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CRIMEAN AUTUMN

Translated from Russian by John Kendal

novella

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BETALT

To the radiant memory of Polina Savelevna Tikhonenko

They had first appeared at Utjos eight years ago, in the middle of August - the worst time to arrive. There were always a lot of holiday visitors, but in the first months of the summer they came and left without any particular pattern, and every day somebody's room or apartment would fall vacant - only to be occupied again immediately. *Apartment* was the proud name for a small wooden shed, with an opaque little window or peephole, standing detached from the owner's home. At the beginning of August the opposing streams of people became regularised, equalised, denser; this movement gradually slowed down to come to a complete standstill by the tenth of the month - and the accumulated human flood filled the tiny village to the last shady corner where it was possible to put down a spring mattress, a camp bed or a wire frame. There were few arrivals in these days, rapidly moving towards the end of the short summer, but even fewer departures, and only in the last five days of August, as if waking from sleep, would the holidaymakers - the *guests* or *lodgers* as the locals called them - as if by common consent abandon the seashore, which was already becoming chilly at night, and head back towards their homes...

She remembered that the first time they had arrived on the fifteenth of August, because that day was her birthday, not that anybody had wished her many happy returns. It was fifteen years since anybody had done so, since her brother Pyotr, who had stayed behind in Mariupol, had been crushed by a truck. Her brother had remembered her birthday every year, had sent her a card with a picture of some monument to Lenin or to Taras Shevchenko, always with the same words written in large printed letters: "Dear Poly a happy birthday I wish you health and

happyness your brother Pyotr”... Each year she awaited this card all year - and when it arrived perused it long and slowly and with pleasure: first her own and the sender’s addresses, which began with the broadly spaced and always underlined capital letters: “RSFSR” and “UKR.SSR”. Her brother wrote “RSFSR, Crimea” long after Khrushchev had handed the Crimea over to Ukraine. He was a solitary, unsteady man, worked as a stevedore and drank heavily, and had probably not heard about this event; then the actual good-wishes, the text of which remained unchanged from his first card and only in the last year of his life was unexpectedly supplemented, after the word “happyness”, with “... and success in your work” - although she was already a pensioner at that time and had been so throughout her post-war life, since 47, when she arrived at Utyos. The only employment she had had was a little work as a laundress or cleaner at the sanatorium... Success? Having read everything, the addresses, the good wishes, she would turn the card over and regard with close attention the grey sunlit monuments. The monuments were large - in comparison with the living people standing beside them - and very handsome.

While Petya was alive, she had not felt lonely even though she had been alone for a long time. Their father had died - disappeared - in 1919. Not even a photograph of him had remained, and she had forgotten - it had drowned in the sea of her memory - his face. They had lived in Ekaterinoslav, in their own little house in Kaydaki; in 1919 she had been thirteen years old, and she remembered the horsemen flying down the dusty street - in the gap between the curtains, hasty, seemingly fearful shots and dimly, like a page in a book written in childhood their father’s hurried departure one dark night filled with the sounds of shots and their mother’s weeping voice... She never saw him again. In 1921, not waiting for their father, they left Ekaterinoslav for good

because of the famine. Where had he fought and how had he died? As a young woman she used to write when filling out forms with her biographical details: "...died in 1920 in the ranks of the Red Army for the happiness of the working class". That was what her mother always said, and that was how she remembered him throughout her life. Not long before the war, seeking employment in the spray section of a radiator factory, she handed in her papers to a personnel officer - and suddenly the personnel officer, sinewy, yellow and mean like an unfed dog, growled at her in a sibilant whisper, throwing her papers across the table: "Fiction...you've written! Write: father so-and-so, from 1919 in the Red Army, killed in 1920! The stuff they write..." Forty years had passed. She still remembered the face of the chief personnel officer; her father's face 70 years later, she could not recall.

