calculations. He looked like a doctor who was preparing to present a prognosis to a hopeless patient.

"Alright, here it is," said the principal taking off his glasses. "He needs to improve in several subjects: math, Russian

and chemistry. Then, I can assure you that your son will be all right.”

Erzol knew the value of gratitude and did everything he could for the principal and his school. He provided clothing for the teachers, donated money, and gave gifts – all to create nurturing circumstances for his second son.

On the evening of the day that Father spoke to the principal, he called me, sat me in front of him and said:

“Son, go and squeeze all you can out of this. You need to get a gold medal.”

Father’s words were more than a gentle nudge – they carried the hints of a veiled threat. I took to my studies out of desperation, gaining a sudden desire to learn.

My Russian tutor was a novice literature teacher named Anastasia Efimovna. For a while, she resisted taking Erzol Babaev’s money, but Father insisted. He had a knack for that. The literature teacher held her lessons in her humble home – an ordinary Kislovodsk apartment. I’d come in to the spacious kitchen infused with the smell of smoke, anthracite and borscht and sit by the window to learn the rules. Gleams of sunlight danced across the floor and whitewashed walls.

My Russian grammar skills themselves were more or less fine, but literature, particularly the Russian classics like Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and Gogol, needed a serious boost.

Our lessons were complicated by another factor. The energy and vibes that emanated from the young teacher kept me from focusing. I’d look at her face and wonder who created such beauty. She had just turned twenty-five. She was short, had delicate facial features and a nice figure, even if her arms were a little thick. She would gather her red hair in a bunch. Looking at her, I would think that I had never seen a more beautiful woman.

My God, if only Anastasia Efimovna knew how in love I was with her then! Whenever she looked at me, I would

plunge into a proverbial quagmire, forgetting all suffixes and conjugations. I have no idea how the sixteen-year-old boy that I was managed to learn anything with all that. I no longer recall the rules that she had taught me, but her image remains clear in my memory.

All my tutors were given a single goal – Erzol's son needed to graduate with a gold medal.

Chemistry turned out to be my weakest link. This wasn't good: a chemistry entrance exam was mandatory for enrollment in Krasnodar Polytechnic. Perhaps that's why Father chose a most unexpected man to tutor me in the subject – a genius in his field.

He was disabled and couldn't walk, arriving in Kislovodsk in a wheelchair. We had no idea what had happened to him. People said that prior to the 'catastrophe', as the adults called the cause of the chemist's illness, he was working at a research institute where he had received a dose of radiation, after which his legs gave out.

The chemist had a narrow, stretched face, thin, pallid lips and large black eyes, chilled by the sadness of a man who knows that he could die at any moment. All of my tutor's acquaintances spoke of him with great regard. He practically lived by his science. Faith in a local healer, who used bee venom to cure all ailments, had brought him to our city.

I have no idea how Father came upon this chemist, but at one point Erzol told me that he had found me a teacher. One from Moscow, no less! That alone raised his authority in the eyes of a provincial boy. But the main thing was that he, like a skilled forward, knew how to maneuver around our own laziness and force us to love his subject. In his words, chemistry was a mystery with which he familiarized his students. Everything that seemed boring and confusing before – the structure of matter, valence electrons, the structure of the benzene ring – suddenly became interesting.

At times I wanted to escape the trench into which Father's will had got me – the trench of filial compliance. But, like a good soldier fulfilling his duties, I knew that I couldn't avoid it. I would always listen to Father when he would ask me: "Did I give all my effort to that which deserves to receive it?" Once in a while, however, the fear of defeat would strike. Then, with a quickly beating heart, I would jump out of the trench and run to play football and cards with the guys, dreaming of that unimaginable freedom that never seemed to come.

## XLVII

When the time came, I did a stellar job on all my school exams, with the exception of composition. Here, Anastasia Efimovna was powerless and I ended up with a 'four'. Nevertheless, I had a silver medal in my pocket and had not disappointed Father. A month prior to the entrance exams, I was sent to Krasnodar along with Valentina, who was put in charge of looking after me.

Father ensured that her and I would not be in need of anything. At first, we stayed in Stas Belyakov's apartment. There, I saw how others lived for the first time. It was as if someone had rooted for Spartak their whole life and suddenly found himself on the bleachers in a crowd full of Dynamo fans. In our home, guests had always been revered. They received special attention from the lady of the house and better meals. Special dishes would be cooked and toasts would be said. Sometimes, it seems to me that Father's accomplishments



were at least partly intended to impress his friends and gain their approval.

Stas Belyakov's home was different. The master of the house and the family took first place, and everything else sank into the background. His wife would cook exquisite dishes every evening, but not because they were expecting company – they were for their own enjoyment.

I also found out that being a guest didn't carry as much weight as it did with our father. Despite the fact that we only spent a little while at Belyakov's home, the lesson stayed with me for the rest of my life.

The month spent studying for my entrance exams was a sort of nightmare. Afterwards, I went into my first exam – chemistry – with my chin held high, full of blind faith in fate and my genius tutor.

Reverent silence reigned over the auditorium, where the other applicants were already sitting. The chairman of the examination commission – an elderly professor – smiled at me kindly and offered me the ticket jar. I sighed and pulled out a strip of paper. I skimmed over the question, looked at the commission members, and spoke, enunciating every syllable:

“I'm ready to answer.”

The academics looked at one another, and the educator on the left smiled and told me:

“You can go prepare. You have time.”

“I'll answer right away,” I said.

“Without preparation?”

“Yes.”

“Think about it, young man. No one is rushing you,” said one of the professors.

“Don't make things worse for yourself,” said another.

All seemed to be on a mission to talk me out of answering.

“There’s no need,” I insisted. “I’m ready.”

The commission members looked amongst themselves once more and the chairman shrugged with the expression of an executioner whom the prisoner was asking for a swifter death.”

“Well – it’s your choice.”

I stood before the commission and began to recite everything I knew. When I was finished, the examiners looked amongst themselves. This wasn’t something they encountered often. Their faces were clear: I had won. As I exited the auditorium, I felt invisible wings fluttering behind my back.

“So?” Valya ran to me. She was flushed from worrying.

After a dramatic pause, I smiled and exclaimed:

“I got a ‘five’!”

And so I was admitted.

Valentina and I set off to Sochi the following day – our reward for the positive outcome. There, Father was waiting along with Slava and the rest of the family.

The Black Sea rekindles one’s appetite for life. Everyone there seeks specific pleasures. Almost everyone goes there with one goal in mind: to relax, and, perhaps, have a summer romance.

We decided to go for a walk on our first evening there. The seaside radiated tranquility and the remains of the day’s heat.

“Tired?” Father suddenly asked.

“A little.”

“You’ll forget it in two days.”

We walked for about five minutes in silence.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“The feeling of victory.”

I thought for a second.

“It’s awesome!”

“Then let’s go celebrate.”

My admission to the institute was celebrated in Ahun – a restaurant that belonged to Misha Gelman. Summer, dressed in all shades of yellow, bloomed outside. More colors were thrown into the pallet by the sunset, the fading foliage, even the vacationers’ tans. The sun’s reflections glimmered in the black bark of the eucalyptus trees. Life rejoiced, and people had no choice but to join in. Father’s friends – Lenya Bodnev and Stas Belyakov – Valentina, my brothers, and some men and women I had never seen before, all sat around the table celebrating my triumph. That evening has remained in my memory as a symbol of boundless happiness. Father’s friends congratulated him, as if he was the one who passed all his exams with excellence. In a certain sense, it really was Father’s victory.

During the celebration, Erzol quietly said to me:

“You were supposed to win, and you won.”

“I have to be honest, Pop – I had to work for it.”

“I noticed,” Erzol replied, looking at me approvingly.

That gesture carried more praise and gratitude than the ten speeches that were recited at the table. I suddenly wanted to tell him what it took for me to endure the admission test.

“When the chemistry exam began, I went to answer right away, without taking the time to prepare. They didn’t expect that, Papa. Others would take two hours to get ready, but I was done in fifteen minutes.”

Father looked at me, full of pride.

“That’s my boy,” he patted me on the shoulder approvingly. “Remember: if you want to accomplish something, wring yourself dry.”

On the day following the celebration Father took the whole noisy bunch of us to Berezka, a foreign currency store. At the time, this was an ‘oasis of the rotting West’, inaccessible

to most, the dream of the Soviet citizen where one could buy anything. He decided to buy a gift for everyone, even for Valentina, which, given his principles, was unusual.

My eyes wandered. What to pick? I looked out of the window – at the blue sea splashing in the distance. I had made my choice: brand name swimming shorts, which a select few could boast at the time. In the land of satin panties, even underwear wasn't immune to critique.

The sun-drenched beach and girls' attention followed – a reward of a special sort, which no Babaev man could pass by.

In the evening, Father took us to Ahun again. Gelman was a pedantic and enthusiastic owner, paying attention to all the small things: the cleanliness of the tablecloths, the table settings, the servers. Misha dressed like a dandy, seemingly at the very same Berezka. He wore fashionable sunglasses – a fresh pair every night – in a clear attempt to draw everyone's attention to himself.

Our big, noisy crowd sat in his restaurant. People unfamiliar to us would constantly approach Father to pay their respects. Erzol would exchange a few words with each and every one of them. We just watched and recorded it all to memory. This was the first evening when Father felt we had reached an age where we could be brought forth into his endless circle of friends and acquaintances. He called this ceremony the beginning of our career paths.

But let's get back to Misha Gelman. When his friends, including our father, would approach him, Misha was nothing but cordial. He knew the occasion for our gathering, and would always shake me by the shoulder and say:

“How's the future power player of Soviet trade?”

I would blush silently. I felt nothing like a power player.

That evening, Misha removed his glasses, looked at me carefully, and said:

“A great future awaits you. Remember my words. Well-established children bring their parents happiness. You’ll understand that when you have your own.”

And then, father interrupted everyone’s casual conversations. As he raised his champagne flute, silence came over the table. Father had several phrases with which he would begin every toast. This was less of a rule, but rather a lifeline that he threw to the feast’s other participants.

“Listen to my words and remember them well,” Erzol began. “I would like to raise five drops for every tooth to...” Father began talking about his friends in an eloquent speech. “Our unity and friendship are stronger than ever, just like our ability to help one another in times of need. I would like to raise a toast to our friend Stas Belyakov, who does a whole lot for those striving for knowledge. Soon enough, I’ll probably become one of his students myself, and that is a point of great pride for me – that two of my sons and I will all be studying in the same city and the same land.”

This was perhaps the first time in his life that Erzol felt at peace. Everything he strove for had turned out the way he wanted. This was the greatest reward.

## XLVII

**E**nrollment at a university marked an end of a whole epoch – my childhood. This was the beginning of my almost-adult life. No school, no football, no Father, no Havo – just Slava and I.

My brother and I were living on our own for the first time. Lectures, seminars, syllabi... They were all engaging and romantic, like the light scent of French cologne. Learning wasn't difficult for us, and we picked up knowledge as we went. Whatever we didn't understand, we would pick apart with the professors. We were helped and tended to.

With the help of Stas Belyakov, father became acquainted with Yakov Dmitriyevich Rudakov, the rector of the university and a well-known man in Krasnodar. A Donbass native, he began his career in the thirties as the secretary of the Komsomol committee at the Kirov Metallurgical Plant in Makeyevka – a city one would be hard-pressed to find on a map these days. Fate then brought him to Makhachkala, where he worked

as chief mechanic of an oil trust. Rudakov was working as the director of a thermal power plant when he received the unexpected invitation to become the rector of the Krasnodar Polytechnic Institute.

Father tried to maintain control of our situation without infringing on our freedom and burdening us with his presence by offering help when we needed it. The only thing that elicited indignation from us was the fact that he forbade us to live in the dormitories, where the free spirit of student life away from parents reigned with all the requisite consequences. Father rented an apartment in the city center near the university, and that's where we lived.

How we got the residence was coincidental. It was offered by Stas Belyakov, who was of a venerable age that allowed him to have a young mistress – the director of a local television station named Galina. She had two apartments. She lived in one, along with her mother, and rented the other out. Upon finding out that we intended to live in the dormitories, Stas told his friend:

“Why should your boys drudge through the dorms when there's an apartment? It would cost pennies for the likes of you.”

We saw Galina when we went to see our future apartment with our father. She was beautiful! Waiting for an opportune moment, Father whispered to Stas:

“Nice girl you got here.”

Stas shook his finger at him, as if to say ‘Don't you dare!’

“Who do you think I am?” Erzol laughed.

When it came to cash, he was in no rush to spoil us – we were granted a small allowance to make sure we ate well, and not a kopeck more – to keep us from spending money on all sorts of temptations. He felt that excess money could relax a person and make them lose direction and the will to develop further.

Nevertheless, my brother and I needed money, so we started earning it on our own. I would write papers for students who struggled, and Slava earned it some other way.

At sixteen and seventeen, we, still essentially children unaware of our still unrevealed abilities, were learning of what Father called the ‘key to life’: to spot things that lie on the surface but are overlooked by others and utilize them to our advantage. We were learning to rid ourselves of self-pity and express our will and character, just like our father did. But, of course, aside from education and ways to earn money, we were attracted to the unavoidable avatars of youth: dancing, girls and first romantic encounters.

This side of life consumed Slava’s thoughts first. He fell in love during his first few semesters. My brother was a prominent man – a boxer with an athlete’s build – and the girls really liked him. He fancied our neighbor Zoya, the daughter of a colonel who lived across the hall from us. He was walking up the stairs as she was walking down, reading a book. Their meeting was unavoidable. Slava looked at the girl’s blue eyes and drowned in them, feeling drunk as he looked at her, losing his mind and his ability to speak.

That feeling resembled going down a snowy ski slope, when excitement takes your breath away. In youth, passion lifts you higher and makes you stronger.

Naturally, the chance encounter led to dates, moonlit walks, then, a bit later – kisses in the entryway. It would have probably continued just like that, if Zoya’s father, the colonel, hadn’t left for a distant assignment. The girl was left to her own devices, and the young couple couldn’t resist the temptation and rushed to make up for lost time.

I didn’t complain, as I got the entire apartment to myself. So began our student life.



## XLIX

**T**here was a reason why Father strove for us to advance in society and dreamt of us getting a higher education. It was something he valued, if only from a practical standpoint. Higher education would allow him to rise to a level where he could unfold his entrepreneurial talents to their full potential. Erzol set a goal: to graduate from university. By then, he and Valya had finished evening school, and Erzol received his high school diploma – another milestone. Now, it was time to keep going.

As expected, Erzol enrolled at the Krasnodar Branch of the Union-Wide Correspondence Institute of Soviet Trade, and Valentina went to study along with him. This educational institution was attended by a specific type of people. In Moscow, the main building of the university was located by the Rechnoy Vokzal metro station. The locals always marveled at how twice a year – when the university would hold its winter and summer exams – the contingent of public transpor-

tation travelers would change abruptly. Buses would be filled with men and women dressed in expensive clothing unavailable in stores. These were employees of the trade sector going to school. The situation was similar in Krasnodar.

Father and Valentina graduated from the Krasnodar branch without much trouble. Everyone, particularly the university professors, understood full well that while businessmen like Erzol Babaev needed an education, it was, nevertheless, a formality. He already had all the knowledge he needed and was well equipped to teach it to anyone, despite the fact that a university diploma was inarguably essential to a successful career. Therefore, Erzol would help his professor solve some household problem or other in exchange for leniency in grading and examinations.

Exams took place all across the south of Russia, across all branches of the university: Ordzhonikidze, Rostov, Kursk, Volgograd. Valya would always be by his side.

After he graduated and received his diploma, father became a member of the Communist Party. He now had the necessary equipment for advancement up the career ladder. Erzol fully understood that promises of a bright future were empty words. People didn't know how to make money, but nevertheless discussed prosperity. His life experience had proved that wisdom and strength have always ruled the world and will continue to do so. He knew full well that, as a Jew, he needed to be ten times smarter and stronger than his competitors to achieve higher social standing. And he tried to do just that.

L

The end of spring marked the beginning of dance season. At the time, the City Culture Park in Krasnodar was the venue for folk festivals, though those were largely attended by students and local punks. It was customary for guys to go there a little drunk – for boldness.

The dances would take place on Saturdays and Sundays. Some band or other would arrive, and the young people would come. Some were there to find the girl of their dreams, others just to have fun. Their beginnings would be marked by all the paths leading to the dance floor filling up with a multitude of girls in pretty dresses and requisite scarves around their necks. Guys would dress in a flashy manner customary at the time: either wide breeches and shirts, or trousers with undershirts over them.

Customarily, the ladies would throw glances at the gents – scoping out dance partners. The guys didn't sit idly either. I always tried to pick the most beautiful girls. I must have sub-

consciously felt superior, even if I couldn't yet discern what this advantage was. I ended up choosing a pretty blond. She had big brown eyes that observed the world with mischievous curiosity.

...We had been going out for a week. She had made no mention of her previous romances, as if her life had been a blank slate before we met.

"Let's take a walk on Krasnaya," she once suggested. That was a street in Krasnodar. Each word said in that tender voice was music to my heart. We were walking leisurely, when suddenly a guy approached us. He was the 'bellbottoms and a Finnish knife in his pocket' type, as the old Soviet song went. In other words – a hooligan.

"Let's step aside. We need to talk," he said with a crooked smile.

We stepped aside toward three other guys with cheeky smiles just like his. It turned out that they didn't really want to talk after all. Before I had a chance to blink, I was punched in the jaw and fell to the ground. The others joined the beating. It was, I must say, a very persuasive form of communication that left eloquence powerless.

"Maybe someone could tell me what I did?"

"If you want to know," the leader laughed, towering over me at six feet tall, "come to the dance on Saturday. You'll get an explanation."

They stood there silently, ready for another fight.

"Fine," I muttered.

I turned around. My date had vanished without a trace. Cursing and holding my bloodied nose, I headed home to tell my brother everything.

"Was she seeing anyone before you?" Slava asked upon hearing my story.

"She said she was single."

"There must have been something between her and one of those assholes."

“Maybe.” A dull pain echoed through my bruised cheekbone. “Anyways, they arranged a meeting at the dance next Saturday.”

“Forget it! Why bother with them?”

The conversation ended there.

I went to bed. The thought of my assailants beating me without reprise was more painful than my wounds. Thoughts of revenge were brave, pleasant and tempting. Refusing the meeting was akin to admitting defeat. It was better to let them beat me again. In any case, I gathered a group of ten or fifteen people.

I was scared on Friday, but by Saturday evening I was calm. My friends and I gathered at an arranged place and set off to the dance, where we were greeted by a comparable group containing my assailants. As I approached them, I could hear my heart beating faster. The bully’s face was already distorted by a crooked grin.

I stopped in front of him and consciously provoked him to hit me.

“So?” I asked. “You wanna talk?”

Before I finished the sentence, I felt myself flying off to the side. Then I heard Slava’s voice:

“How about you talk to me now.”

Slava had appeared suddenly, as if he was waiting on the sidelines for the fight to start.

“And who are you?” the bully asked.