She had never been married. She had been a clumsy, plain and taciturn girl, with vivid freckles on her broad face and with round, grey eyes - and the first fellow to whom she yielded, almost without resistance, stayed with her for a month and then dropped her, leaving her pregnant. She gave birth to a son; she was completely alone, constantly reproached by her sick, worn out mother - although for that matter she did not feel lonely with her son. Her mother was working on the construction of a steel factory and in 1933 finally collapsed and died. In 1943 her son was called up and killed straightaway.

She could not now recall the pain that she had felt on receiving notice of his death while she was living in evacuation - and anyway it is not at all possible to imagine a feeling, it is only possible to experience it. She remembered that she lay down on her bed, her face to the mattress, and lay there for two days in a half-sleep, half-faint, mechanically getting up to drink a little water, eat some bread and go to the lavatory, - and her brain became

more and more densely enveloped in a black, ringing silence. On the third morning her mates came to her and dragged her off to the factory by force. The foreman of their section was a saint and did not report her for her absenteeism.

Her life flowed slowly and joylessly - more joylessly than sadly; slowly - but it now seemed to her that her short childhood - her little brother crying in the cradle, the dusty, sun-yellow street along which she hurried on foot to the parish school (saving the tram fare for the shining, tenderpink ice cream, thick as homemade sour cream, that the blue-eyed onearmed invalid measured out into a miserably small green glass with a very thick bottom for the sake of economy) - that all this had taken place yesterday. Her feelings were pale and weary, her memories fragmentary and imprecise, but all her life she remembered with tenderness the sugarwhite, squat little house in Ekaterinoslav - with its red roof, sky-blue shutters, the May foam of the flowering cherry tree in the yard, the old mulberry tree, its trunk and roots growing out from under the steps of the sagging porch interwoven with a wild vine... - and never felt any fondness for the factory, with its smell of oil and paint, its clang of dead iron. Perhaps that was why, after the war, when a fellow soldier wrote to her brother inviting him to come to the Crimea - to a town between Altusha and Yalta, to a village consisting of empty houses left behind by the Tatars - traitors to the Motherland, - and Pyotr refused to go because he had returned from the war tired, deeply locked up in himself, with an urgent and passionate need for vodka, that she accepted the invitation in place of her brother. She imagined the Crimea, which she had never seen, as a leisurely mountain rolling down to the sea, entwined with grapevines and early and long-flowering cherry blossom.

She arrived; after war-blackened Ukraine the village with its fairy-tale name of Biyuk-Lambat seemed to her a little island of paradise, left by God amid the devastation created by man on earth. The village was almost empty - a score of yellowy grey houses under pink tile and made of mussel-shell brick, many with furniture and even with household equipment that no one had plundered, which the people leaving had either not had time or had not been allowed to take with them. She was well received, immediately offered work in a vineyard that had suffered severely during the war and a large room with a view of the high, dazzlingly blue sea - a room in which there stood a home-made cupboard, fashioned with loving care and two shining chrome beds, and in which there hung a large oval mirror with a black star, to the right of which could clearly be seen a long light patch - the sad reminder of a recently removed photograph or picture... - but she declined. It was not that she felt sorry for these unknown Crimean Tatars, about whom she had first heard on the way and learnt terrible and what seemed to her improbable things (even her mind, unaccustomed to reflection, and the more so reflection regarding state affairs that were infinitely remote from her, timidly registered astonishment, even weakly resisted the idea presented to her of a traitor-people - of men, women, old people children as traitors...even it seemed dogs whose dried out skeletons still lay yellow along the street that was swiftly becoming overgrown) - it was not that she felt sorry for these people - although this, too, was probably the case, especially at the moments when she saw on the road a child's shoe that had not yet been worn out or a celluloid comb trampled into the dust or a walking-stick with a knob exquisitely carved to represent a bunch of grapes - but she did not register this clearly in her thoughts and far less did she express this feeling aloud, - it was simply that - in this abandoned,