“I’m his brother,” Slava said, nodding in my direction.

“I see! His brother! Well – you’re about to join him.”

“Everyone move aside,” Slava yelled, loud enough for the men around us to get shaken up. “We’ll go one on one.”

The punks moved aside, forming a semi-circle.

The leader, still clueless, measured Slava with his gaze. My brother’s heart burned with fire, and his eyes narrowed to two slits. He only needed to catch his opponent with a full

force hook to the jaw. That was enough to bring a bull to the ground.

The bully attacked first. Slava dodged him – he was patient. He circled his enemy, not retreating but not approaching, waiting for him to strike again. The other guy kept swinging left and right, aimlessly, ignorant of the fact that he was tiring himself out and throwing off his breathing by constantly missing. Suddenly, he lunged. Slava dodged him and simultaneously struck him with his left fist. He did so instinctively, from the top down, and his opponent didn't have a chance to react. I heard something crack – either a bone or teeth. The guy twitched and froze in place, while Slava planted a few swift strikes on his torso. The bully began to buckle. The onlookers gathered around, and it started getting noisy. As the bully's face started turning into a bloody mess, the other's jumped toward Slava, yelling.

“Stop! You'll kill him!”

Three or four of them tried to restrain my brother, unsuccessfully at first, but eventually managing to do so. The fight was over.

The onlookers, upset with the spectacle's speedy conclusion, waddled over to the dance floor. I approached Slava.

“Why did you come here?” he roared at me. “I told you: don't go! They'll kill you!”

I only shrugged. I couldn't not go. We went home in silence. My nose was bloody, but neither of us could shed the sense of victory.

“How did you end up there?” I asked when we got home.

“I didn't think you'd listen to me,” Slava answered. “I knew you're stubborn. So I decided to follow you and keep tabs.”

I could only smile. This was one of the most important lessons of brotherly love which youth had given us.

## LI

The fact that we were studying in Krasnodar became known to our mother. Her brother, Zachar Abramov, had moved there from Makhachkala. He had married a Russian woman, started a family, and opened his own tailoring workshop. To be precise, the workshop was government owned, but he held the post of director, which, at the time, meant that he had the same authority over the staff and the capital that he would if he owned the establishment. He had enough money to be considered a successful businessman, though the scale was nowhere near of what Erzol's operation.

Every time that our mother would visit Krasnodar, she would stay with her brother, and it was he who informed her of this development. He always tried to materially support her as much as he could. What set Zachar apart from the others is that he never interfered in the affairs of others and avoided touchy subjects. Privately, he found Turunge's marriage to be bad luck – she had simply married the wrong man. However,

since there was nothing to be done about it, it was best to forget it instead of picking at the wound. We considered Zachar to be the ideal uncle.

One day, I was running late to a lecture and nearly ran out of the house. If the bus were to leave without me, I would spend the entire lecture behind the auditorium door, and I wasn't about to do that. At the bus station, I was hailed by a shabbily dressed woman.

"Son!" she ran at me.

Turunge stood before me. I hadn't even recognized her right away. She was older and heavier, with dark circles under her eyes. She stood there and smiled at me warmly, as my ears turned red from surprise.

"Son..." she repeated, barely audibly, and took a step toward me.

"How did you... get here? Listen, I'm late for class..."

Turunge realized that I felt uncomfortable around her. It was as if someone had slapped her in the face. Her heart skipped a beat, then started beating erratically. Her legs went limp, but she tried to conceal her faintness.

"I'm staying with Zachar..." she said. "I just came to visit you and Slavik. Here, this is for you two." She extended the basket she held in her hand toward me.

"Please don't!" I replied, almost pleadingly. "We have everything. Keep it. I beg you! Don't show up like this, without a warning and stalk us, okay? And don't bring anything. We have everything. I'm in a rush. If I'm late to the lecture, they'll be angry. I'll see you another time, okay?"

Turunge stood still, thinking that if she made even the smallest move, she would collapse onto the ground. This meeting went differently in her dreams. All she wanted was for her son to hug her and kiss her, but that didn't happen.

"Slava's at home... Listen, I'm not gonna wait for the bus, I'll walk. I'm so late..." I turned around and started walking



away from the station, then couldn't resist switching to running as fast as I could. Our mother just stood there, not knowing what to do.

That evening, Turunge did visit Slava and I briefly. We sat and made small talk.

"How are you?"

"I'm well."

"And you?"

"I'm well too."

Then we parted. There was nothing more to talk about.

Turunge visited us several times while we studied in Krasnodar. She ached to at least catch a glimpse of her sons. As for more, even she probably didn't dream of that. We didn't understand any of that.

Turunge often saw her children in her dreams – nearly every day. They were always little, playing in the sandbox and roughhousing on the carpet. Occasionally they would fall and start crying. She would jump up and try to help them, but could never make it in time to help. She would try to run, but obstacles would pop up in front of her. She would try to walk, but nets she couldn't get out of would appear around her arms and legs. She would then start screaming, loudly and inhumanly, and walls would collapse ahead, separating the children from her.

With time, children became merely wonderful memories – fairy tale characters, mythical sons and a daughter. Turunge knew that she had them, but could never reach them and feel their warmth and love.

She would always wait for us on the street, as we hurried to class, but we were embarrassed by her poverty, frailty, and strangeness. We were embarrassed by the fact that she wore four dresses, each layered upon the next. It was all the clothing she had.

We were also numb to her love.

Every time we would recall these moments thereafter, we would feel uneasy. But what did we know? Barely out of adolescence, just entering real life, we still considered our mother to be a stranger, a sick woman. We couldn't comprehend the magnitude of the suffering of her tattered soul.

Whenever we would see her, Father's image would appear before us, reminding us of all the love and money he had invested in us. We felt like we couldn't betray him. What we saw as betrayal, however, was far from it. We were simply depriving our mother of that mere hint of warmth, which was all she wanted from us.

Each time I remember this, I want to scream: "FORGIVE US, MAMA! FORGIVE US!"

## LII

**T**he secretary of the City Communist Party Committee, Comrade Murakhovsky, was responsible for ideology in Kislovodsk. He spent as much time and effort on it as a perfumer does to create a legendary scent. One day, looking out of the window of his home, he was surprised to see men in overalls and yellow hardhats working across the street – at the site of the Old Market’s abandoned warehouses. Just like ants, they circled the half-dilapidated buildings, unloading paint cans off the back of a truck.

The building sector was not part of Murakhovsky’s domain, but, being the ideology secretary, he felt, in a way, responsible for all of the city’s residents’ spiritual pursuits, which undoubtedly included construction projects. Murakhovsky grabbed for the phone, like a drowning man reaching for a lifebuoy, and dialed.

“Hello, Murakhovsky speaking. San-Sanych, can you tell me about the construction at the Old Market? What are they building and on whose authority?”

Something gurgled on the other end of the line. Murakhovsky looked at the receiver in disgust and exhaled:

“Fine. I’ll wait for your report.”

In ten minutes, the phone rang again. Murakhovsky picked up the receiver in a well-rehearsed motion.

“A workshop? What kind of workshop? Who gave permission?” He stood up. “Why was I not informed? Whose accord? Put a stop to it at once!”

The secretary slammed the phone down and returned to the table, displeased. His appetite had vanished. He picked around the plate with his fork, but did so by mere inertia. His worried wife walked away from the window and sat closer to her husband. As a general rule, her voluptuous bust had a soothing effect on Murakhovsky’s mental state.

“Darling, what happened?”

Murakhovsky put his fork aside.

“It’s only temporary, my dear. Just...” Murakhovsky stammered in contemplation. “Something’s happening in our city, and I can’t quite understand what... There’s construction next door, and I don’t know who started it and why. If it came from ‘above’?” He raised his eyes toward the ceiling. “If it came from above, that’s fine!” He exclaimed reverently. “But why don’t I, Secretary of the City Committee, not know about this? Or am I no longer the secretary?”

His wife’s eyes grew wide:

“What? You’re no longer the secretary?”

“No! Of course I’m the secretary! Just...” Murakhovsky looked up at the ceiling again. “I just don’t understand what’s going on,” he whispered.

“You need to do something,” his wife whispered in response. She found benefit in pronouncing wise words softly, as people tended to pay closer attention to them.

Murakhovsky nodded in accord. Three wrinkles intersected his forehead. His grateful spouse offered him a bowl

of borscht. Once it was eaten, Murakhovsky approached the window again. The activity at the Old Market had ceased. The secretary let out a satisfied hiccup.

“They stopped!” he triumphantly informed his wife.

“I told you! So you are the secretary after all!” she said, delighted at her husband’s heroic feat.

Comrade Murakhovsky enjoyed sweet dreams through the night, but come morning, he was awoken by the rumble of construction equipment. He ran to the window to see a giant excavator digging near his home, like a hungry dog rummaging for bones. His hands trembling, Murakhovsky grabbed the phone.

“By what authority?” he screamed.

A man’s voice explained to him that the construction was happening per instructions from the Central Resort Supply Office in Moscow. Murakhovsky’s heart sank and he grimaced in despair.

“The order came from Moscow,” he whispered to his smiling wife. “Something’s happening in the city. Or will happen.”

The wife gasped and looked over at the pot of red borscht, which sat orphaned on the snow-white gas stove brought over from Finland.

“I need to call the chairman of the City Executive Committee,” Murakhovsky suddenly announced.

In the meantime, Erzol’s first assistant, a tailor by the name of Yura Lisovets, sat glued to the library chair, sketching new men’s and women’s clothing designs from every foreign fashion magazine he could get his hands on.

It took Erzol nearly a month to reconstruct the abandoned warehouses. He was constantly running between the Sewing Center and the Old Market. One evening was spent visiting an old friend – Yosif Petrovich Petukhov, director of the Sewing Vocational School.

Yosif Petrovich, a man of about fifty, always wore a jacket and tie, even at home. He and his wife had a tradition, which

was followed regardless of weather or season – drinking tea from the samovar on their porch.

The meeting took place according to a once-and-for-all established ritual. Erzol would admire the flowering garden, which shielded the home from prying eyes, exchanging small talk with the lady of the house. The men would then move on to discuss the latest game between Lokomotiv and Spartak. Arguments about forwards provided a brief distraction from vital problems surrounding tailoring workshops – the lack of master tailors and their general incompetence. Much like in football, the men were experts in this topic.

“Petrovich, I need your girls,” Erzol suddenly blurted out.

The director looked at his wife cautiously, mouth agape.

“Why?” he asked, lowering his voice and shuffling through images in his head, each racier than the next.

“I need tailors,” Erzol replied, also transitioning to a whisper. “Skilled ones. I’m opening a workshop.”

“What workshop?”

“To process non-liquid fabric. I want to build it in the Old Market.”

“So that’s what you want!” Petrovich shook his sharp beard, which he was growing to resemble Felix Dzerzhinsky, in silent laughter. “You know my girls. Take any of them.”

“I don’t need one of them. I need a whole class. Do we have a deal?”

“Why wouldn’t we have a deal? Write a proposal and we’ll file for an allocation. Just make sure to give them a good salary.”

“I pay commission bonuses. The more they sew, the more they’ll get paid.”

The men went on to talk about this and that for a little while. Then Erzol said his goodbyes and headed home. He walked through the evening city happily, whistling ‘Toreador’ from the opera Carmen. The staffing issue for his new

workshop had been resolved. The mere thought of this boiled Erzol's blood from excitement.

The next day, Erzol Babaev went to the office of the chairman of the City Executive Committee and filed a petition asking permission to build an addition to the new workshop at the Old Market. The secretary huffed as she took the papers.

"The chairman is at a meeting and can't see any visitors. But leave the petition here, Aleksey Naumovich, and I'll make sure he gets it.

Babaev smiled gallantly and handed a paper packet to the girl. Intrigued, the secretary unwrapped it and pulled out a beautiful silk scarf.

"Oh, Alexei Naumovich," she said, smiling ear to ear, "you certainly have a way with women."

"What way? This is straight from the heart."

"Your heart and the scarf are both lovely," the secretary replied. "Thank you very much."

She threw the scarf over her neck, walked up to a mirror and started looking at herself, using her reflection to toss playful glances at the visitor. Then, she casually walked right up to Erzol.

"Your name was mentioned at a meeting yesterday. I heard it – just barely. Comrade Murakhovsky was upset and screaming, demanding to know who allowed you to start construction in the city. The chairman of the executive committee agreed with him. Anyways, don't tell anyone I told you, but I think you might have to put your plans on hold."

Erzol listened carefully, nodded to thank her for the information, and quietly left the reception area.

In two hours, he was speaking to Lobov in Moscow.

"Ah! Aleksey! Happy to hear from you. How are things at the workshop?"

"I already sent your wife a few samples from our new experimental collection."

“Thank you, thank you,” Lobov’s voice purred through the receiver. “We got them. I was ordered to convey her utmost gratitude.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Tell me why you’re calling. I heard they aren’t playing nice over there?”

“Yes, there’s a tiny problem. We’d like to expand, but can’t get the construction permits. Perhaps you could facilitate things?”

“You mean with Grigoryev? The chairman of the City Executive Committee? Don’t worry – I’ll call him.”

Erzol sighed in relief. Now it was all about how Comrade Murakhovsky would counter.

The following day, Father visited the City Executive Committee chairman’s reception area again. The secretary met him with a radiant smile.

“Hello, you gallant man. I have news for you. Sergey Nikolayevich signed your petition. You may resume construction.”

Erzol picked up the paper in disbelief, skimmed it, and the smile gradually faded off his face. A resolution was written on the bottom of the paper in sweeping handwriting: ‘commence construction only after coordinating with the city architect.’

Erzol stood quiet for a moment, mentally storming the last bastion.

“How long until they meet about the city’s architectural improvement?” he asked the chairman’s assistant. She went on to shuffle through some papers and emerged in about three minutes holding two folders in each hand.

“The next one is in three months.”

“There’s nothing sooner?”

“Surely you understand, Aleksey Naumovich, that the members of the City Architectural Improvement Commis-



sion are numerous. In order to get everyone together, arrangements must be made. That takes about three months. There's no way to do it quicker."

"I see."

Erzol straightened himself and darted out of the office. The chairman's assistant followed him out with a sympathetic gaze. To think that such a charming man would be without a wife!

Erzol went to a card game with his friends on the Accountants' Building veranda.

"What's new?" Boris Buglak asked.

"I went to the City Executive Committee. Filed a petition for an addition to the workshop."

"What did they say?"

"They wrote that I have to 'coordinate with the city architect'."

"So what's the problem?"

Erzol took a big gulp of beer.

"The problem is that that can't happen until three months from now, and we need a workshop tomorrow."

"So what do we do?" Boris asked.

"Good things come to those who deserve it!" Erzol threw an ace on the table.

The following day, City Committee Secretary Murakhovsky felt faint in his office. The emergency doctor diagnosed preinfarction syndrome, and the faithful Leninist was sent to intensive care. The following day, he was transferred to the regular ward, and from there to a health resort. A follow-up consultation recommended another month of sanatorium rehabilitation. Ultimately, it was another three months before the City Committee Secretary returned home.

Murakhovsky entered his own apartment. Dear God, he'd been gone for so long. A sweet shiver swept through this body as the nostalgic secretary approached the window. The view

of his street warmed his soul. Comrade Murakhovsky looked pensively at the courtyard, then shifted his gaze at the Old Market and froze. He took his glasses off and wiped them clean – the image remained the same. Right in the middle of the Old Market stood a two-story industrial building. Brand new and shiny, with disgustingly bright walls.

The secretary's face turned beet red and he reached for the telephone.

"Do you feel faint?" his wife asked tenderly.

"No," Murakhovsky rattled. "Dial this number."

The wife, struggling to get her fingers into the holes in the rotary disc, dialed.

"San-Sanych! What is this factory that sprung up before my window? Who allowed this? In the city center! Well, find out!"

The secretary threw down the receiver. The phone rang three minutes later.

"Yes, San-Sanych! Who built it? Babaev! A non-liquid fabric processing workshop?" Murakhovsky's face took on a bluish tint and his voice transitioned to a screech. "Call him before the City Committee! Tomorrow! How dare he!"

He took a deep breath before declaring his final verdict, but the other end of the line said something to him.

"How?" he gasped. His face was nearly purple. "He got permission from the Central Committee itself? Hold on, I didn't hear you right, bad connection..." Murakhovsky paused. He looked out of the window, even took off his glasses. "Listen, San-Sanych, I thought about it, maybe we shouldn't call anyone before the City Committee. Perhaps Babaev's right? You know, now that I've looked at it more closely, the workshop doesn't look half bad. Just like an apartment building! It even improves the landscape. Much better than a vacant lot."

Murakhovsky gently hung up the phone.

“That rascal!” he said, wiping sweat off his brow. “Well, let the rascal be a rascal! Without the architect’s consent or anything! Just a call from above. Some connections this guy has!”

A few days later, Erzol ran into Murakhovsky’s friend – the chairman of the City Executive Committee. He stopped him, shook his head, and said:

“Aleksey, didn’t I tell you to coordinate? And you just went ahead and built it. I tell you – I give you a finger, and you bite off the whole hand.”

“Tell me your secret. How do you do it?” Boris Buglak asked Erzol the next time the group was playing cards on the porch.

The friends looked among themselves slyly.

“We wouldn’t want you to get in trouble!”

“What for? I’m not doing anything wrong!”

“Of course you aren’t! One could say that, if not for you, our people would be walking around naked.”

Everyone erupted in laughter.

“So?” Erzol asked, lifting his shot glass. “To the start of good business?”

“To the start of good business!” the two others echoed in unison.

The men clinked their glasses.

A few days later, while walking near the workshop, Erzol Babaev came across a staircase behind a hill that led underground. Intrigued, he descended and found a metal door with a plaque reading ‘Caution – Entry Forbidden’. This was the city bomb shelter, left over from wartime.

“That would make an excellent warehouse!” Erzol exclaimed.

The very next day, he was at the City Executive Committee chairman’s office. The conversation took no more than twenty minutes. Father walked out of the office waving a piece of paper – a rental permit. The City Military Committee protested

in vain that the whole city would perish should a war with China break out, since there wouldn't be anywhere to hide.

No one could do anything about Babaev, and none of his friends understood where his power was rooted. Only Father knew the secret to his success, and he kept it under lock and key.

## LIII

**M**y brother and I each finished our first years of university. Father continued to take care of us and regularly visited Krasnodar, always bringing Valentina along. She would quickly set a table and we would spend hours telling Father stories of our happenings. Erzol seemed happy in those moments. He would sit and listen to us attentively, often with a stern or incredulous expression, smiling rarely and often responding with a vague “Well, then.”

Valya scurried about in the background, either putting plates on the table or clearing them. In a few hours, she somehow managed to fill our bachelor pad with homely charm.

One time, during our third year, Father visited us alone. He quietly entered the apartment, tossed his fat briefcase into the foyer and entered the living without taking off his coat. He sat at the table.

“Make some tea,” he told me.

I went to put the kettle on the stove.

“Where’s Valya?” I asked, sensing that something strange was happening.

For whatever reason, Father shot me an enraged glance.