vacated, alien house, together with this cupboard with its unusual, unknown, simple and at the same time somehow affectionate decoration, on this floor with its boards fraying at the edges, under the rectangular patch on the long unpainted wall - she suddenly felt *wrong*. And she refused both the room and the job, thereby disappointing the good people who had received her kindly because of her brother and who were happily settling in to this new post-war life in a new place that had long been inhabited and, as it were, prepared for them by other people... She refused to settle in Biyuk-Lambat - and descended the mountain road to the very seashore, to the old estate Kuchuk-Lambat, which the new people, especially those invested with power, called Utyos, after the cliff sticking out into the sea - and for certain other reasons known to them, and remained there for ever. In Kuchuk-Lambat there was no shop and very few people lived there, but neither were there any empty houses with the bitter traces of other people's comfortable, long lives that had been destroyed in the course of a single day.

When she arrived in Utyos, she was already approaching fifty. She was taciturn and unsociable - both by nature and because of her past life, in which she remembered so little human warmth. She had experienced her last and perhaps only memorable happiness on the day the war ended; on that day it was as if she had woken from sleep and she had laughed and cried together with everyone else, loudly and joyfully. It seemed to her that now everything would be different, and that her life of which she had barely been conscious since the death of her son, would be a different, happy life, joyfully filled with events and people, a life that she herself would be aware of... But this did not happen.

The village consisted of a dozen small houses, each with a single sloping roof, and scattered like swallows' nests in the old park

which covered the steep slope. The park was more than a hundred years old. Above it on the red cliff rose a medieval-looking castle, with round crenellated towers and steeples at the corners. From the castle ran dark avenues of century-old cypresses - gigantic black-green cigars, hiding their ash-grey trunks among densely foliated laurels. Along the avenues wandered tame peafowls pecking at the pebbles, the huge peacock Grishka with his emerald tail and three agile peahens - and woke her in the mornings with their piercing, cat-like cries. Up to the Revolution an old princess had lived in the castle - had probably strolled in the park, gone down to the pool built in the middle of the wild beach, and drunk tea of an evening in the summer-house on the red cliff... Now there was a sanatorium here: visitors in pyjamas wandered in flocks along the stony paths, craning their necks to see the tops of the cypresses, fed the satiated peafowls with the pastries left over from afternoon tea. The numerous springs converted by the princess into fountains were blocked with rubbish and no longer working, but to compensate there stood at the beginning of the central avenue a plaster statue of a girl in a blouse and running shorts, with elegantly raised arms... There were other similar girls.

She liked the park immensely - although there were no cherry trees around the white houses which had once belonged to the princess's servants and now belonged to the sanatorium. It was forbidden to have a kitchen garden so as not to spoil the old park. Near the houses, only surreptitiously planted pomegranate and walnut trees - invisible from the cypress avenues behind the leaves of fig trees - reached towards the sky and having already got a good footing had begun to bear fruit, while along the walls and trellises of the little courtyards wild vines afforded a meagre harvest... It was very quiet here; at night pensive crickets sang

clearly and resoundingly, and a brilliant golden moon sailed across the black vault of the sky above Bear Mountain. In autumn, when the heat lessened, she liked to sit above the chasm on a bench polished by the wind and look out over the waves of the close yet infinitely distant Black Sea in front of her: at first greyish-black with white horses at the horizon, then blue-black, then blue-green, then, not far from the shore, greeny-yellow - and, finally, surging angrily among the sharp stones with dirty white, boiling foam. To her right, grizzled with age, the old she-bear slept her stony sleep; to her left, unlike anything at all, stood the cliff of Utyos, plunged into the water up to the curve of her breast, flecked with the white dots of resting seagulls... She liked it all after the brick and iron of the factory - even the plaster girl reading a book outside her window. The same girl had sat at the entrance to the factory hall. This faint reminder of the factory that she had left for always was even pleasing to her. After all she had worked - lived - there for twelve years, and it could not be said that they had done her any serious wrong.