The conversation continued according to usual protocol. “How are you? What’s new at school?” and so on. But the fact that Father wasn’t himself didn’t go unnoticed.

Later that evening, after he had left and we were on our own, I asked Slava:

“Do you know what happened to Valya?”

He looked at me warily and vaguely shrugged.

“I don’t understand your signals!” I burst out.

Slava grimaced.

“They broke up,” he said.

“How? They’ve been together for eleven years.”

In response, Slava shrugged again. We didn’t speak of it again. Slava went to Zoya’s, and I hit the books. Focusing, however, was out of the question. Valya had been a second mother to me, and we were very close. I liked to consider myself to be one of her favorites. And now she was out of my life. This was akin to betrayal. I was still unskilled in rebuffing such bitter twists of fate, and took it very hard.

I hoped that Valya and Father would reconcile, and that everything that Slava said would turn out to be wrong, but days went by, as did weeks, and Valya didn’t visit. Only then did I conclude that this was it.

What really happened between them wasn’t revealed to me until years later.

During the summer, Valya felt that something odd was happening to her. Her figure grew noticeably plumper, which was annoying to a woman her age, and, to add, she started getting sudden faintness episodes. At first, she chalked it up to a cold. But days went by, and the faintness remained, joined by nausea. Valya started getting seriously concerned and went to the doctor.

Watching the doctor wash his hands before the exam, she grew nervous. She thought of the worst: ‘serious illness’ or something even more dreadful. But after the exam, the doctor looked at her happily and said:

“Congratulations!”

Valya was taken aback.

“What for?”

“Congratulations, Valentina...” The doctor paged through the medical history in search of her patronym. “You’re expecting a child.”

The walls started swimming before her eyes. Had she not been sitting, she would have collapsed.

“How far along?”

“Four months.”

Valya bit her lip and left the office, forgetting to say goodbye. She didn’t have the courage to go home to Erzol, so she went to her mother’s.

“I’m pregnant,” she said right off the bat.

Her mother clasped her hands, also frightened.

“How do you think Erzol will take it?”

“I don’t know. He isn’t used to surprises from my end.”

Indeed, after eleven years of their life together, Erzol stopped worrying about the possibility of having another child, and here was this.

Next day, at work, she approached Erzol at an opportune moment.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“What happened?” he grumbled.

“I’m pregnant.”

“How?” Erzol stared at her as if she had told him that the moon had fallen from the sky.

“Three months.”

Valya fell silent and lowered her gaze, then looked up at Erzol.

“Why are you like this? You wanna kill me, or something? You think I did it on purpose?”

Something strange came over Erzol’s eyes as he listened to Valya’s words. He wasn’t ready for this. The black coals that suddenly replaced them burned with suffering, which was turning into rage. He didn’t think about her pregnancy, but that she had tricked him, did something to disrupt his plans. But what if it was true? The flame leapt into his soul, but he quenched it with invisible tears. Erzol paced around the room.

“Are you sure there isn’t a mistake?”

“Oh, dear God. No, there isn’t a mistake.” Valya smiled at him exhaustedly.

Erzol said nothing else and left the office as hundreds of questions circled around in his head. He returned home glummer than a storm cloud. Liza was at the stove, about to put a giant pie into the oven. Noticing the expression on Erzol’s face, she put it aside.

“What’s wrong?”

Erzol looked at the window for a long while, then broke down and told her. Liza grabbed her head.

“How could she? She did it on purpose... To tie you down.”

“Liza – are you serious?”

Erzol was surprised by his sister’s reaction, but the seeds of the notion of Valya trying to ‘tie him down’ fell upon fertile soil.

“She isn’t your wife!” Liza exclaimed, her eyes widening. “She needs to have an abortion. You can’t have another child. You haven’t yet raised the four you have.”

Erzol’s headache grew sharper, and the lights in the room seemed to dim.

“She’s too far along. Who’s going to do it?”

“I have plenty of friends who can find someone.”

“What if I married her?”



Liza looked like she'd been struck by lightning.

"Are you nuts? Say that to Mother, and she'll have a heart attack!" Liza started running around the kitchen. "What were you thinking? You can't continue stepping on the same rake over and over! They're using you. She should have warned you."

That was a terrifying word for Father. Being used by someone was the one thing in the world he feared most.

"Not to mention that she isn't Jewish," Liza continued.

She grew more and more nervous. Liza was never one to reveal her thoughts, and here she was, spilling them all like a dam had burst. Had the situation been different, Erzol would have found her reaction alarming, but in this case, he almost agreed with her.

"What's wrong with what you have now?" Liza continued. "You need a woman? Fine – here she is, right at your side. Take her! Live with her! No one's telling her to go! By why go to the wedding registry? Was it her idea? I'll talk to her myself."

"Calm down." Erzol slapped his palm on the table.

Liza's eyes widened, as if her brother had truly crossed the line.

"I'd rather die than see you marry her!"

She said this so suddenly, with such rage, that Erzol recoiled. This admission was akin to an illegal wrestling maneuver – a gut punch – but it worked.

Erzol took a bottle of vodka out of the cupboard, poured himself a full glass, and drank it.

He tried reading the paper, but everything there was the same. A five-year plan being fulfilled in four. Brezhnev's negotiating with Tsedenbal. All these things were so distant from his life, from the problems that interrupted his peaceful existence. He returned to the kitchen, made some tea and drank it, cup after cup, tensely pondering something as he

did it. A dull displeasure with Valya grew and grew. After eleven years, he was overcome by a strong desire to do all the 'i's.

The following morning, he approached Valya at the Sewing Center. She was the first one that had showed up.

"Did you not leave work last night?" she asked quietly, entering his office. Not waiting for an answer, she picked something up off his desk, a pattern, a sketch, or a cut of fabric – Erzol didn't get a chance to see what it was – and turned around to leave.

"Stay," he told her, barely audibly.

Valya stood still.

"Why?"

"Sit down," he commanded in a steely voice. "I thought about what you had told me yesterday. You need to end the pregnancy."

"Are you crazy? No one has abortions at that stage."

"And I said you'll get one," Erzol said in a threatening voice. "You want to tie me down? I don't need that freak!"

Valya left the office, carefully closing the door behind her. This was that very moment when all love was lost.

She didn't speak to or look at anyone for the rest of the workday. Whenever Erzol entered the workshop, Valya seemed to shrink, as if an invisible force was pulling her away, beyond the bounds of his control.

The evening before Valya told Erzol of her pregnancy, Havo and Liza were alone in the kitchen.

"Have you noticed how she looks?"

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"What do you think? Valka..." This was the first time Havo had referred to her with the diminutive. "She looks odd."

"Same as always, if you ask me," Liza said, stretching her words.

"Are you serious?" Havo said, irritated. "I'm not blind. Just look at her."

“What are you talking about, Mama?”

“Oh, you children... Teach you or not...” Havo began, in frustration. “Fine. Time will tell.”

She was silent for some time, occupied with her dilemmas, then turned to Liza and said.

“Do me a favor and take another look at Valka. She seems to have gained weight. Understand?”

Liza clasped her hands, staring at Havo.

“You don’t say...”

Havo raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“Mama, that’s impossible. I’ve talked to her about it many times. She takes precautions.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! Look at her yourself, then tell me if I’m right or not. This isn’t a dislocated shoulder. You can’t correct this as easily.”

Liza stayed quiet, pondering her mother’s words.

“Could she have done it on purpose?”

“I don’t know what I can think. It’s not like my word is law to you kids! I just tell it as I see it, you know?” Havo started clattering pots. “Eleven years together. That’s no joke... Who knows what’s going on in that head?”

So when the following day her brother told her about Valentina’s pregnancy, Liza exploded. Her position toward Valya’s future child was irreconcilable. Havo could help Russians, could be pleasant with them, but would never in her life agree to mix her clan’s blood with them. Such was the law of her ancestors.

Valya milled about for a day or two, then found a doctor on her own, through friends. When Erzol told her ‘I don’t need that freak’, he killed all the feelings she ever had for him, and her hope for their future.

She went to a basement apartment at the appointed time. She felt exhausted, unable to make a single gesture. If one were to ask her what street she was on, she couldn’t answer.

She went home nearly blindly. She had money for a taxi, and, to add insult to injury, no driver wanted to travel into the boonies where her home was. She was forced to wait for a bus. She couldn't get the doctor's words out of her mind: "You would have had twins. Boys."

Valya barely recalled how she got home. She opened the door and fainted in the hallway, scaring her mother half to death.

How long did she lie in bed? She seemed to lose count of the days. Evidently, she needed to be rescued after what had happened to her, but there was no one there to do so. And, for some reason, her mother kept saying terrible things to Valentina, words that pierced her like rusty spikes.

"He corrupted you. He tore you from your sons. All you have left is a lost soul. What if you can't have kids again? Did you think about that?"

Valya listened in silence, without replying, tears pouring from her eyes.

One day, there was a knock on their door. Erzol stood on the threshold with a bouquet of flowers. When Valya heard this, she asked her mother not to let him in.

"Tell him I don't feel well! I'm sick," she said, and covered her head with the blanket.

Through the wall, Valya could hear Erzol's eager voice and her mother's replies that her daughter was sick. When the front door closed and she heard the sound of a car driving way beyond the window, Valya called her mother and told her to throw away the flowers that he had left for her.

A whole week had passed before Valya was able to return to work. Everything at the Sewing Center was as it was before, short of everyone seeming to look at her with sympathy.

When Valya saw Erzol, she nodded to him, as one would to a good friend, but no more. She didn't come to his home with him the first evening, or the second. He tried to make

conversation and joke around, but she either didn't understand him or pretended not to. Something in their relationship had broken, like the winding mechanism in a child's toy.

Valya's mother, seeing her state, would often come up to her daughter, hug her, and both would start weeping.

"You should have kept them," her mother once told her. "We could have raised them."

"Yeah?" Valya replied hysterically. "But what good is that now?"

She fell silent.

After about three weeks, Valya didn't show up to work. Erzol called her at home. Her mother said that she was sick and can't come to the phone.

Erzol irately threw the phone aside and didn't call again.

"If she wants to, she'll come," he exclaimed hot-headedly.

After Valya hadn't come to work for a whole week, it occurred to him that something was wrong, so he got on a taxi and went to her home. He knocked. It was a while before someone responded. Finally, Valya's mother came to the door, displeased by the noise.

"What's with all the commotion?" she asked.

Erzol was speechless.

"Don't you recognize me?" His face erupted in customary red anger spots. "I want to talk to Valya."

"She isn't here."

"What do you mean, she isn't here?"

"Exactly that! She left. Didn't say where to."

Erzol shook his head in disbelief.

"You want to look for yourself?" the old woman said angrily and opened the doors wide before him. There wasn't as much as a hint of Valya's presence. Even the closets, which she opened for him, didn't have a single one of her dresses in them.

"So where did she go?"

"I don't know."

Not wanting to go home, Erzol told the driver to go back to the Sewing Center. Regardless of the late hour, the workshop teemed with activity. Erzol went up to the second floor and went to the human resources department, where Valya's friend worked.

"Do you know what happened to Valya?"

"Oh," she replied, frazzled. "I thought you knew. She quit."

"What do you mean she quit?"

"She came by the other day. Asked not to disturb you, said she'll explain it to you in person, and quit."

He slammed the door, ran to the workshop, and started interrogating Valya's friends. They confirmed that she was planning to quit – seemingly intending to move to another city.

"Alone?" Erzol asked in disbelief.

"With Valera."

"What Valera?"

This was like a bad dream. Erzol started laughing. Valera was their driver, who studied in the same school as his sons. Erzol had introduced him to Valya so that he could drive her to and from work. What other tailor could boast a private driver? Babaev's women always got the very best, just like the wives of City Committee Secretaries and party officials. How could she abandon all that?

But the truth was funny to the point of being banal. Valya had escaped. Escaped with their chauffeur, leaving him – Erzol Babaev. Father was ready for anything, except abandonment. He thirsted for revenge. Or, perhaps, he simply didn't realize that he was suffering.

A dreary autumn followed. The days seemed hopelessly gray, the streets deserted. One could walk along Kislovodsk's central, most beautiful street without encountering a single person.

The city descended into a sleepy stupor. There were days where a boundless sadness permeated the air, much like the anguish that filled the heart of the abandoned man, who,

suddenly alone, realized that his prior good mood and peace of mind turned out to have been love.

Only a year later, after we graduated from university, did I find out that Valya was back in Kislovodsk. She and Valera hid in Shevchenko, Ukraine for a whole year. When Valya's savings were exhausted, they returned.

Whether or not she was happy in her marriage, Erzol didn't know. Nor did he care, for that matter. The fact was that Valera had officially become her husband.

The return to Kislovodsk had certain consequences for Valentina as well. She decided to turn to her old friends for help. One of her and Erzol's fellow students at the Soviet Trade Institute was a man named Nikolay, a Georgian man with a colorful appearance. By then, he had become a department supervisor at the City Executive Committee Dining Services office. Valya decided to turn to him.

The old friends greeted one another warmly.

"Long time, no see!"

Something seemed to bother Nikolay, but Valya paid it no mind.

"Kolya, I need a job. I heard that they need a director at the circus café. You know that I have experience and that I can handle it."

Nikolay grimaced.

"Who told you?"

"Zina Malyarova. Remember her? She studied with us. She was promoted, and now her spot's free."

"Well, yes. It's free," Nikolay replied, his eyes darting around the room. "But... I'm so sorry, but I can't give you that job."

"Why not? It's available, isn't it? You don't think I'm a good fit?"

Valya was annoyed. She had such hopes for this job, and Kolya seemed to be hiding something.



“No, you’re a good fit. But here’s the thing... Well – you know, first you disappeared, and now you’ve reappeared... Asking for work...”

“What?” Suddenly, Valya came to a realization. “Erzol forbade you, didn’t he? He forbade you to hire me, right?”

She fell silent, shocked by the extent of Erzol’s influence.

Nikolay grew even more nervous.

“I don’t meddle in your affairs. Yes, there’s a spot. Let me think it over. Come back in a week, okay?”

Valya was uneasy for a whole week, all in nerves. She finally went back to Nikolay, who greeted her happily – this time appearing genuine.

“Your business is settled,” he said right away. “Don’t worry.”

Valya smiled, barely visibly. Erzol was merciful after all. Something stirred within her soul before disappearing. The past could not be brought back.

Valya dreaded their encounter, but it did take place, at Erzol’s own initiative, no less. One day, he visited the circus, clearly unconcerned with the show. He bought a ticket but went straight to the cafeteria. While trained predators bared their teeth on the arena, he stood by the counter talking to Valya.

He would continue to come by. The conversations were largely about nothing in particular. He seemed to be trying to pave a path back to her heart, trying to bring back what had been lost. Perhaps that’s when he realized he loved her – for the first time in his life. When he finally knew it, he did everything he could to bring her back. But it was all in vain.

Oh, how he tried to win Valya back! Each time, he would bring a new woman with him – younger or older – and introduce her, as if trying to tell her: ‘Look – I’m not alone. I’m fine without you.’ But the more of them he brought over, the more obvious it became to Valya that he misses her.

One day, she couldn’t resist and asked him:



“Why do you keep showing off your girls to me? What use are they to me? Stop it.”

Father laughed it off, seemingly realizing his blunder.

But his most surprising act came later, when Valya was once again pregnant, this time quite obviously. Father came to her at the cafeteria and asked her directly:

“Come back to me. Give birth to your child and come back. I’ll raise him.”

But Valya didn’t believe him.

“I can’t,” she said. “Let’s just be friends. We don’t need all this. We had a good time. Let’s remember that, and not hold grudges.”

Erzol was quiet for a half a minute, then nodded angrily.

“Fine.”

He never went to the circus again.

A young girl – also named of Valya – whom Erzol had brought to the circus several times, became his wife and brought him happiness: a child – a girl they named Katya.

The friendship between the first Valentina – let’s call her that – and our father remained. Many years later, while in transit through Moscow, she even stayed in Erzol’s apartment, met his wife, her namesake Valya, and their daughter. They became friends. And that’s how strange life can be sometimes.

## LIV

**I**n the meantime, Slava graduated from university and was assigned to work at the Krasnodar Distilling Plant, assuming the key position of chief technologist. This, of course, didn't happen without Father's help.

Until a certain time, we, his children, didn't pay much thought to the fact that he was guiding our fates like a skill juggler handling his pins. The only aspect of our lives that Erzol didn't interfere in, allowing us to feel, to a certain point, free, was romance – matters of the heart.

During the final years of my studies, I would visit my older brother at the plant quite often, pretending to be a contractor. After I'd get a pass and come in, Slava would take me to his office and supply me with bottles of liqueurs, cognac and other potables. To the joy of my fellow students, I would bring the bottles to the dorms to help celebrate birthdays and other occasions.

It was here at the distilling plant that Slava introduced me to a girl. His student days were behind him, and Zoya, the colonel's daughter and neighbor, had already been forgotten, freeing Slava's heart to be occupied by others.

We sat in the dining room, discussing current events. Suddenly, Slava's speech cut off and he pointed somewhere behind my back.

"Wait! Turn around and take a look – but casually. There's a girl sitting by the window.

I did what he said, but didn't spot anyone worthy of our attention.

"No, not that way! The other direction."

I repeated the same maneuver in the other direction and spotted the one that caught my brother's eye.

"Galya," Slava whispered. "Not bad, right?"

She had a long, oval face and jet-black hair. She had dark eyes, a straight nose, narrow lips and a sharp chin. Her main asset was her snow-white skin – skin tone that was achieved by centuries of living in Caucasus's fogs, which wash women's faces from generation to generation.

"Not bad, right? Go for it."

"You go for it, Slava."

We changed the subject, forgetting about the girl. A month passed, then another, then six. At one of our subsequent meetings, Slava admitted to the fact that he and Galya started dating.

"Who are her parents?"

"Her mother's Adyghe and her father's Russian."

"Not Jewish, then?"

"No. So what? Anyways, we're serious."

"Like you were with Zoya?"

"No way – more serious than that. Listen, Igor, I need your advice."

Slava paused. I was all ears.

“What if this is where my fate lies? What if I need to... well,” he raised his eyes toward the ceiling. “I wanna marry her.”

“Why? If you like her, just keep dating her.”

“No, she’s not like that. It’s serious. Just don’t tell Father anything yet, but I think that...” Slava didn’t finish. Two wrinkles formed at the bridge of his nose as he sank deep into thought.

“Do you know what you’re saying? You’re in deep, old man,” I replied, trying to put some sense into him.

“Of course I know. That’s why I asked for your advice. Speaking of which, you didn’t say what you think of her.”

“What’s there to say? Congratulations. Damn, I’m very late. I’m sorry, but I need to run.”

I really was in a rush to get somewhere. Slava shoved a requisite liquor bottle in my briefcase, and walked me to the door. Patting me on the shoulder, he asked again:

“So you really do like her?”

“Would I lie to you?”