She took a job at the sanatorium as a cleaner; life trickled slowly, quietly - and somehow rarely - just as the cypresses grew and the pink Italian pine renewed its needles. The people around her were the most random acquaintances; mainly single women, from various remote and often highly unexpected places, who looked without hope at the few men: these were all heavy drinkers and always quiet in the company of women. In full accord with her nature she did not seek company and did not avoid it, she wished and did no harm to anyone - nor, probably, good - perhaps because a person living in inner and outer loneliness seldom has the opportunity to do either. She did not read books because that was not her habit, but she did subscribe, however, to the newspaper "The Red Crimea" (which a few years

after her arrival began to call itself “The Crimean Truth”) and hardly read it - she needed newspapers in her housework - and occasionally she visited the sanatorium club - occasionally because although she liked films, she felt uncomfortable there, lost in the crowd of idle, gay informally dressed people, who long before the beginning of a performance would stand around the entrance, noisily greeting each other.

The house in which she was given a room was constructed of real Crimean stone and not of friable bricks made of crushed mussel shells, and stood on a narrow, crumbling terrace - as on a huge step - which had been made back in the old days. In the nineties there had been a kitchen there - the castle did not exist, and the princess lived one terrace lower in a single-storeyed white house with two columns, the foot of which rose to the level of the kitchen yard... She could not help noticing (and drawing an involuntary though, for her, unclear parallel with Biyuk-Lambat) that the princess's estate had also preserved the signs of an intrusion into someone else's attractively and securely organised life - the traces of the destruction and expulsion of this life from the princess's ancestral home: in the park, in the castle and in the mistress's former home, whose very appearance seemed to suggest that they were made for quiet and isolation; it was noisy and dirty as a result of all the new settlers and visitors - of course, not as now, forty years later, when they came in their thousands; but all the small, insignificant details of the old estate had already disappeared - the curved benches, the friezes, the small basins with flowers placed where the stairways turned, which both constitute and preserve memory - and consequently the sight of hundreds of people had already become natural and habitual... And then the signs of the slow but, as it were, natural death of the old Kuchuk-Lambat forced themselves on her attention: the scrolled cast-iron

streetlights were bowed and rusty, the castle was dilapidated and covered in dirty patches, a plaster girl had seated herself on a massive pedestal, which had obviously been designed for something else; the Springs had fallen silent, and those which had been made of limestone had begun to crumble and lose their ornamentation; the family vault had long since been violated, and now in the short, low labyrinth, where the coffins had once stood, tourists with torches climbed around, calling to each other, making fires, or performing their bodily functions. The grave of the old princess, who in 1917 had voluntarily given away all her property and in the twenties was still working in her library, had turned into a barely noticeable mound close to the chapel... However, the sight of these changes did not evoke in her even a shade of that bitter, dreary feeling with which she had descended from Biyuk-Lambat to Utyos; all this had taken place long ago, thirty years had passed, and the princess herself was no longer among the living - and her estate had rightfully been passed on to the working people...

Her room was smallish, narrow and long, with one window in the long side - and in bad weather an oleander knocked at this window with its soft stems, and at dawn the blue ridge of Ayu-Dag loomed in the distance. The other three rooms were now inhabited by Granny Nadya - so old that even she called her "Granny"; by Marina, a still young woman in her midfifties, ugly, lively and very prone to tears, who had all her life thrown herself at each new male arrival at Utyos, succeeding in some miraculous way, despite her strident voice and unattractive appearance, in making their acquaintance - and who nonetheless had never succeeded in getting married, - and by the carpenter Ivan, a still middle-aged, entirely greyhaired man with large eyes, who was regarded as a carpenter at the sanatorium, but who in fact never

carpentered - he didn't know how to - and who occasionally performed, in the intervals between his long and quiet drinking bouts, a wide variety of unskilled and dirty jobs - including the emptying of the outside toilets. Old Granny Nadya rented out two small houses higher up the slope, Marina - an absurd construction that contained a large number of sleeping places and resembled a beehive, and Iva's - his large and completely bare room, because he himself lived summer and winter in a huge shed, filled to the ceiling with rubbish and empty bottles... She herself let a tiny house with room for two people.