That’s where we parted. Afterwards, I saw Galya and Slava together many times. He insisted that we get to know each other better. One time, we all took a walk through the city and went to a café. During our walk, Galya kept throwing dreamy glances Slava’s way. At that point, their relationship became much clearer to me. She looked at my brother as if he was a book full of interesting stories, and he returned the favor. It was obvious that the young people really enjoyed one another’s company. And so they continued to date.

One day, Slava asked me.

“Are you worried about the fact that Galya isn’t Jewish?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I looked at my brother, surprised.

“You’re forgetting how that issue is handled at our home,” Slava replied, looking at me skeptically.

"If you mean Valya, this is completely different. Stop it. We're in the latter half of the twentieth century – the age of progress." I genuinely didn't understand Slava's concern.

He shrugged.

"We're going to go to Kislovodsk soon. By the way, I..." Slava paused uncomfortably. "When we go home... Could you talk to Father? I've made up my mind. I'd like to marry Galya."

"Really?"

"I need to get his consent. You know how our traditions go. It's improper for me to approach him myself."

"Yeah! Of course!"

At that time, I was flippant and self-confident. My brother's happy announcement had made me giddy. What could be more important than love? I did not take any counterarguments into account, so the conversation ended there.

A week later, we traveled home to Kislovodsk. The whole time, I felt responsible for my brother's future happiness. I chose a moment and went up to Father's office, where he was sitting at his desk and reading.

"Pop, I need to talk to you."

"You do?" Erzol looked at me curiously. "What about?"

"Well.... It's essentially nonsense. Actually, when I think about it, it's very important."

"I'm confused. Just be direct."

I remembered how we were afraid of pestering father with needless talk while children. Since then, we've learned a stern lesson about what to say to him.

"Father, this is about Slava."

Erzol started laughing. His laughter echoed characteristic of people with great power – laughter that reveals not only joy, but also deep loneliness. Once he was done, I was convinced that everything was going well.

"It's about Slava's future."

"Listen, don't waste my time with your riddles. Tell me what's what."

"You see, Slava is in love with a certain person. Perhaps there's no need to heed our Jewish traditions so closely? The thing is, the bride isn't Jewish. She's pretty and smart. They make a nice couple..."

"Hold on," Father said, interrupting me halfway though. Do you wanna marry her too, or something?"

"Who? Me? No! Not me – Slava!"

"So let Slava talk to me about it," Father replied in a tone that clearly marked the conversation's end and removed the possibility of further argument.

Skippping steps on my way down the stairways, I ran to Slava, who awaited the results of the conversation as if they were a sentencing.

"Father wants you. Good luck. I started it, you finish it."

This was much like childhood, when we would go to father to show him our daybooks. I slapped my brother on the shoulder, and he walked upstairs to settle his fate, attempting to keep composed. He wanted to be as calm as possible when he stood before father, but the stakes were much too high, and thoughts that he might be doing something wrong wouldn't leave his head. Worst of all, he had an unpleasant, unexplained feeling of guilt.

One would be hard pressed to say that the father and son were particularly inspired by seeing one another. Erzol sipped tea from a large mug. Slava sat silently across from him.

"You look terrible," said Erzol, unable to resist a quip. He himself didn't look much better.

"Must be work," Slava replied, shrugging.

"Yes," Father smiles. "The tension will keep you up through the night." He had yet again switched to a subject that concerned him most. "You have something to tell me?"

Slava remained silent.

“So you said everything you wanted?” Father asked, pointing at Slava with his index finger. The room seemed to shrink. “You’re here, so talk.”

“Papa, the thing is, I...”

“Stop it,” Father interrupted. “Who is she?”

“Galya. Her mother’s Adyghe.”

“So her father’s Jewish?”

“No, he’s Russian.”

“Russian. I see. Russian,” Father repeated. “That’s why you sent your brother?”

Slava already regretted he came.

Erzol Babaev was a product of his time. In all of his enterprises, Father was always drawn to the idea of Jewish unity. It was always a key element. For a long time, the Jews had not had their own government, or a king, or even a common way of life. But they were bound much tighter than any other people in the world. How? They were united by the cult of woman – the Jewish mother. That’s why Erzol was supremely confident in one thing: that his sons should marry Jewish women. That way, their children could absorb our people’s unfaltering resolve and uncanny resourcefulness from their very birth. A Jewish wife would help through all of life’s hardships. That’s what troubles were – they came and went, but a wife and mother endured forever.

“Listen to me carefully,” Father began. “We’re Jewish. It isn’t customary for our wives to be Russian.”

“She’s Adyghe.”

“Don’t interrupt,” said Father, raising his voice. “Did you think about the fact that you have two brothers? They look up to you. What will they think if you marry a Russian woman?” Erzol cracked his fingers so loudly that Slava shook. “Life is difficult, and always unclear as to where it’ll lead, but there are parts of it that can’t be changed. For us, Jews, the wife is always the one to provide direction. No other people have

women like that. What did you say her name was? Galya? Fine – say you marry Galya and bring her into your home, where she will be happy that you’re the head engineer at some skuzzy distilling plant. And she’ll be content with that, because she loves you. But feelings alone aren’t enough. A wife needs to be able to force her husband to advance, to strive for more. And that’s why you need a Jewish wife. Understood?”

Slava didn’t reply.

Father continued his pointed speech for a long time. He pulled out a bottle of cognac, and he and Slavik drank it. Then, Havo brought them up some fried eggs, and they continued talking.

“When it gets dark, I sometimes think we’re still in Dagestan, in Makhachkala, and that forces me to pull myself together,” Father suddenly said, smiling. Slava looked at him. Suddenly, he saw his father in a new light. He was big and reliable, like a cliff. “I think we’ve reached an understanding. Am I right?” Erzol concluded. Slava replied with a nod. He was happy. He understood. He couldn’t argue, or even find the words to describe the effect his father’s words have had on him.

I watched the clock impatiently as Slava appeared in the kitchen.

“So?” I ran to my older brother.

“Everything’s great, old man!”

I responded with a happy yelp.

“He gave consent?”

“I don’t need that Galya. I made a mistake with her. A mistake,” Slavik muttered. “It’s better this way.”

The smile faded from my face.

“He’s right, old man. We can’t marry women who aren’t Jewish. It’s the voice of our blood,” Slava added glumly and patted me on the shoulder.



Someone once said: if it's written in your destiny, you'll marry a Chinese princess. That's a lie. It isn't enough to find love – you need to fight for it. Alas, Slava couldn't. What really surprised me about that conversation was the way in which father persuaded Slava. There was no screaming, no threats – just reasoning. He put all the ducks in a row and convinced him that two plus two equals five – that love doesn't matter.

Later on, looking back on this incident, it seemed that, for whatever reason, Father spent his entire life preaching one thing and doing another. His second marriage to the young Russian Valya only reinforced that point.

In any case, Slava's conversation with Father had consequences. An urgent search to find him a Jewish wife commenced. Friends suggested dozens of possibilities and father went to see perspective brides himself. Perhaps he wanted to find one that he would like.

This search brought father into the Mikhailov family. They had three children: Larisa, the oldest, Volodya, the middle son, and Lida, the youngest, still a child. Larisa had turned twenty-one and was still unmarried. The family thought that the young woman's girlhood had stretched too long and could result in tragedy, since she was beautiful and smart – a student at the Stavropol Medical University.

One fine day, the Babaevs were invited to a wedding hosted by the Bakshievs. The Mikhailovs were invited as well. That was in accordance to Jewish custom – to give the opportunity for the future newlyweds – Larisa and Slava – to see one another.

When the dancing started, Slava and I went into the circle. It's customary at a Jewish wedding to shower the bride with money. The more you give, the manlier you are. I quickly spotted Larisa among the guests – her beauty set her apart from the others – and pushed my older brother toward her.

“Come on – go. She's by herself.”

“You can go dance with her first. I’ll look from the side,” Slava whispered.

My pockets were stuffed with ten-ruble bills and I went on to dance. I was a good dancer and had belonged to the Lezginka ensemble at the university. Larisa wasn’t too bad herself. We looked perfect from afar.

I purposely slowed the dance down, so that Slava could get a better look. I’d spin her around, bringing her closer, then father away. Slava could hear the elders whisper: “She’ll make a good wife.” When they’d say that to Slava, he’d blush.

“But I barely know her. What if she doesn’t like me?”

“What are you talking about?”

And then the evening ended and everyone went home. Slava needed to decide – that’s what the custom required. He finally made up his mind.

He and Larisa met in Stavropol. This was a meeting of two total strangers. Larisa decided to break the ice.

“You must be here on business.”

Slava smiled softly and blurted out:

“My mother asked me to visit...”

Larisa’s eyes grew wide. She was open to a number of possibilities, but she didn’t expect that her potential groom would be forced to meet her.

“Your mother? Then tell your mother that she can visit me herself if she wants me to be her daughter in law.”

And that was that.

Years later, I understood what Father really did with Slava’s consciousness: he became indifferent to what his wife would be like, whether she’d be a beauty or a beast. As long as she was Jewish, it was fine. I think that father killed the man within Slava that searched for his own happiness.

But the family continued the search for a bride.

Another time, my brother and I traveled to Dagestan for another bridal visit. We went to a strangers’ wedding. I tried

to figure out who the potential bride was, and was shown a girl who, to be honest, was far from pretty.

“Time to put away the fishing rods,” I cautioned. “This isn’t the one.”

We returned home, and life continued along its course. Few months later, Slava called me:

“Igor – I found a bride! Remember when we went to Dag-estan for that bridal visit? Well – it’s her. Anya.”

Needless to say, my brother nearly killed me with the news. Slava must have sensed my thoughts telepathically.

“You know, I met with her again, and I think she got more attractive.”

I was disappointed. Even Father told him:

“We can find you another. Why do you have to marry this one?”

But Slava was stubborn. ‘So you don’t like this one? I thought you didn’t care as long as she’s Jewish?’

The family kept saying that Slava’s choice was a protest against his father’s will. Havo, however, unexpectedly took Slava’s side.

“Let them marry! Why do you keep saying – find another, find another! What if that’s where his heart lies? She’s Jewish, and God looks over all Jews. Saying anything against one of our own is akin to offending the Creator!”

My brother’s complete indifference to the events surrounding him ended the argument. The wedding happened.

## LV

**B**y then, Slava was already in graduate school. That happened much like everything else in his life – in accordance to Father’s will. As soon as Slava had been appointed chief engineer at the Krasnodar Distilling Plant, Erzol realized the opportunities that lay before his oldest son. He had the potential to become the region’s youngest director, but to do so, ample effort had to be invested.

Father started to pressure Slava:

“You absolutely need to get your master’s degree.”

“Pop, I’m the chief engineer at a plant. Why the hell would I need a master’s degree?”

“You just don’t understand, son! You’ll take this step and return to manufacturing at a completely new level of understanding. Graduate school will open doors for you which are now off limits.”

Father mingled with ministers and Central Committee members, and was quite familiar with the process of being ap-

pointed to an executive position. The best regarded research institute in Slava's field was in Yalta – the Union-Wide Wine-making Research institute, also known as Magarach, the name of the Ancient Greek village that stood on it's site, a name which, ironically, sounded very similar to the Old Russian word for 'kickback'.

Getting admitted there was impossible, and even Erzol's closest friends within the regional administration were powerless to do anything. Father, however, always had an ace up his sleeve. Therefore, a referral from Yakov Dmitriyevich Rudakov could be quite the deciding factor. Graduate admissions required entrance exams in philosophy, a foreign language, and the field of study. Slava urgently flew to Yalta. He presented a portfolio of scientific publications on winemaking to the commission and passed the entrance exams. That, however, wasn't enough.

Yakov Rudakov called Father.

"Erzol, the graduate admissions decisions for Magarach come from Moscow. Here's a man's phone number. If you find a way to go visit him, he'll help you."

It's unclear what Erzol had told the man in Moscow, but Slava got in. And so he went back and forth – between Krasnodar, where he and his wife Anya lived, and Yalta. One could easily call him fortune's pet. Few knew, however, that Slava also led a secret life.

His marriage to a person he didn't love took its toll. First he had one lover, then another. He must have wanted to forget himself, to find peace, be happy. Perhaps he wanted to have at least something in his life that he got via his own will, even if it meant cheating.

As folk wisdom dictates, if you steal, someone will steal from you. Anya soon got pregnant, but her first child was still-born due to an infection. Was this retribution for the liberties that Slava took? Who knows. By disallowing him to marry

the woman he really loved, Erzol had condemned his oldest son to suffering.

Other than that, however, Father was happy with the way his sons' lives were turning out. They were moving along the trajectory he had chosen for them.

## LVI

I graduated from Krasnodar Polytechnic and Father arranged for me to be assigned to the Experimental Dietary Canning Plant in Yessentuki. I had just turned twenty-one, but was already starting my career at the rank of senior master.

The plant director took me to the workshop where the canning experiments were taking place. Simply put, special machines would pick jars up by the rim, pump them full of fruit filling, and then screw a lid on. The long conveyer belt that carried the results of these ‘experiments’ even looked impactful from an observer’s perspective. Everything was clean, and everyone wore aprons. The only thing that stuck out were the packing ladies, who would shove their fingers into the jars from time to time to taste the product.

The canning plant didn’t pay much and was experiencing a staffing shortage. I had to become jack-of-all-trades – fill in at the assembly line, load crates, drive the forklift. The men

respected me because I wasn't a mama's boy and took all work that was handed to me without complaint.

Berry season – when strawberry marmalade would be made – became a de facto aptitude test. The problem was that all the strawberries that summer had suddenly vanished in only a few days. The collective workers said that the crops first took a beating from the heavy rains, and then were further decimated by the drought that followed. The plant was left without berries. But did the State Planning Committee care? The doers were far removed from the deciders. Then, however, someone in management had an idea: 'Why not make jam instead of marmalade? The plan doesn't specify the type of product we have to supply.' Jam could be made out of any fruit puree. It was said and done. Ultimately, instead of strawberry marmalade, we made strawberry-apple jam, which flooded the entire country, exceeding quotas.

In a year, I was appointed chief technologist of the entire enterprise. That was good enough, but Father insisted I aim higher. Soon, I was elected secretary of the Komsomol. Then, a conversation took place with my father.

"Listen, son, you're going to become an industrialist," Erzol said, "but we need to think about your path upward. You need to think about your graduate studies. But first, you need to join the Party. After that, it's easy. You'll get a master's at a minimum, tell them all about Tsedenbal, and be done with it."

To Erzol, party membership was merely a tool he could use to get ahead. It was a bullet point in Erzol's career-building manual, and upward mobility was a subject in which Father's mastery was genius. He always found an optimal path toward his goal. It wasn't always straightforward, but it always led to something bigger.

I went on to write a petition to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which led to the plant's party organization



secretary to call me to his office. His welcome was far from warm. He didn't even lift his head to look at me – just kept shuffling through papers.

"We received your petition, Comrade Babaev," he began sternly.

His tone seemed to only leave two possibilities open: either things weren't going well for the party, or they weren't going well for Igor Babaev. The secretary raised his eyes off the paperwork and looked me straight in the eye, much like the guy on the 'Be vigilant, the enemy doesn't sleep' poster.

"Igor, you're a good worker. As for joining the party... You have some nerve!"

"What's wrong?" I asked, confused.

"You want everything at once. Our candidates generally have about five years worth of experience. You, on the other hand, just got here, and already you're asking to join the party. Maybe pump the brakes a little and not rush? We need to get a better look at you."

I nodded in accord, as did the secretary, and we peacefully parted ways.

A few days later, I met Father at home. I didn't visit as often after I became chief technologist, as I now lived in a dorm in Yessentuki.

"How are things at the plant? How are your coworkers? Any updates on party membership?" Erzol started asking.

"Well, as far as party membership goes, I have no idea."

"How's that? You need a party ticket. You hear me? It's a lot easier to join the party at work than it is in school."

"The secretary told me yesterday that I'm rushing it and that I still have time."

Father's eyebrows started crawling up his forehead.

"Rushing it? You're the Komsomol secretary. You've been there for over a year. You have every reason to apply for party membership."

“He said that they need to get a better look at me.”

“Who do they think you are – a spy – that they need to look at you?” Father slammed his palm onto the table and didn’t broach the subject again.

The following day, as soon as I arrived at work, the secretary ran into the workshop and told me that ‘they’ want me. I followed her. Once in the director’s reception, the director’s secretary briefed me:

“Mikhail Andreyevich Shulga, the First Secretary of the Yessentuki City Party Committee, has scheduled a meeting with you tomorrow. Do you understand?” The other secretary looked at me, frightened.

I showed up at the office at the appointed time. A large portrait of Lenin hung over the desk. Mikhail Andreyevich was in a good mood. Without getting up, he shook my hand.

“Hello-hello! Please, sit down. You’ve matured! How are you? How’s work?”

“Work’s fine. Filling those quotas.”

“You were planning on going into graduate studies, right?”

I didn’t recall ever making him privy to my plans.

“Yes, I was. I just need to get the necessary publications ready.

“I see,” said the Secretary of the City Committee and scratched behind his ear. “And what about joining the Party? Why haven’t you applied?”

“I have. The people at the plant told me that I have enough on my hands. As in, that I shouldn’t rush.”

“Well, you can see where those comrades are coming from. You must be a good Komsomol member, if they’re unwilling to let you go. Well, so long. Tell your father I said hello.”

I was puzzled by this conversation. Why had they called me in the first place? I returned to the plant and forgot about it all, consumed by issues surrounding a malfunctioning transporter.

The director's secretary once again interrupted my work.

"Igor Alekseyevich, you're urgently wanted at the party organizer's office."

This time, the party secretary was overjoyed to greet me.

"My dear friend Igor! Come in. You know, we took a closer look at your case. After the committee discussed it, we decided that you're probably right – it's time to join the Communist Party."

Only at that moment did I realize the extent of my father's power and understood why people called him 'king' behind his back.

So I began preparing for graduate school admission. The school of choice was the Moscow Meat and Dairy Institute. I would have to study there full time, but father decided that remaining at my chief technologist position at the canning plant shouldn't even be a consideration if I had a shot at becoming a director. He had a simple mission – to enroll me at a university in Moscow. To succeed, he needed to get me a designated space at the institution. That decision depended on one man – a Communist Party Central Committee instructor whose friends called him exclusively by his patronym: Kuzmich.

Everything began with Yakov Dmitriyevich Rudakov introducing Erzol to Nikolay Petrovich Yanushkin, the rector of the Moscow Meat and Dairy Institute. When Rudakov took his next business trip to the capital, he dragged Erzol with him. 'Dragged' is, of course, a strong word. Everything was done in a calculated manner. Erzol went because the issue of my graduate enrollment was at stake.

What did business involve back then? Conversations and dinners. Father reserved at table at the restaurant at Rossiya Hotel overlooking the Red Square.

Nikolay Petrovich Yanushkin was a veteran, and Rudakov greeted him like a brother.

“Meet Aleksey,” Rudakov said, introducing Father. “We’re close. His older son is studying at the winemaking faculty at Magarach. I helped him. Now, his younger son just finished studying with me. He’s a very quick learner and works in Yes-sentuki – a very bright guy. He wants to move on to graduate school. In your field.”

“Let me find out how to reach Silchenko,” Yanushkin suggested. “We won’t get anything done without Silchenko.”

And that’s how Mikhail Kuzmich Silchenko entered my father’s circle of contacts. He was an instructor and the Agricultural Sector Supervisor of the Communist Party Central Committee, and could arrange a designated space for me at the university. Silchenko promised to help and kept his word.

Father didn’t know how to thank them. Little by little, he was being introduced to higher and higher ranks. He entered the world of very powerful men. Anatoly Tarada was one of them – a colorful member of the Krasnodar Region’s governing elite.

Tarada was in charge of the Industrial Division of the Krasnodar Regional Party Committee. He spoke softly and respectfully, much unlike the stereotypical party official. He was also eager to help when someone needed something. The conditions of his help, of course, varied, but the process was always pleasant for people who haven’t met Tarada before.

It should be mentioned that Tarada was part of Father’s trip to meet with Silchenko. As the Central Committee curator, Kuzmich was the one to confirm Tarada’s appointment to his position. Therefore, one could say that Tarada played a part in getting me admitted to graduate school.

The rest was a matter of logistics. It was time for entrance exams. The philosophy and foreign language ones could be taken in the city of residence – in other words, in our native region, where Father knew everyone. Father wasn’t about

to let that part of the process go untended. He met with the rector of the Pedagogical Institute, and, within hours, took care of everything.

## LVII

I was growing and maturing. Talk began within the family about it being time for me to get married. I only realized what that truly meant when Father told me that we were going on a trip to find me a bride. I still remembered when we went for a bridal visit for Father in Derbent, and that was a while ago. The visits to arrange Slava's marriage didn't leave me with pleasant memories either. And here I was, about to embark on the process myself, and there was nowhere to run.

The bridal visit took place in Makhachkala, and Father's sister Fira accompanied me. The train arrived into the city at 7 a.m. I estimated how long we would have to wait until it would be appropriate to show up at a stranger's home, and shared my concerns with Fira.

"We aren't going to wait," she scoffed, interrupted me.

"Won't they be asleep?"

"That doesn't matter. We're Babaevs. We'll arrive when we see fit."

Her statement came off as arrogant, but Fira knew what she was talking about.

“You don’t know the specifics of the issue,” she told me. “You’ll see. Let’s go!”

When we arrived at the home of the potential bride, it was already filled with a multitude of people. It looked more like the middle of the workday than it did like morning. Everyone was dressed up and running around, as if they hadn’t gone to bed in the first place. They weren’t just waiting for the Babaevs – they were dreaming of us becoming their relatives.

“When did you get up?” I asked unexpectedly. Upon hearing the answer, I thanked God that we moved away from Dagestan and its traditions.

Fira and I went into the room and sat down. After some time, a girl walked in and huddled in the corner. She kept looking at the floor, and I was worried that if she kept sitting like this, she wouldn’t even catch a glance of her potential husband. As if she had sensed my thoughts, she lifted her head and shot a lightning-fast mountain-girl glance at me.

Thankfully, she turned out to be pretty. I started smiling. The food was brought to the table, and conversations befitting the occasion began. When the topic of weather was exhausted, everyone got up. It was only ten a.m. It became clear that I would have to find some way to kill time.

I approached the ‘bride’ and suggested that we take a walk to the city beach to get some air. Fira tagged along and watched us from afar. I was uninhibited and flirted with the girl, who was no longer as shy as she had been that morning.

“Settle down, Igor!” Fira would hiss. “Act appropriately! We’re in Dagestan. People see everything.”

But I couldn’t care less. The girl that I had been introduced to was fun, good looking and perhaps even smart, but my heart just didn’t feel it.

A while later, while we were already in Moscow, Erzol asked me whether I liked her.

“She doesn’t suit us,” I answered.

Father never insisted on a particular Jewish girl. If not one, than another. The search continued, and Slava’s wife Anya joined the efforts. She had a relative in mind in Azerbaijan, so Slava and I headed there.

We were once again greeted by a whole crowd of people. For a long time, I couldn’t figure out which of the girls was being offered for marriage. I looked around the room and whispered to my brother.

“Hey, where’s the bride to be?”

“You’re joking, right?” Slava chuckled. “Right in front of you!”

“Oh, that’s just cruel,” I grumbled, trying to restrain laughter. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

So we left.

The third candidate was sought out with the help of Erzol’s friend Misha Gilyadov. This time around, we went to Derbent.

I felt like a capricious prince, the likes of which the world had never seen, but there was nothing I could do about it. Each girl I was shown seemed uglier than the one before. I was afraid that had I continued, I would have been turned off by women altogether.

Upon return, I told Father:

“Pop, let’s stop with the bridal visits. They’re not going to lead to anything good.”

And so the efforts to marry me off according to ancestral traditions had ended.



## LVIII

**I**t was time to head off to graduate school.

“Your main task,” Father insisted, “is to establish a relationship with research advisor. Got it?”

“Of course, Pop.”

“And don’t party too much.”

As father had promised, I was greeted by the Nikolay Petrovich Yanushkin, the Rector of the Moscow Meat and Dairy Institute. Looking at him, it was obvious that the man was well connected within the Central Committee. Nikolay Petrovich introduced me to the research advisor, whose last name was Kahuchishvili.

“Comrade Kahuchishvili, this is Igor Babaev – the very same promising young man whom I mentioned earlier.”

Professor Kahuchishvili was a tall, skinny bespectacled man of about forty-five. He turned out to be a great guy, as well as a top-ten specialist.

"Igor, I'm sure you've read Comrade Kahuchishvili's work," Yanushkin told me. He then paused, trying to remember the work he was referring to.

"I haven't written anything notable yet," Kahuchishvili said modestly.

"Don't sell yourself short," the rector laughed. "Self-criticism is valuable, but to a point. By the way," he said, pointing to me, "this young man already had the opportunity to be the chief technologist at a plant in Yessentuki. He was in charge of a large staff."

"I wouldn't call the staff large," I replied, in tune with the research advisor.

Everyone in the room laughed in unison and the introduction ceremony concluded.

"I see that you're going to get along,"

That concluded my audience with the rector. After leaving his office, the research advisor and I discussed our Napoleonic plans for another fifteen minutes or so and parted amicably. Leaving the campus, I felt like the luckiest man in the world. At home, my life had turned into a whirlwind of mundane tasks: work, commute, study for graduate admission, repeat. Day after day, like a hamster in a wheel.

And here I was in Moscow again, with a fat briefcase containing a few articles on automated processes, my entrance exam materials, a razor and a bottle of cologne called 'Autumn'. After a successful entrance exam, I moved into the graduate dormitory.

Yanushkin congratulated me on my admission and asked me, barely audibly:

"I suppose that all your problems are now behind you?"

"Thank you very much, Nikolay Petrovich," I replied, also in a whisper. "You're certainly right about that."

## LIX

**S**lava was sent to work at the Tikhoretsk Winemaking Plant, which was also facilitated by Tarada. He started at the position of head engineer, and was confirmed as the director in a few months. One can only imagine how our father felt when he found out: his sons were entering the executive ranks of the regional industrial and commercial complex.

Slava plunged into his new work with gusto. Under his management, the plant began to operate like clockwork. He fixed the workshops, bought and installed new equipment, and established an uninterrupted supply chain. But there was another side to his enterprise – one that, I think, changed his life. His profession involved working with alcohol, which was always accompanied by certain risk.

In Soviet winemaking, it was considered normal to fortify wine with added alcohol in order to speed up the process. International producers didn't even entertain the option, as quality wine needs to mature over a set period of time and can

only be bottled after several years. Our manufacturers, however, were hampered by scarcity and antiquated equipment and faced with quotas that could only be met by speeding up the maturation process with added spirits.

Tikhoretsk specialized in producing fortified wine. It was made using raw materials, which were purchased with cash. Where there's cash, there are always 'shadows'. If a plant processed ten tons of grapes, it was easy to write down that it processed twenty and make up for the difference by adding water and alcohol. Funding for the additional ten tons landed into the pockets of winery and distillery managers.

This was how popular 'people's wines' were made. The recipe was universal: alcohol, water, and food coloring.

Wine orders would come from Moscow and end up at the regional administration in Krasnodar, which decided how to allocate them amongst manufacturers. In other words, Tarada had the ability to ensure that the plant would always be churning at full speed. This was its own form of blackmail. In order for a director to fill his quota, he needed to maintain a good relationship with raw material suppliers.

After the Tikhoretsk plant was renovated, processing capacity increased and the enterprise required constant orders. Tarada would help secure these. Slava therefore found himself entangled into the complex processes of the winemaking industry, partly due to Erzol Babaev's activities.

## LX

**M**y three years of full time graduate studies in Moscow turned out to be a gift from fate. Interaction with scientists in and of itself carries a great benefit. This was one of the best periods in my life, carefree yet rigorous and goal-oriented.

I was assigned to a dormitory on Saratovskaya in the Tekstilshchiki district of Moscow, on the ninth and highest floor. This was a special floor for graduate students. Undergrads lived below and regarded us with respect, as the graduate students also taught. We would often descend from our perch to party with the other students, always receiving a warm welcome.

I shared a room with an Arab named Ibrahim. He was a very pious man. He feared pork as if it was Satan, and didn't drink alcohol. He ate only vegetables and prayed regularly. To top it off, he was married and, naturally, didn't even contemplate going astray. His wife and three daughters, whose

photos adorned his half of the room, stayed behind in his homeland.

All temptations that I'd offer him, like a true serpent, were always answered by Ibrahim with a resounding 'no'.

"Ibrahim, how about we go party with the girls tonight?"

"Thanks, Igor, but no. It's forbidden."

"Ibrahim, how about we go to a restaurant and celebrate the end of exams?"

"Thanks, Igor, but no. It's forbidden in the eyes of Allah."

"Ibrahim!"

"No, Igor, no! Thank you!"

And so it went!

If you offered him a drink, he'd quote the Quran. You'd give him a meat pie, and he'd protest that there's pork in it. But neither of us cared about the fact that he was an Arab and I was a Jew.

The only vulnerability in Ibrahim's outlook was money. Trade was encouraged by Allah. Ibrahim needed money like the rest of us, and the life that a graduate stipend allowed was far from luxurious. I once noticed that after every trip home, Ibrahim would return to the dorm wearing a whole lot of watches.

"Ibrahim," I asked, "why do you need so many watches?"

Ibrahim smiled slyly, looked around, despite the fact that there was no one else in the room, and asked me, leaning close to my ear:

"Igor, can I trust you?"

I nodded.

"As it stands, I don't need a watch," he whispered. "I'm never in a rush to get anywhere. But other people are, and they need watches. So I sell them."

This was Ibrahim's great secret: he was a speculator. Ibrahim seemed overjoyed by the fact that I reacted to this revelation with complete calm.

“Do you want to buy in?”

I made a deal with Ibrahim to buy watches from him at 150 rubles each, and quickly found customers who would buy them for 250. Ibrahim made three or four watch runs per year, and each time I was able to make around a thousand rubles worth of profit. And so we lived.

The fact that money can change a man did not become apparent to me right away. One day, however, I arrived in our room and was taken aback: Ibrahim was holding a bottle of champagne.

“Igor – let’s have a drink.”

“What are you doing?” I wondered. “Isn’t that forbidden?”

“Eh! Who cares?” Ibrahim shrugged. “He who knows how to sell should know how to buy.”

I stood there, in disbelief of the change I was witnessing.

“Ibrahim, is that you?” were the only words that came out. “Did you get bad news? What happened? Tell me – maybe I can help!”

“Nothing happened! I simply came to a realization: you should try everything in life at least once if you have the means.”

So began the ‘fall’ of Ibrahim. Had he been a Buddhist, he would have chalked it up to overcoming his fears. Earlier, Ibrahim’s only contact with women consisted of looking at a photo of his wife. Now, I found him in the company of two female students at once. They sat on either side of him atop the narrow bed and thirstily drank up his stories about faraway lands.

The apex of his rebirth came on a day when I returned to the dorm earlier than usual to find the door locked.

“Hey, Ibrahim!” I yelled. “What happened.”

The door suddenly cracked open and I saw an Arab with glistening eyes.

“Igor, can you go for a walk or something? I’m not alone...”

That's how money changed Ibrahim. Perhaps it wasn't just that – Russia has a peculiar air to it. After a year, we parted ways. Ibrahim suddenly disappeared. From what I heard, he went back home.

So went my first two years in graduate school. I absorbed the advice of my peers and was introduced to some of Father's friends, who visited Moscow often. Among them was Mikhail Anatolyevich Tsymbal – the director of the Novorossiryk Wine Distribution Center. He knew way more than he said out loud, and, being in the field that he was in, happened to work with Slava quite closely. Personal and work connections were intertwining, tying people more tightly than blood.

Tsymbal's son Sergey had recently returned from the army and was aching to get situated. That was when his father turned to Erzol.

“Help Sergey out. He wants to study and you know people everywhere. Don't let the kid waste away.”

Erzol, who by then was on good terms with rector Yanushkin, helped Tsymbal with enrollment. It was then that father decided to transfer his youngest son Gena from his correspondence studies at Krasnodar Polytechnic to a full time space at the Moscow Meat and Dairy Institute. He wanted him to be under his brother's watchful eye, so to speak.

Ultimately, Tsymbal Junior and Gena arrived in Moscow together and moved in with me. My graduate housing provided good living conditions, and Ibrahim had already left, so there was plenty of room.

Gena liked to drink, and when he did, he had a knack for getting into difficult situations that I had to get him out of. Only then did I understand the burden of constant care that our father bore. Occasionally, I'd have to wake up in the middle of the night to screams of: “Your brother's in trouble – come help!” And I did. I got him out of the drunk tank, out of the po-



lice station, out of the Komsomol Vice Patrol's paws or simply out of restaurants where he couldn't pay the bill.

But the most difficult time came about when Gena and Sergey Tsymbal needed to pass their exams. At those times, the pair of shoddy students who rarely looked at their syllabi would pester me for advice and help. In manufacturing, they call this 'rush work'. In the educational realm, however, it was legal, common and expected.

## LXI

**W**e would get rare visits from Slava. Gena and I watched him change over time and marveled. By our humble assessments, Slava became Croesus – he earned ten to fifteen thousand rubles a month.

Slava would invite me to visit him. He had a car, which he would let me borrow, usually accompanied by a gift of about two thousand rubles – for minor expenses. We shared with one another – both because Erzol watched over us and because of the mere fact that we were brothers.

In truth, however, Slava was a miserable man, and money didn't change the fact that he felt lonely when he came home. The battle against loneliness can have unexpected effects. One day, Slava ran into Zoya – the big-eyed beauty who captivated him during his first year of university. The officer's daughter understood the price of loneliness and knew how to rid a man of that gnawing feeling. Their tumultuous affair was rekindled.

Slava gave Zoya a job at his plant, and after some time she got pregnant. Slava's wife Anya instantly found out about it, and that's when she made her character known. She didn't say a single word – just gathered all the bankbooks, gold, money – everything in the house – and left.

One could say that this story had a happy ending. Zoya and Slava had a baby girl. Slava divorced the girl that Father picked from him and never saw her again.

## LXII

While at a student party, I met a girl named Olya, and we liked one another. As you know, certain meetings make it all clear without words. I invited her out to cafés a few times, to the movies, or simply for a walk along the boulevards.

One evening, I was preparing for a date.

“Where are you off to?” Sergey Tsymbal asked.

“Going to a restaurant with a girl.”

“Take me with you!”

So the two of us headed to the date. Actually, I headed to the date and Sergey just tagged along. We went to the restaurant and ordered. The waiter brought champagne. At one point, the beautiful Olya stepped away for a minute. This was probably one of those moments when passion dominates us, because as soon as Olya walked away, Sergey grabbed me by the sleeve, his eyes burning.

“Listen, are things serious between you two?”

“What do you mean? We haven’t even officially started dating.”

“This is fate! Trust me! I know this doesn’t happen, but I can feel it – it’s fate! Give me a chance!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Olya! Do you want to marry her?”

“I can only marry a Jewish girl!”

“Leave me with her,” Sergey started insisting. You know that I’ve never asked you for anything.”

I stared at my friend, puzzled.

“You look like a crazy person.”

“I am a crazy person. But I can feel this. Let me talk to her.”

“Fine, fine. I won’t interfere. But keep in mind that if there’s a situation, you’re getting out of it yourself.”

Without saying another word, I got up and left a restaurant. It was truly a plot point in a soap opera.

## LXIII

**M**y good friend and fellow Kislovodsk native Volodya Mikhailov lived in the same dorm as me. He helped me realize the fact that everything in this world is predetermined. At one point, my older brother Slava unsuccessfully courted the Mikhailovs' older daughter Larisa.

In November of 1975 Volodya and I flew to Kislovodsk and I went to visit the Mikhailovs. Their house didn't differ from ones around it, aside from the fact that wealthy people lived there. Everyone who crossed their threshold understood this, as the house featured certain attributes.

At first, Volodya took me to the garage. He opened the door and pointed at the semi-dark room.

"Look!"

I stood still, trying to discern something. Volodya turned on the lights and my eyes were hit with a bright flash.

This was the ideal machine on wheels. It seemed like the pinnacle of human creation, which couldn't be surpassed

on this Earth. It was a shiny, clear-coated automobile, each detail of which underlined its foreign origins.

"See?" Volodya exclaimed, approaching the car and stroking its sides. "It's an Opel Kapitän."

"Where'd you get it?" I blurted out.

"My dad bought it."

Ilya Vladimirovich Mikhailov was a man famous throughout the city. By modern standards, it would be more proper to call him a businessman. He oversaw an industrial template manufacturing operation, still managing to make money in a time of total deficit. By the time Ilya Vladimirovich's children were grown, he had accumulated a sizable sum and could easily consider himself to be a wealthy man. He had a number of hobbies, which included a penchant for expensive things. The love for foreign cars was also amongst his secret passions.

Volodya opened the door, inviting me to get into the cabin. The inside of the car smelled like leather and Cuban cigars, which, at the time, were sold in every store in our country. Making like an expert, I started examining the interior. We were used to Zaporozhets and Zhiguli, so an Opel may as well have been from another planet.

"An Opel Kapitän, you say?" I stroked the seat. It was real leather.

"Yes," Volodya confirmed proudly. "I'll take you for a ride if you want."

"What kind of horsepower?"

"A hundred or two, I think," my friend shrugged. "It's a special model made in Germany. Father certainly paid for it. Really expensive. So it's really cool, right?" Volodya couldn't contain his excitement. "Imagine yourself at the wheel!"

"Oh, come on," I scoffed. "I've seen fancier."

I examined the car and gathered my thoughts. Did Volodya really think that I came to their home only to look at an expensive car? After all, he knew that the purpose of my visit was

completely different. Volodya had a younger sister, a marriageable girl who was rumored to be an amazing beauty. I remember well how I would ask to meet the girl and Volodya would feigningly flail his arms and answer: “What are you talking about! She’s still too young – a child!” And here I was, at their home, and I still haven’t seen anyone. Perhaps there were all just stories. And what could be so special about a Jewish girl?