All her life her life had trickled slowly and monotonously; after the death of her son it had come to a complete standstill - that is to say, she had lost the sense that the following day would bring anything, not necessarily something big or joyful, but something new, anything at all. She had lost the sense of *tomorrow*. Everything was limited by the present, not even by what would be in an hour, in ten minutes, but by what was occurring at that very minute. The past no longer existed; at the time still close to Sasha's death she had not even been able to recall anything - inside her a black flame of such pain flared up that she recoiled from it in terror - as if snatching her hand from a fire. She could not recall her life with her son, that spartan, ruddy pre-war life, which it now seemed to her that she had lived with warmth and a smile - seeing her boy or expecting to see him. She could not recall her life before she had him - because her memory simply ran forward without looking back, swallowing the years, to the day when she carried him out of the nursing home, wrapped in a white woven blanket brought by her mother. Her life had stopped together with the life of her son. After that there was a brief ripple that lasted a day or two and drowned in the unmoving ocean of her grief - the end of the war. In everybody's mind the war had

already been won for a year, and its end could not return her son to her. Her son was her life, the end of the war - a moment of gladness in a lost life.

In the course of some years the pain died down, became weaker, but it was still there - it exploded now and then, if, suddenly, not having had time to prepare herself internally, she unexpectedly met in the street a middle-aged woman, of her age, together with a fully grown boy of about twenty. Seeing an old woman leaning on the arm of a forty-year-old man she felt nothing - for her this picture was meaningless and unfamiliar; seeing a young woman, more like a girl than a mother, with an unruly ten-year-old boy, she felt only an incomprehensible alarm and a strange wish that the boy should walk quietly along beside his mother: that he shouldn't clamber up that crumbling slope, shouldn't run to and fro on the road that concealed motor cars, shouldn't dive head-first into the sea and, perhaps, that he shouldn't bathe at all... People sometimes drowned at Utyos, mainly drunks, however. But time passed, she grew old and together with her the mothers of twenty-year-old boys grew surprisingly younger, so that soon she, the mother of a forever twenty-year-old son, was at the very first moment surprised by their youth, was no longer able to put herself in their place and Sasha, her - an old woman's - son, in the place of their boys - and the pain of these accidental meetings began to die away and soon disappeared completely. The past returned to her, she remembered it without suffering with a tender sadness, and the older she grew - with pleasure... The photograph of her son hung in her room on the wall opposite her bed, so that she could meet him on waking in the morning - next to it in the corner was a small icon with a brass lamp - , a brown oval photograph, glued onto a piece of cardboard and framed in a simple rectangular frame. Ivan had made the frame in one of his good

moments: a little drunk, he had looked in for some reason and had taken pity on her son, whose photograph was hanging from a string on the wall. Unable to make an oval frame, he had knocked together a rectangular one. She was so happy about the frame she could have wept; she painted it with manganese and offered Ivan a rouble to buy vodka. Ivan had not wanted to accept the money and insisted on taking it as a loan. She had been prepared to forgive him this debt, but he did not have time to repay it because on the very same day he got into a fight with someone at the shop, got beaten up, and the local policeman, who had it in for him, put him away for a year on a charge of hooliganism.