It’s a good time as any to remind you that all of my family’s attempts to find me a bride encountered the same unsolvable issue: I found all the girls that were being shown to me to be unattractive. Each bridal visit that my family would arrange became a confirmation of the fact that there’s nothing more permanent than temporary misfortune.

At the time, I didn’t give much thought to what a person needs to be happy. It seemed that I had it, but what did it entail? I’m removed from the naïvely categorical supposition shared by the majority of Mountain Jews that happiness lies in wealth. For me, happiness entailed achieving my goals, no matter how difficult. Once one is reached, it is essential to set another – a more difficult one. This continues for the entirety of life.

Back on that magical day, Volodya and I started talking about foreign cinema – about heroines and sultry beauties. In movies, heroes zoomed around in exquisite cars at high speed and lived in castles.

It was then that I heard a voice. I didn’t pay attention to it at first. For a second, the garage got dark and a silhouette appeared in the doorway. I lifted my gaze and saw a young woman. A girl, rather.

Years have passed, but I remember every detail of our first encounter. Those pleasant, unique, almond eyes, in the depth of which, like in Aladdin’s cave, sapphire flames sparkled. She had clear white skin, delicate features, a dainty nose and full, supple lips. I watched as the girl embraced her brother.



“Volodka! You’re back!”

My friend hugged her and spun her around.

“Lida! Let me introduce our princess and my sister,” he proudly told me.

The girl laughed. Oh, what a laugh it was! It was as if a hundred bells chimed a peculiar melody.

“I’m Igor,” I replied.

She looked me over indifferently and approached the car.

“So how many people can fit in there?”

“A whole platoon,” Volodya laughed.

The rumors were true. This girl was different from everyone I had met prior to then. She moved with rare grace and beauty. One only needed to look at her once to tell that shyness hid under the glib exterior.

To make an impression, I got out of the car, knocked on the hood with my knuckle, and turned to Volodya.

“How many gears does this rickety thing have?”

“Four, old man.”

“Does it burn rubber?”

Volodya scoffed, sounding like an expert.

“Like an animal. But that wears out the carburetor.”

“Good handling?”

“Glued to the road at one-fifty!”

I chatted with Volodya, and could intuitively tell that the girl was listening to me attentively.

“What kind of car do you have?” Lida suddenly asked.

“I don’t have a car,” I replied.

She giggled, as if I had told a good joke, and turned to her brother.

“When are you gonna take us for a ride?”

“As soon as I’m free.”

Lida looked at me mischievously. Music started playing somewhere in the distance, as if prompted by a magic wand. Volodya started tapping to the beat on the hood. A pause hung

over the garage, and no one rushed to break it. Suddenly, Lida whipped her hair.

“If I could drive,” she said, “I wouldn’t sit around. I’d drive somewhere every night. Wherever my eyes fell.”

She looked at me inquisitively, as if asking me: ‘Got it?’, then silently gave her brother a kiss and left. The heavens sent me no sign to indicate that she was my destiny. If only my heart had skipped a beat, or something.

We were invited into the house, where Anna Grigoryevna was setting the table. That was when I got a better look at Lida. She was in the room, talking to some guy. Trying to seem casual, I asked Volodya who he was.

“That’s Misha, Lida’s classmate,” he replied, and we went back to talking about cars.

For the remainder of the week, I visited Volodya several times, as if by chance, and ran into Lida. We’d say hello to one another and exchange meaningless jokes – that was the extent of our communication. I never saw Misha the classmate again. It was as if someone was chasing him away before my arrival. I had no idea whether this was coincidental.

I gradually learned a lot about Lida. She was finishing up ninth grade and her future had already been decided. Her parents chose a career in medicine for her, and wanted her to enroll in the pharmaceutical faculty in Pyatigorsk. Back then, it wasn’t customary to let girls go far away from home, especially youngest daughters, and the pharmaceutical faculty seemed very suitable. Firstly, it was nearby. Secondly, it was prestigious – particularly for a girl. Working in a quiet pharmacy and dealing with scarce medication – one could only dream of something like that. Actually, the ideal career that every self-respecting Jewish father dreamed for his son or daughter was dentistry – a most lucrative profession – but as far as I remember, there was no dental faculty in Pyatigorsk.

To understand why no one could get enough of Lida one only needed to see how her parents regarded her. They absolutely adored her. Their older kids had left the nest, and the entirety of their parental love focused on their lovely youngest daughter. Basking in such love, there was no way she couldn't be happy.

Every other aspect of her life was no different from that of an ordinary Soviet girl. As appropriate, dates were only possible under parental supervision. Trips to restaurants were strictly forbidden, and all walks around the city had to be accompanied by a friend.

That first week after we met flew by. It was time for me to return to Moscow in order to hit the books back at graduate school. On the way to the capital my thoughts always came back to Lida. There was nothing romantic about them. This was simply the first time I met a pretty Jewish girl, and her image hung around in my memory. So picturesque, and smart! She countered boldness with boldness, all while staying within the bounds of politeness. She made an impression.

In Moscow, I had a girlfriend named Tatiana. We liked one another and I wasn't in a rush to break up with her. Moscow's hustle and bustle differed from the measured pace of life in Kislovodsk. I had to attend lectures, write a dissertation, compose journal articles, lead a student seminar, and learn tons of useful and useless information – a million things that a graduate student was supposed to know. This sort of schedule left me with no time for other things.

Once a month, I would visit home to relax, breathe the crystal clear air of my native city, and enjoy the peace and quiet, the value of which I didn't fully appreciate during my youth. Now, however, I started frequenting the Mikhailov home during my visits. At first, I did so as Volodya's friend, without ulterior motives. It was on my third visit, I think, that I visited Lida directly. We had a pleasant conversation and that

was it. Anna Grigoryevna, Lida's mother, saw me out with a long gaze.

I never missed the opportunity to grab a box of chocolates or flowers for the girl. I gave them sincerely, feeling a pleasant flutter in my heart, as if I was putting a piece of my soul into her tender hands along with the gift. She accepted my gifts, but with a sly smile, which made no promises.

Finally convinced that Lida wasn't interested in me, I felt challenged. I was a great guy, goddammit, and courage conquers all. I've had a chance to hold management positions, was working toward my master's, and studied in the capital. These were impressive things!

At times, I would visit the Mikhailovs and invite Lida out for a walk. As I mentioned, a decent girl from a proper family couldn't go out with a man by herself, so our walks were always accompanied by her friend Liza Karina. We walked around our famous park, its paths leading us higher and higher into the mountains. The more I looked at this girl's face, the more I wanted to win her affection.

I took every chance to impress or amuse her. One time, we were walking by Hram Vozduha – a famous Kislovodsk restaurant. It stood at the very top of a mountain, and had a marvelous view of the surroundings. This architectural marvel was built before the revolution, and became a must-see tourist attraction during Soviet times. I suggested that we go in, but Lida categorically refused. A Komsomol tenth-grader with a young man – God forbid. Accepting that I wouldn't be able to convince her, I ran in and arranged for the waiter to bring out some simple food to the lawn in front of the restaurant. He smiled wryly and started preparing a tablecloth.

Years later, this move gained an aura of romanticism and gallantry, though I didn't give it any thought back then. I was pleased to make my lady happy, and loved to see the girl I liked enjoying herself.

Lida and Karina strolled along the fir-lined path. Time after time, she would glance at the strange preparations the waiter was making in front of the restaurant. At a certain moment, Lida spread her arms, like a bird. Her dress tightly clung to her body, revealing her exquisite shape. It seemed like everyone was looking at her, and at me, seeing how much I liked her and how she was toying with my feelings so pleasantly and innocently. Her hair fluttered in the wind and her eyes suddenly seemed lighter – gray or blue instead of their usual brown. Every time she looked at me, her face seemed to suddenly light up.

Perhaps that was the first time I thought that Lida would solve all my problems, even if I had no idea how she would go about doing that. I certainly didn't doubt the fact that Father would have no issue with her being a candidate. I think that, at this moment, both her and I felt like chess pieces in a captivating game waged by providence.

Lida approached the makeshift table that magically materialized on the lawn, pinched off a piece of a roll, laughed and started giddily talking to Karina. I sat next to them. We told each other funny stories and laughed with no respite. The exact words didn't remain in my memory, but that doesn't matter. We felt young, provocative, and very happy.

I wanted to stretch that moment as far as possible, but time showed no mercy. Lida soon started checking her watch, and her and Karina got up to go home. I compliantly walked them back, as if concluding an important ritual.

I was drawn to the Mikhailov house like a magnet. I saw no reason to fight the feeling growing inside me. Why would I? Every time I was able to escape Moscow, I visited them as their daughter's friend and reveled in her company. What did we do? Nothing special – just talked. Anna Grigoryevna would always find something to do in the adjacent room.

I patiently awaited the tiniest sign of hope from Lida – even the slightest encouragement. But the sign didn't come.

Every time I returned from Lida's, I would tell Havo everything. What seemed insignificant to me meant a lot more to Havo's feminine heart. One time, after hearing out my woes about Lida's indifference, Havo looked at me sternly and sat me down in front of her.

"Son," she began, "don't try to outrun a train."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know how our traditions are. Not everything is done at once. Sunset starts with sunrise. What do you want? What do you expect from Lida?"

"Well, I don't know..." I hesitated. Everything seemed so obvious to me. "Probably some sign of affection, or attention. I come to her with gifts – sincerely, from the heart."

"Son, you forget," Havo replied, looking at me sternly, "that life didn't start yesterday. You keep saying 'my Lida, my Lida.' Don't you know anything about the Yagyayevs?"

The Yagyayevs were old friends with the Mikhailovs dating back to when both families lived in Dagestan. Mayer Yagyayevs was friends with Ilya Vladimirovich. Raya, his wife, was friends with Anna Grigoryevna. And the fact that their son, Misha, was Lida's classmate was, to them, a sign from above and a reason for further action.

"They're promised to one another," Havo explained, with concealed reproach over me not knowing it.

"But it's the twentieth century! What do you mean – 'promised to one another'? The only thing that matters is whether they're in love. Everything else is just stupid tradition."

"It isn't stupid. In fact, it's very right, and it's not up to you to decide what's good and what isn't," Havo snapped back. "Do me a favor and respect their decision. If Lida's father arranged something with Mayer, then it isn't proper for you to stand in his way."

I contemplated Havo's words. She had a point. I wasn't about to start battling windmills. I silently shrugged.

I needed to go back to Moscow. Packing, I couldn't help but think that maybe it really wasn't worth it to be up in arms. I bought a ticket and went back to my books, articles lectures and little brother Gena, who was just barely finishing up university.



## LXIV

**A**t the time, life in Moscow seemed magical to the provincials. It wasn't a matter of how accessible bologna was or whether or not one could buy bananas. Moscow life was eventful and punctuated by interactions with interesting individuals. Everyone burnt with ideas of the science and technology revolution, discussed space flight, and dreamt of conquering new worlds. This was all so different from what I encountered at home that no one could blame my imagination for being amazed and captivated.

My graduate social circle differed greatly from Kislovodsk society. This was a world of contradictions that tempted with its novelty: be it scientists who worked so hard that they forgot to eat, or savvy careerists who dreamt of becoming doctors, deans or at least department heads before they turned forty so that they could live the high life.

My younger brother Gena and I were amazed by the rank of professors that taught us and regretted not being introduced



to them sooner. Perhaps it was our family's interest in all kinds of technology that spurred Gena to improve his studies and become better at grasping the relevant core concepts.

Ultimately, he graduated from university. This was an achievement – a new height. Father's dream had come true – all his sons got higher educations. What was out of our grandparents' reach became an element of their grandchildren's normal life. Afterwards, each of us had his path to follow.

Gena was returning to Kislovodsk. We didn't give much thought to what that meant for him. He was about to be under Father's watch, and neither of them was too happy about it. Father found him at job at the Yessentuki Sausage Plant, and work life followed.

Then, everything suddenly changed. One day, Gena returned home and gave Havo his first earnings. It wasn't until later that I realized how much that meant to Havo and Father. In one single moment, a disobedient troublemaker who had to be watched at every moment turned into a provider. A man who brought money into the home automatically became a master and an authority figure.

## LXV

**E**rzol had an easy time obtaining the funds, materials and documents necessary for the construction of new workshops and the equipment that filled them. Starting from very little, he gained enough power in Kislovodsk to conduct business at all levels. He then understood that he outgrew the city. It was time to move on to another level.

He had an old friend named Zinyukov, who headed the Second Branch of the Russian Sewing Industrial Complex and offered Father a job as his first deputy. That's how our father ended up in Moscow.

At times, it seems to me that Father belonged to a rare breed of lucky people. Then I remember how he acted in difficult situations and built his business and understand: he and he alone was responsible for his success. He only relied on his wisdom and skill and ascended toward career heights, step by step.

I remember when Father and I both visited Kislovodsk and he asked for my help. It took me a bit of time to real-

ize what this help entailed. Father showed me five one-liter jars layered with coins, diamonds, and a bit of gold. The jars seemed to glow from within. Erzol's house collected money like other homes collect dust. At a certain point, he began to wonder what he was going to do with it. He didn't have a lust for gold, and no one in our family wore much jewelry. There did exist a need, however, to invest money into something that didn't depreciate, which led Father to buy things that would always retain their value.

The tragedy was that Erzol couldn't spend his fortune out in the open. Similar problems befell many businesspeople during the Soviet epoch, among them Koreyko – a famous underground millionaire from the Soviet satire classic *The Golden Calf*.

Realizing that it was dangerous to keep valuables at home, Erzol started to hide them by stuffing them into jars like they were pickled tomatoes. He would store them somewhere on our property – no one but him knew exactly where. Eventually, the precaution seemed insufficient to Father, and during one of his trips home Erzol decided to hide his treasures somewhere more secure.

He had planned everything out meticulously. Father asked me to help him dig a pit on the slope leading down to the ravine, some two hundred meters behind the house. We traveled light, carrying only shovels. Eduard Khil's voice echoed through the garden, singing winter songs in the middle of a scorching summer day. Wearing undershirts and sweatpants, like a pair of fishermen looking to dig up some worms for bait, we walked down the path toward the rambling river. It was a rough path, making us worry about missing our step and plummeting down every second.

Despite the sunshine and wonderful weather, a feeling of impending doom refused to leave me. There was no one around, just cicadas chirping with all their might, drowning out Khil's song.

At a certain spot, Father stopped and carefully looked around. He tapped his foot several times for some reason or other, picked up a shovel and said:

“We’ll dig here.”

With those words, he plunged the blade into the ground and tossed up a chunk of soil. I instantly recalled his gardening lessons, when he took us to the garden when we were little and taught us to dig. The lessons didn’t go unheeded. His motions were pointed and filled with strength. Father had set a goal and pursued it, difficulties notwithstanding.

The thought of digging a pit to hide treasure – one where it could possibly remain forever – amused me. Was there really no one watching us? Swifts and swallows zoomed through the air high above us. Khil’s voice had been replaced by Lyudmila Zykina singing about Russian fields. Father seemed to notice none of it. He simply threw an angry glance in my direction, as if to ask me why I wasn’t doing anything. I grabbed my shovel and our efforts doubled.

Father only stopped once he was confident that the pit was deep enough to reliably hide his possessions.

“Now let’s go get the jars,” he said curtly, happy with his work. “No one will find them here.”

It was as if he had predicted a future which none of us could have possibly imagined. At home, baskets of food prepared by Havo awaited us. At the bottom of the wicker vessels were the jars, carefully arranged and obscured by eggs and potatoes. Everything was being done per proper conspiracy protocol.

The responsibility for our cargo gave me such an adrenaline rush that I couldn’t feel my feet under me. It seemed like I wasn’t walking, but flying down the perilous mountain path. My motions were precise, my muscles tense, and my senses sharpened. I felt confident that I could repel any attack if it should happen and protect my father’s earnings – our family’s legacy – at all costs.

The only way someone could see us was from the other side of the river, and the other bank was overgrown and rarely traversed by others. We reached the pit. Father went in, and casually told me:

“Give ‘em to me.”

I carefully handed him the jars. Father would receive them as carefully as a midwife receives newborns, carefully lining them up. He then climbed out and we went back to our shovels.

Exhaustion expelled unwanted thoughts. We methodically piled the dirt on until the pit seized to exist, stamped the soil down and went back home.

Once at the house, we washed up and changed. Father called me into his room and closed the door. He looked at me sternly and we swore to forget about the stash’s existence. This pledge made me feel our family ties – ones that could never be broken under any circumstances – even more vividly. We were bound by a secret, and everyone’s future depended on us keeping it.

Soon after, Father went back to Moscow and I followed. Big deeds lay ahead.

## LXVII

I always wondered how Moscow, a landlocked city, got so many seabirds. Their guttural screams marked the beginning of my schooldays. Syllabi, lectures, being pressed for time... The life had a rhythm and energy that had me waiting for something new and unexpected that would lead me to great things.

Studies were accompanied by pleasant romantic adventures and joyous holidays. People dated, fell in love, broke up. Some lost their other halves, others found them. Wedding parties rumbled, and bridal veils flapped, much like the wings of those white seagulls.

I loved those celebrations – my friends' weddings. I found them to adorn life with new, bright colors. Weddings would announce to the world that two hearts had found one another, discovered what they lived for, and attained happiness.

And what did I live for? Everything was uncertain and unsteady, but I didn't lose hope. This was when something very important happened.

Father had returned to Kislovodsk for another brief visit. I didn't find out what happened until later. Everything started with Havo telling Father the story of my failed attempts to win Lida's affection. This was probably the first time Father received my romantic inclinations so approvingly. Everyone had been dreaming of me settling down for a while, and here I was, having feelings towards a Jewish girl who my family fully approved of. Always looking ahead, Father could already see the benefits of this union – a new family, lots of children, and the continuation of the Babaev clan.

Everything seemed very simple. Someone needed to go to Lida's father and have a heart to heart. The rest was a matter of logistics: an engagement, followed by a wedding and gifts for the newlyweds.

It was already evening when Erzol Babaev knocked on Ilya Mikhailov's door. The lady of the house opened up. Surprise briefly flashed over her face and was quickly replaced by a polite smile: "Welcome."

Father was taken to the living room. It wasn't long before the master of the house – Ilya Vladimirovich – showed up.

The men exchanged handshakes while the women set the table. One toast followed another, interspaced with conversations about life.

I assume that Father was in top form that evening. He talked about business, about fabric prices, about the future and the fact that time flies so fast that you barely notice your children, whom you still consider little, turning into adults.

"How's Lida?" he suddenly asked.

"Finishing up school," Ilya Vladimirovich replied.

"And what then?"

"She already decided on a university."

"It's a good thing when parents know what's good for their children. However, for a girl, family trumps work." Father

looked at Ilya Vladimirovich slyly. This is where, I assume, Father asked how Ilya felt about his son Igor becoming betrothed to his daughter. Young people are hot and ardent, but if their hearts say ‘yes’, then why not consent? Igor likes Lida, and that’s what’s important. Isn’t their children’s happiness the pinnacle of any parents’ dreams?

Father finished his speech. Ilya Vladimirovich lit a cigarette, smiling softly, exhaled a ring of smoke, then looked at Father and calmly replied:

“I’m sorry, Erzol. I truly respect Igor’s feelings – he’s a good guy. He’s clean, smart. I’ve heard many a word about his academic success. All signs point to him having a bright future, and any girl would be happy with such a proposal. As far as I’m concerned, however, my daughter’s happiness trumps all, and that means that it’s her decision. Lida needs to be asked whether she wants to marry Igor.”

Father looked at his companion, surprised.

“I can’t ruin my daughter’s life,” Ilya Vladimirovich explained. “She must decide whether she wants to marry. If she agrees, then that’s her will, if not – that’s another matter.”

My father wasn’t ready for this turn of events. How could that be? A girl would determine her fate independently? That was contrary to tradition. The father should be the one to decide! Nevertheless, Ilya Vladimirovich was adamant: Lida alone would make that decision.

In the morning, father realized what had happened. He had simply been strategically refused. And how! Softly and politely.

Father returned to Moscow, to the apartment where we were living then, and jumped to a conclusion in his usual, rash manner:

“Enough of this! How long can you demean yourself for? Forget about Lida! Find another!” Father followed to slap the tabletop hard enough for the glasses in the cupboard to let



out a lengthy jingle. He explained what happened and ended the conversation.

Upon hearing his words, I seemed to have plunged into oblivion. At first I didn't know what to do, but then I attempted to change how I felt about this sudden defeat. I tried to convince myself that there was nothing tying me to Lida. I was young, hot-blooded, and not about to enter a monastery. Moreover, I already had a girlfriend in Moscow named Tanya. Why would I deprive myself of happiness if the girl I was ready to give the moon to didn't need me?

I examined the situation with rare pragmatism. Why not marry Tanya? 'But she's Russian,' the voice of reason whispered. 'So what?' my offense chimed back. If Father had decided to take on the matters of my heart, why wouldn't he compromise? Why not hint at the fact that his son's happiness was possible with someone other than Lida? This was simple arithmetic that didn't require complex calculations.

But how would I open up to Father? How would I show him what I want and have him respond positively? That, I didn't know.

And then, majestic chance solved it all. My friend, Serezha Tsymbal announced that he finally found happiness: he was going to marry the most beautiful girl in the world – the same Olga whom I had introduced him to at one point.

The wedding took place at the restaurant at Rossiya Hotel, and all friends, including Erzol, were invited. This gave me an idea: what if this was when I introduced my father to Tatyana? He would meet this Russian girl, realize how wonderful she is, and, perhaps, bless our union. God had been kind to Tanya as far as good looks went. As soon as she entered the restaurant, my father's friends' attention instantly shifted to her. Tanya was flattered as high-ranking officials nearly shoved each other aside to ask her to dance. She would only smile mysteriously, nod in accord and go onto the dance floor,

occasionally tossing a glance in my direction. It wasn't long before everyone understood that Tanya was my girl.

Relaxed by alcohol, Erzol's friends would nudge him and kick off sincere conversations:

"Aleksey, how are your children? How's Gena, how's Slava?"

"What's Igor planning?"

Father would happily reply. I found out later that many of Father's friends had heard the story of my brother Slava's unfortunate first marriage and were making attempts to help me. Conversations with them would be filled with subtext, as if to say: 'you've already ruined your older son's life, so don't repeat the mistake with Igor. Look at the girl he has. Have you seen her? How she looks at him? Such a nice couple! Have them get married!'

As I was told later, Father would reply with a joke and say: "We'll see. Now isn't the time to decide."

Other people's happiness always seems seductive. Watching the happy newlyweds and listening to others happily yell 'kiss!' I couldn't help but think that fortune would smile on me as well and I'll join our planet's army of happy people. All I had to do was get Father's consent.

I kept watching him out of the corner of my eye, how he interacted with his friends, having fun and reciting toasts. It seemed that even here, at someone else's wedding, the main man at the party wasn't the groom – it was Erzol Babaev.

Before too long, it was evening, then nighttime. Riled up and tired, Father and I returned home. I fell asleep thinking about how great it would be to get everything settled tomorrow. But the following day I couldn't find a suitable segue into a conversation about Tanya. Simply bringing it up, out of the blue, wouldn't work with him. I needed to find the right moment, and soon I did.

A month later, while getting ready for work, Father casually mentioned:

“Listen, Tarada’s coming to Moscow today. He needs to be entertained. Come with me and keep me company.”

I gladly agreed. I wasn’t particularly busy, so why not help Father out? A hired Chayka limo picked us up at a set time. I quietly got in and we were on the road. Father took out a newspaper and started loudly rustling it. I instantly tensed up: this was my signal.

“Pop, I need to talk to you.”

Here it was! I took the first step. My tone made it very clear that the issue was serious. Unfortunately, Father didn’t register this.

“Papa!” I repeated. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“Not right now,” Father grumbled, as closing the gates.

“I’m sick of these constant conversations about my marriage. I’m grown enough to be able to decide who’s right for me and who isn’t.”

“I told you: not right now,” Father repeated, a bit more loudly, metallic notes echoing in his voice.

Not realizing what was happening, I ignored his warning once again.

“I need to tell you this. You probably saw her at the wedding that time – the girl with whom Lenya Bodnev and Gelman were dancing. Her name’s Tatyana.”

Anger’s slight shadow swept over Father’s face.

“Pop, did you hear me? I wanted to tell you that I’d like to marry her.”

Silence hung over the car – the same kind of silence that probably happens after an unfortunate infantryman steps on a landmine and the detonator clicks.

“Is that all?” he asked through his teeth.

I was taken aback.

“No. I thought you liked her.”

“Is that all?” he repeated, more loudly.

“Listen...”

Father suddenly slapped his palm on the leather seat. The noise was loud, like a gunshot. I shuddered. Sparks of rage shone in Erzol's eyes.

"Nikolai!" he roared at the driver, who shuddered as well. "Stop the car."

The driver hit the brakes. I was thrown forward, painfully hitting my chin against the back of the front seat.

Father reached over and opened the door on my side.

"Get out!" he ordered.

For a fraction of a second, I looked at him, not understanding what had just happened, then ran out. The car left, and I stood there on the road, baffled.

At that very moment, when Father kicked me out of the car, he brought me back to earth, reminding me that at this point in my life, nothing was up to me, even when it concerned my own happiness. Love? It didn't matter! But duty did. And it was my duty to marry a Jewish woman.

And so, my attempt to achieve family happiness had failed. Two-zero in favor of solitude.

I stood there on the street, watching the clouds float by, lamenting fate and even asking what I had done to anger the heavens in such a way. As strange as it is, I'm grateful to my father for the abrupt answer he gave me: his forbiddance prevented me from making a grave error in youth, one for which I would punish myself for the rest of my life. This was because my attempt to marry Tatyana was merely an attempt to remedy my love for Lida, which still overwhelmed my heart.

## LXVII

I had charted my journey to happiness with Lida. To put it lightly, it was a dead end. Nevertheless, I tried to approach the situation differently.

If I had to marry a Jewish woman, it had to be one I loved, not some arranged wife. It could only be Lida – only her! She was promised to someone else? I didn't care! After all, her father himself said it: it was her decision. Well – I'd let her decide.

This idea gave me strength. I decided to give it another shot: to go to Kislovodsk and try to reason with the one that captivated all my thoughts. Immediately after arriving in the city, I wrote Lida a note: 'I'm haunted by the burning notion that you're thinking of me.' The next day, with the punctuality of a man who's truly in love, I was on the threshold of the house that had become so dear to my heart. Lida had seen me from a distance. It seemed that my visit had amused her, and there was plenty to laugh at. From a distance, it looked like

a giant bouquet was walking toward the house. The prior ones had been far smaller. The girl must have been torn between to sentiments. On one hand – what would prompt such a grand gesture? On the other – there was clear joy in her eyes. After all, this was all done for her alone – how could she not be flattered?

I entered the room, set a box of candy onto a table in the foyer, took a deep breath, and gave Lida the bouquet. She accepted it without getting up, only looking at the paper in which the flowers were wrapped.

“Nice!” she finally said.

It felt like an electric shock, and I felt like I had spurted wings. It seemed that Lida understood my feelings, and that intoxicated me. I continued with my plan. I had no idea what its result would be, but her smile gave me strength.

After that, we would be occasionally allowed to remain in the room alone. This made me vivacious and eager to express the feelings that filled me. I once told her that my intentions were very serious. Lida laughed happily and replied:

“You know, I’m not planning to get married quite yet. I’m only seventeen, and I still have to get an education.”

At that moment, Anna Grigoryevna and Volodya entered the room. It was hot outside, and Volodya was wiping sweat off his face with a handkerchief. Lida’s mother put a heavy shopping bag on the floor.

“What kind of princess are you?” Volodya quipped. “This is how you receive guests? At least offer some tea.”

“Want to go to Pyatigorsk?” Lid asked her brother.

“I can’t, I’m busy,” he replied.

Lida pouted.

“What were you doing?” asked Anna Grigoryevna sternly, as if she caught us doing something improper.

“Anna Grigoryevna, believe me, I really respect your daughter,” I grumbled, getting up.

“We weren’t doing anything like that,” Lida said, laughing.

She embodied that laugh – proud, playful, mischievous, and infinitely attractive.

Anna Grigoryevna shook her head disapprovingly and went on to search for something in the cupboard. Lida and I went out to the porch. Despite it being daylight, the milky-white moon was slightly visible in the sky.

“So beautiful!” Lida exclaimed, dreamily watching the clouds. She had already forgotten about Pyatigorsk. She just had a constant desire to go somewhere.

Her mother also came outside and sat down to stretch her legs. We started talking about this and that. I gathered that we weren’t going to be left alone again, and soon departed.

I felt that Lida wasn’t pushing me away and keeping the subject open, even if she kept me at a distance. Encouraged, I decided to be more persistent. But that wasn’t working. Brief signs of attention were always followed by cool indifference. I was being toyed with – I just didn’t realize it yet. Lidochka enjoyed watching me suffer and she gladly accepted my attempts at courtship, but she wasn’t about to surrender.

Spring ended, as did graduation exams at schools. The scorching season of university admission tests followed. I don’t know how many sleepless nights Lida’s studies required, but she was accepted into pharmaceutical school on her first attempt. I remember how I came to congratulate her right after she enrolled. She laughed about something, and I felt on top of the world.

I will always remember once instance of our interaction as a victory. We were taking a walk in our park. Birds sang, trees bloomed, and life’s ardor unfolded in front of us, calling out in a way that made it impossible not to answer.

“I love you, Lida,” I said quietly, as if sensing the gravity of the moment and being afraid to ruin it.



Lida stopped in her tracks.

“You love me?”

“Yes.”

“So why are you whispering? Are you afraid someone will hear you?”

“Afraid? Why would I be afraid? I’m not afraid,” I replied.

Lida frowned, as if she suddenly tasted something bitter.

“So say it louder. Loud enough for everyone to hear. Would you do that?”

This was the moment of truth. She didn’t believe me. But why? I instantly started recalling scenes from movie’s I’ve seen and books I’ve read, where the hero falls on his knees before his beloved at the most melodramatic moment.

I looked at the brown soil beneath my feet and fell on my knees before Lida in gratitude. The people walking behind us stopped in fright, looking at me like I was a madman.

“Lida, I love you,” I said.

A pinecone fell from a nearby tree. I felt like the world had gone all ears, trying not to miss a single bit of my passionate explanation. I thought I heard someone laugh in the distance. ‘Are they laughing at me?’ I thought. ‘So what? Let them!’ I have never felt so free, so drunk – yet so sober.

“Loudly! Say it loudly!” Lida demanded, with unexplained distrust on her face, a line over her brow confirming doubt.

“Lida, I love you!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Passersby jumped aside like a flock of frightened jays. The birds went silent. A strange silence hung in the air, uninterrupted by anything.

“I don’t believe you,” Lida said, smiling softly. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you’re married. You have a child.”

“Lidochka, what are you talking about? That’s nonsense.”

“Quit making excuses. I know what I’m talking about.”



I stood up.

“Lida – none of that is true!”

“And your wife? Admit it – have you been married before?”

“Married? To whom?” I threw up my hands, which had never seen a wedding ring. “That’s a lie!” I confidently repeated.

“A lie?” Lidochka looked at me probingly. “All right.”

She took a moment to think, examining something at her feet, as if she was standing at the center of the universe. She then nodded, as if answering her own silent question and broke a twig off a tree that grew by the road – as brittle and tender as she was herself. Then, pivoting on her heels, she turned around and started walking.

“Lida, wait!” I ran after her.

She stopped and turned around. At that moment, I felt blinded by a bright light.

“What?”

“Don’t you believe me?” I pleaded. “None of that is true.”

“Yeah, I believe you,” Lida replied, smiling softly. “Just tell that to the people who are gossiping about you.”

I had no idea how to respond. It didn’t even occur to me that her friend Misha’s mother was spreading rumors about me. But war was war. I later found out that, according to rumors, I was an alcoholic drug addict divorcee. Given that I was twenty-six, all this was theoretically possible, so had someone else been in my place, the guy wouldn’t be able to cleanse himself of the slander.

I wasn’t about to let defamation stop me. This was revenge – a blunt attempt to put a rift between Lida and I. While our youth and purity made it unsuccessful, my ego took quite a hit back them. But what could I do?

I was overcome with offense. I do understand that Misha’s mother was also driven by the simple desire for her son’s hap-

piness, which she was ready to pursue by any means. Nevertheless, she lost. Never again did Lida and I discuss the tawdry rumors.

Lida's relationship with Misha ended suddenly – I myself barely found out. She was the one to dot all the 'i's. This is what happened.

I once arrived at the Mikhailov home. Lida and her 'be-trothed' Misha, who, much like me, never missed an opportunity to woo her, sat in the hall. While I talked to Lida's father, she approached her classmate.

"Why so glum?"

Indeed, the young man looked dejected.

"What's he doing here?" he blurted out angrily, nodding in my direction.

"Same thing as you," Lida laughed. "Asking for my hand."

Misha got flushed, his cheeks turning crimson. He started blinking very often, as if he had something in his eye. He sat motionless for some five minutes, completely silent. He then got up, walked up to Anna Grigoryevna, said something, nodded at Ilya Vladimirovich and left, smiling about something or other.

As Lida herself told me later, Misha said goodbye to her mother and was never seen in the Mikhailov home again. Even later, I found out that he found another wife, though their marriage was far from successful.

## LXVIII

**A**ugust flew by. September 1976 followed. Once again, I arrived home from Moscow, but this time friends and loved ones all lost their appeal and sank to the background. I thoughts were consumed by one desire: to see Lida. So I went to visit her the following day – a Saturday. Confident that Lida would be home, I impatiently knocked, planning out what I would say to her. I was slightly shaken when her father opened the door. This wasn't usual.

“Ah, Igor. Hello!”

I was a tad confused. Lida's father was smiling at me like he knew something.

“Hello, Ilya Vladimirovich. Is Lida home?” I asked, blushing.

“No.”

My heart sank.

“When will she be back?”

“Probably not too soon,” the man grumbled.

I stood there, not knowing what to do. Ilya Vladimirovich's words had an air of trickery to them. And what would I do with the flowers? Giving them to the father of my beloved seemed foolish. I shifted my weight from leg to leg.

"You know, Igor, you and I need to chat," Ilya Vladimirovich suddenly said. "Let's go to the garden."

I looked at him. This was a surprise.

"Yes, of course," I replied.

Still holding the flowers in my hand, I followed the master of the house. We stopped under the shade of a sprawling apple tree. Ilya Vladimirovich stayed silent for a second, then, looking into the distance, spoke:

"You know, Igor, Lida isn't planning to marry quite yet. She needs to study."

I was stunned. Maybe I heard him wrong? It was as if a stranger said it – someone unfamiliar with Lidochka or me.

"I don't understand," I blurted out.

"Please, Igor, don't be offended. You're both young – especially Lida. I assure you, you'll find someone. But please don't come here anymore."

He fell silent, as if a load had been lifted off his shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. His discomfort had vanished. This declaration rang like thunder amidst a clear day. I didn't know what to say, or what to do. I answered in a mechanical voice, like a robot's:

"I understand, Ilya Vladimirovich."

I then shuffled in place for a moment, turned around, and headed for the gate. I couldn't believe what I heard from Lida's father, or that I was leaving this home forever.

'This is some sort of mistake! You need to talk to her,' my inner voice insisted. 'It can't be right. Come back immediately and talk to her.'

But I didn't do that. Instead, I went to the university dean's office the following morning to look for her.

Through Volodya, I found out that she and the other first year students were sent potato picking, and that Ilya Vladimirovich wasn't lying about her being away for a while. At the time, 'potato volunteering' lasted about a month. First year students were taken to the collective fields, where they mixed black soil with regular soil while soaking the earth with their sweat. Volodya told me which collective Lida was taken to and gave me directions. Next morning, I took the car and headed for the countryside. I wasn't worried about whether or not this was a good decision. I had to see her. Her father's words weren't enough. Lida herself had to tell me everything.

I spent two hours circling through muddy farmland until I finally spotted a bunch of figures rummaging in the field like ants. I parked nearby and got out, only then realizing that I was dressed for a date – suit, polished shoes, and all – about to go into deep mud, when the other guys and girls were all in boots and sweaters. But that didn't matter. Shoes be damned, I headed straight for Lida. She didn't see me approach. I stopped behind her, like an invisible man, and watched her skillfully handle a shovel.

"Hello, Lidochka!"

The girl shuddered and looked around. It seemed that my sudden arrival had had an impact. She stood up. I stood about two paces away from her, and didn't see as much as a shadow of displeasure on her face. Maybe things weren't that bad after all?

I realized that I didn't want to talk about anything serious. As if sensing this notion, she burst out in laughter. I followed suit, and soon we were both in stitches over nothing in particular. It seemed that we were simply happy to be together. It was as if we had only been apart for five minutes: all tension melted away.

I waited to say what was most important. I felt like a race-car driver during the final world championship race. One shaky

turn of the wheel, and my car would go off track and then – an explosion and plumes of smoke. But Lidochka seemed not to notice my hesitation. There was nothing in her expression that said ‘you stand no chance.’ We chatted pleasantly, after which she rinsed her hands in a nearby bucket and approached. A fresh breeze blew over her face, ruffling her hair.

“Listen, it’s a bit cold here.” Unable to resist temptation, I feigned a shiver. “Let’s sit in the car.”

“Alright!”

I opened the door for her and she got in the backseat. I sat next to her.

It seems that every man has moments throughout his life that he will always remember. I felt the warmth ascending from the depths of my soul and hugged her tight. She was still, like a bird in a cage, and I felt that she wasn’t pushing me away. Her soul was opening towards mine. I kissed her – carefully at first, then more and more passionately.”

I don’t remember how long this went on, but suddenly Lida pulled back.

“Let’s stop – they might see us,” she said.

“They won’t see us here.” I shook my head.

“Yes they will!” She answered firmly and pushed me away.

I realized that I shouldn’t expect any more that day. On the bright side, nothing stood in the way of what I had to say and I could speak, my heart and soul open before my beloved.

“Lida – please understand. I have very serious intentions. I love you and I want you to be...” I spoke slowly, as if my words had suddenly turned to stone “...my wife. Yesterday, your father told me not to come to your house again. I respect his opinion, but I also think that you have your own. And, most importantly, it’s your heart. Listen to yourself. I won’t rush you. Let’s meet in a month, and you can tell me what you’ve decided.” I stopped for a second. Was I risking too much? “There are no conditions. You’ll simply say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” I insisted. “I’ll accept either answer.”

Lida grew very serious.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. In a month. But no sooner than that.” She looked me over with her velvet gaze in a way that had me trying my damndest to not lunge at her and continue kissing her.

“I’ll be waiting,” I answered, barely audibly.

Everything would be decided in a month. My life or... I took her hand in mine.

“Merely holding your hand,” I mumbled, my voice trembling, “does something incredible to me.”

She didn’t pull her hand away, as if there was something invisible binding us. I looked at her, silently breathing in the aroma of her hair.

“Okay, I need to go back to the others,” she said, taking back her hand.

Lida climbed out of the car and went back to the field, not turning around, and I was left alone. Was this really happening to me?

I barely remember the way home. ‘What will she decide? What if her parents try to talk her out of it?’ There were hundreds of questions rushing through my head, each scarier than the next, all unanswered. Days of exhausting anticipation followed.

## LXIX

I returned to Moscow. Every day, I had to fight the urge to send the following telegram: “YES OR NO? TELL ME NOW!”. But I didn’t run to the post office and stayed away from the phone, understanding that time and silence were my best friends.

A month passed, and I came to Lida to hear her final decision. We met, and I suggested a walk in the park. She agreed. I tried to discern the answer from her facial expression, but it was unreadable.

We walked silently for quite a while, tossing small talk at each other here and there and looking at the sky, pretending to care about the sunset when both of us clearly had more important things on our mind. Lida kept glancing at me cautiously, her gaze tinted by surprise, as if this was the first time she’d seen me. In twilight, her face seemed pale.

“What have you decided, Lida?” I asked, unable to restrain myself, my voice trembling.

“Nothing,” she answered, smiling subtly.



My eyebrows crawled up my forehead and my legs turned to rubber.

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that I haven’t made any new decisions since we last saw each other,” she answered.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Lida whispered, her face growing serious, “I gave you my answer when I let you kiss me.”

“Tell me again,” I also whispered, stunned by my happiness.

“Yes,” Lida replied, barely audibly.

“Again,” I asked. “Louder.”

“Yes,” Lida replied, her tone unchanged.

“Again!” I yelled, lifted her up, and started to spin her. “Say it, say it, say it!” I kept yelling.

“Let go, you’re gonna drop me!”

I felt drunk, though I hadn’t had a drop of alcohol. It felt like a special light beamed upon us from the heavens, invisible to everyone else. What more could I wish for? Such happiness – to be loved and to have my whole life ahead of me. It took my breath away.

Who had willed for this to happen? Who had made this moment, which lifted me to the pinnacle of happiness, last forever? Only the Almighty and the Omniscient, who knew for certain that Igor Babaev’s destiny was linked to Lida Mikhailova!

On the second day after Lida’s consent my father and Havo went to visit her parents. This was according to a ritual developed by generations of Mountain Jews.

Lida and I were inseparable, constantly talking about what awaited us and making plans. I also learned a lot of things that – seemingly – weren’t meant for me to know.

Lida told me how she spent the month that became so torturous for me. Two or three weeks after we parted, she started

talking to her parents about marriage and told them that she had chosen me. Her parents were dumbstruck, and they both rushed to talk her out of it. Many years of personal experience later, I can see where they were coming from. They merely wanted the best for their youngest daughter: Misha was a guy they knew well from the time that he was little and harbored no surprises – a pure boy for a pure girl. What more could they want?

But Lida insisted on her decision, and I am awestruck by her stubbornness to this day. She had made the choice to strive for her own happiness, despite such defiance being unexpected from the tender, obedient daughter, which she remains to this day.

## LXX

**T**he happy outcome of our love story awaited – the marriage ceremony. The artificially blue thin cloth, stretched over four posts, symbolized the heavens that blessed our union. Lida was wearing an unusually exquisite dress, which had been brought in from abroad. Her arranged hair and high heels made her look like a French actress.

When she saw me, a smile illuminated her face. She leaned toward me and tried to say something, but Anna Grigoryevna grabbed her by the elbow – it wasn't proper. For now, the bride belonged to her parents.

Everything happened in accordance to the ancient Jewish tradition. One of Ilya Vladimirovich's friends got a special bottle of wine, then a ritual bottle of vodka on a silver platter and a basket of desserts – to symbolize a sweet and prosperous life for the newlyweds. The spry Rabbi with a pointy beard looked at us gently, as if to say 'don't worry, this is just for fun – the important part will be at the wedding registry'.

Ilya Vladimirovich, dressed in a black suit, a starched shirt and an imported tie, paced nervously around the room. His suit fit him like a glove, his shoes sparkled. He was smoking either Dunhills or Marlboros. When he saw me, he recalled the time when I visited their home as Volodya's friend. My future father-in-law then gave the rabbi a mischievous look and said:

"Igor's a champ! If not for his persistence..."

"What does persistence have to do with it?" the rabbi interrupted. "The young man simply knows what he's striving toward and what's worth fighting for."

"Such knowledge requires faith," Ilya Vladimirovich agreed and looked at me inquisitively, as if trying to gauge whether I have faith or not.

"Sometimes faith comes later," I answered softly.

The rabbi nodded in accord and signaled for the ceremony to start.

Volodya instantly appeared, leading five men behind him. These were the main participants in the ritual. They surrounded Lida and I, like the warriors that were supposed to keep Adam and Eve from sin, and lifted the chuppah high above our heads. We stood still – bewildered and happy.

At times, the guests would shoot sly glances at either Lida or me, as if to show that they knew what awaited us in the near future. The women whispered blessings, while their husbands look at me mischievously, as if trying to say: 'Wait a few years, and you'll know what we know.'

The rabbi slowly began to read the ketubah – the matrimonial contract. At times, his voice sounded like it was coming from the ceiling, as if it wasn't him, but the ethereal spirit, doing the reading. When he finished, his helper gave me the sign, and I put a silver ring around Lida's finger. Everyone applauded in unison and started walking up, congratulating us and kissing us on both cheeks.

That is how Lida officially became my wife.

## LXXI

A special episode from my memories was Lida and her Mother's visit to Moscow for my preliminary master's defense. I rented a room especially for them at Rossiya Hotel. The day before the examination, Lidochka helped me rehearse my presentation. I stood before her, as I would before the commission, and ardently laid out my dissertation.

I was oddly eloquent – probably because I was driven by lust. Positive emotions inspired thought, and my beloved's approval wound me up more than any intoxicating beverage could. We rehearsed so much, that it seemed like no stone was left unturned and there wasn't a single question I wouldn't be able to answer. The only thing left to do was to repeat this enchanted speech before the academics and I'd be all set.

The next day arrived. The auditorium was full – its amphitheater benches filled with everyone I learned from, listened to and admired: doctors, fellow students and senior advisors. I went up to the podium, cleared my throat, and began to speak.

I spoke for a while, occasionally stammering and losing my train of thought. Ultimately, speaking to a room full of people, with full knowledge that they knew the subject better than I did, turned out to be exceptionally difficult. At the end of my lecture, I heard applause. That day, the dissertational council was comprised of all the scientific elite of the food industry, but my main expert was still my future wife Lida.

When it was over, I approached her and asked impatiently: “How was it?”

She shook her head skeptically.

“You should have done much better,” she said bluntly. “You stammered and seemed unsure – at least compared to the stellar performance you gave yesterday.”

She kissed me.

Indeed, the stress got to me. But that wasn’t too important – I’d survive. I wasn’t about to waste time worrying about it. I had done everything I could, and there were too many interesting things that lay ahead.

The banquet that followed, however, went much better. There were no more than twenty-five people there. Graduate students, their friends, and the research advisor. I smiled and spoke about all kinds of foolish things. Anna Grigoryevna, Lida’s mother, surprised me as well – this was the first time I saw her, as they say, fully dressed up. She looked so glamorous that I didn’t recognize her – her fashionable hairstyle and exquisite jewelry looked like they were straight out of a foreign film. She danced, attracting the attention of venerable professors and young students alike. My friends would come up to me and say: “Some mother-in-law you have! One could fall in love!”

Overall, it was a successful evening.

Serious challenges lay ahead, however. I was faced with a dilemma over where to take my career from now on: science or industry.

As a newfound PhD, I could stay within the university department, which carried significant advantages. Firstly, life in Moscow, the capital scene, a career as a scientist. Secondly, science then touted a higher salary than manufacturing, and that was certainly important. Everyone was obsessed with physicists and lyricists, but I chose the less favorable option anyways – manufacturing. As it turned out, I wasn't wrong.

## LXXII

**B**efore too long, Anatoly Tarada called my father and told him that there's an opening in Anapa – a famous resort town in the Krasnodar region.

“Don't delay,” he added.

Naturally, Father agreed on my behalf, and the gears of decision-making started turning. When the local meatpacking plant came up on the agenda during a meeting of the City Party Committee in Anapa, Tarada wistfully gnawed on his lip and confidently mentioned:

“I have a qualified, albeit young, candidate in mind.”

“Who?” the first secretary perked up.

Tarada paused for effect, like a Moscow Art Theatre actor, then announced:

“Igor Babaev.”

“Which Babaev?” someone asked.

“The one from Kislovodsk?” asked another.

“No, that's his father,” Tarada softly replied. “I'm talking about his son. He's a very bright guy.”



He went on to talk about my record with the Komsomol and the Party, as well as my energetic and goal-oriented nature. This was a ritual followed at all government levels. When Tarada finished, silence hung over the room. The silence meant official approval and boundless support of the Party.

In a month, I received an official offer to head the meat-processing workshop. That's how I became a director of an enterprise at the age of twenty-seven. And where? In a coastal city on the Black Sea!

After arriving in Krasnodar, I headed straight for the regional meatpacking directorate. It was headed by a Party worker, a wise man named Aleksey Petrovich Grechanyi. After our formal conversation, Grechanyi and I drove to Anapa in his car.

It must have been when we arrived in the city and started looking for my future place of work that I learned a new definition for the term 'boondocks'. My guide spent a quite a while trying to find the institution that reported to him, and I was crestfallen over the instantly clear fact that Grechanyi had never been there. The weather outside, however, was heavenly. 'Don't despair, old man,' it seemed to say. 'You'll be fine.'

It's possible that we drove past our destination several times, not realizing that the meatpacking plant was located in a scrubby, unpresentable courtyard. Its grounds were split into parts: the slaughterhouse, which was located on the coast, and the processing and administration facilities, which were located near the center of town. I sighed when I entered the grounds: the facility was paltry, even when compared to the canning plant in Yessentuki. Echoes of the "Hooves and Horns Collective" from Ilf and Petrov's *Golden Calf* echoed through my memory.

While I wandered through the tiny workshops in search of people, the frightened deputy director ran up to us and started explaining that around two hundred fifty people worked

there. Not being able to find a single one of them, I wondered where they went.

What I saw shocked me with its outlandishness, but it was too late to surrender. Now that years have passed, I can confidently say that there was no real science behind the USSR's food industry and agrarian sector. It was funded and its research institutions were hard at work, but that was all fiction. We were governed by regulations created by people who had no experience with industry, and therefore couldn't expect any noticeable economic growth – there was no place for it to come from. Nevertheless, the façade of scientific progress was well developed. It was a true paradox. Examining the fact that Soviet livestock facilities turned out to be unsustainable in market conditions, I can't help but think that the problems stemmed from the very same misguided scientific sector that provided for the existence of such enterprises and I was trying to faithfully serve.

After seeing the dismal conditions at the meatpacking plant and without giving Grechanyi any concrete answers, I ran to Father.

“What now?” he asked in his usual careless manner.

“It's not a plant, it's a goddamn mess,” I said right away and went on to recount my impressions.

Father smiled and then looked at me keenly.

“But Tarada thinks that it isn't that bad – that it's a good place to start. The smaller the plant, the less significant the complaints.”

I looked at Father intently as he picked up a pencil and started putting all my ducks in a row. It was an invaluable lecture. Father explained what to expect, what kind of people would turn to me, what kind of supply issues could arise and how I should handle them. To be honest, his grasp of the situation shocked me. With such support, I stopped questioning my decision.

In exactly two weeks, I came to work in Anapa – this time, without Grechanyi. The deputy then introduced me to the staff. Everyone gathered in a small auditorium, I went to the podium and bashfully introduced myself to my subordinates. Everyone applauded.

And so, I spent my days and nights at the meatpacking plant, dedicating myself to the work with youthful passion and enthusiasm, trying to make tweaks and adjustments. My thoughts were so absorbed by livestock slaughter, supply and product quality that I nearly forgot about my master's defense. And then, I got a reminder.

As I mentioned before, I had only presented my preliminary defense and my final dissertation had not yet been confirmed. That was set to happen after I had accepted my position as the meatpacking plant director. Knowing that, my research advisor, Ernest Kahuchishvili – a professor, a doctor of science, and a very wise man with much experience – gave me some good advice:

“Wait up, Igorek! Set aside your duties,” he said. “I understand that it's pleasant to be a director at twenty-seven. But think about it – it may make more sense to wait.”

“Why would I?” I asked.

“You know, the scientific community is a particular bunch. If you go to defend your dissertation as a director, some people may get the wrong idea.”

“What's so bad about it? The way I figure, it may be beneficial. Both an industrialist and a friend of science – isn't that the idea? Isn't that what you taught us?”

“Yes, of course is it,” Kahuchishvili laughed. “But you know, theory often differs from practice. You see, we scientists tend to be very confident about our insights. Why would an industrial director want to have a PhD as well? Could he maybe be a careerist? That's what they may think.”

He looked at me inquisitively.

“Let them think what they want,” I retorted.

“Sure – let them! But keep in mind, some may be envious. Some of them have gotten very good at tripping up their competition.”

I waved him off.

“We’ll handle it.”

What else could I say? That I can’t put work on hold? Kahuchishvili wouldn’t understand. But had I delayed with my appointment, they could find another candidate to take my place, and then – goodbye career.

But Kahuchishvili knew what he was talking about. Yes, I defended my dissertation – with flying colors. But there was still the minor issue of it being confirmed, and that’s where my candidacy hit a bottleneck – an impassible one. But I didn’t know that yet. At that moment, I was being torn between my work and more important matters: wedding preparation.

## LXXIII

**T**hey say that if you want to be happy with a party, have it for yourself, not for others. Jewish weddings aren't held for the bride and groom – they're held for their parents. I learned that from personal experience.

Some five hundred people gathered for the wedding. Among them were numerous officials, friends and acquaintances of my father, and hordes of relatives from both the bride's and the groom's side. Naturally, Anatoly Tarada was a special guest.

I was going to the celebration straight from the Anapa meat processing plant. I was accompanied by Volodya, Lida's brother, who was already working under me as supervisor of the refrigeration section. Talk about dedication: even an event as important as my own wedding was being juggled with my work.

The car sped forward. I was overcome with the anticipation of happiness. Volodya kept trying to entertain me with

some jokes, but I only half-listened. Staring at the passing landscape, I felt my muscles gaining strength, and happiness filling my lungs alongside air. I was confident that my life would change tremendously from that moment on.

The wedding was held in Kislovodsk's finest restaurant. When I returned there many years later, it seemed small, simple and provincial. But then, in the middle of the seventies, we considered it to be the ideal place for a celebration.

Part of the banquet hall was set apart for the stage. Tables were arranged on either side of it, forming a magical 'u' shape. As customary at Jewish weddings, the tables nearly buckled under the weight of food that topped them. This had all been arranged by Zhora Tumasian – the very same boy that Isay Adamov had saved from jail time when he stole the caviar. Zhora was the head chef of the restaurant and had provided a true feast of culinary wonder.

The orchestra rumbled and everyone rejoiced. Till this day, a wave of happy memories sweeps over me whenever I enter that room. The fact that happiness had a flip side was a notion I hadn't even thought of back then. It wasn't years later until I learned of an incident that was concealed from me that day.

The incredible wedding ship was going three sheets to the wind towards its apogee. The guests danced, broke dishes, and screamed 'shalom!' and "mazel tov!" Suddenly, I saw – or, rather – heard commotion among the guests. It was happening at the section of the table where my father was sitting. Someone ran up to him and whispered something in his ear, leading Father to scowl. That very moment, he and several of his closest friends ran toward the staircase leading to the first floor. I curiously followed them with my gaze, not giving it a second thought. How could something bad happen on the happiest day of my life? After all, I had Lida – the most wonderful girl in the world – sitting next to me.

Perhaps someone had brought a live hippo and was trying to get it in? Perhaps someone had brought the moon down from the sky and didn't know what to do with it? I snickered at my ridiculous theories and stayed where I was.

Years passed, and I still don't know how I would have reacted had I known the real reason for the commotion. As it turns out, our poor mother had found out about my wedding. It isn't clear who told her (perhaps Zachar, her brother?), but she had come from Makhachkala, found the fancy restaurant where the party was being held, and showed up in her old dress to congratulate her son. She merely wanted to bless me, to take joy in my happiness, which she had always wanted to accompany me throughout my life.

She approached the restaurant, where one of our relatives recognized her. I can still picture her, looking around happily, trying to figure out whether she's in the right place or not. Her worn-out blue dress is so different from the other guests' luxurious outfits. My father is informed, and he makes the executive decision not to let the mother of his children into the ballroom.

It was so simple: all they had to do was make the poor woman lose her composure. As soon as someone grabbed her by the arm and try to drag her out, she began to scream. But the thundering orchestra drowned out the noise and commotion that took place on the staircase.

I continued with my happy revelry and couldn't see my mother being kicked out of my own wedding. But even if I knew... Perhaps, true manhood lies in having the strength to admit that you were wrong.

So here it goes: had I known that our mother stood at the door of the restaurant, I'm not sure that I could invite her to the place of honor at the table. That would seem like a betrayal with regard to my father, who had raised me and helped me advance through society. I owed everything to him,

and back then, I experienced no feelings toward my mother that even closely resembled filial love. I didn't know her at all. In my eyes, she was a mentally unstable stranger, who was trying to assert her parental rights for whatever reason. Could I grasp the tragedy that she lived through, again and again, continually encountering our indifference?

It took decades for me to comprehend the drama that took place at our wedding. No prayers could take away the indifference and emptiness that surrounded Turunge throughout her life. My mother loved us more than life itself, and her heart was being torn apart. She dedicated her whole life to us, and it wasn't until much later that I realized that we owed everything to her – every minute of carefree life that she warmed and blessed with her simple, motherly prayers.

It's a pity how we only begin to understand such simple truths after fate forces us to endure a multitude of losses.

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