Soon after the death of her son she had begun to believe in God. This occurred all by itself, without conversations with others, without reading any books about God and even without the church, - that is, she first began to believe and began to believe immediately when she thought of Him; that is, when she remembered that there was a God on earth in whom people had believed and in whom at that time quite a few, even many people believed - before her son's death she had simply not had time to think about it. She began to believe as if God had always been with her in her soul and had only been awaiting his hour, and only after this when she already believed in a kind old man with a big white beard, with whom her son must be in good hands and to whom she could always entrust her son so that she could have peace in her soul - only after this did she begin to talk with Marya Afanasevna, her neighbour in the communal apartment, a severe, taciturn, religious woman, - and Marya Afanasevna brought her an old book about Jesus Christ printed in the old alphabet (which, however, did not present any problems as she had been brought up with it and had read very little that had been written in the new style) and took her to church - and there in the warm semi-dark-

ness, among the candlelight and the sweet fumes that caressed her soul, she felt that she was - not in the Lord's Temple but a guest in the home of a very good, infinitely powerful person possessed of a slow, beneficial strength. She was not offended with God for having allowed her son to be killed: despite all that she had read and heard she did not ask, not that she did not believe in it, for God's omnipotence to be manifested on Earth. Yet perhaps she did not believe in it after all, seeing around her on Earth much evil and together with the magnitude of this evil so little punishment; at rare moments when she thought about it she would conclude that on earth everyone suffers for everything, and that everything, good and bad, is done by people, - and that after their deaths God sorts things out and judges them according to their deserts. She hoped that God would not be hard on her boy - he had done no wrong to anyone and had died defending the Fatherland.

With regret - with regret not pain because God lived first and foremost in her heart - she discovered belatedly after all the stress of moving - that there was no church in Kuchuk-Yambat. Close to the castle the princess had had a large chapel of grey hewn stone erected, but after the Revolution the cross had been demolished and an electric sub-station installed in it... and on holy days she and the other women travelled to Yalta. Sometimes, usually at Easter, they were given the sanatorium's bus with Vasily as driver, and they clubbed together to buy him a bottle of vodka and gave him a basket containing painted eggs and an Easter cake. He accepted the vodka and at first always refused the basket but then took it too, - and going into the churchyard to wait for the old women surreptitiously crossed himself.

On each visit to the church she lit a candle and wrote a note asking for intercession - and if she was alone and Vasily was not

waiting outside with the bus, she always stayed until Father Ilarion, his thick bass voice slightly hoarse after the service, mentioned "the warrior Alexander". She interpreted the intercession and the candle in her own way as a message to her son, so that he should not be unhappy without his mother.

Yes, after her son's death her life had stopped. She still had her brother, twelve years younger than her, whom she loved very much; her brother had remained in Mariupol - she had never got used to calling the town Zhdanov although she had heard only good of Zhdanov - she simply couldn't understand why Zhdanov, and in the few letters she wrote she would succeed only at the second or third try in writing the correct address on the envelope. She loved and felt sorry for her brother and would probably have stayed in Mariupol to look after and support him, were it not for the deep change that had taken place in him during the war and turned him into, not an unhappy or sick person, but into a man who had cut himself off from life completely, who by his weary indifference to himself made any attempt at helping him meaningless and useless. She felt that she was necessary for him only through the mere fact of her existence, it didn't matter where, - but in no way because she could cook and wash and talk with him. All this he did for himself without any effort or frustration - and he talked only with himself. She would have been glad to see him every day - but for her too the main thing was the knowledge that fifty kilometers from Utyos her brother lived and sometimes thought about her - remembered her birthday and sent cards with beautiful monuments on them - and that when she died her twelve years younger brother would continue to live and sometimes remember her and her grave... And when he was killed (he was crushed against a wall by the side of a lorry, lay a week in hospital and, having hung on until her arrival, died just as quietly and

patiently as he had lived), she was left entirely alone, after her there was no one who could live on, and her life, which had stopped with that of her son, but a small part of which had continued in her younger brother, shuddered, swayed and began slowly to move backwards. She felt that this slow movement towards its end - not that she was preparing to die, she was not yet seventy, at that time and might live another five, ten or more years, - at Utyos' life in general was slow and therefore long, Granny Elizaveta, who had once washed for the Gagarins, had already passed ninety, only the men drank and thus cheated life, dying as a rule in their early fifties... - but her life, which she had sensed as a forward movement together with the life of her son and with a long pause between the day of his death and the death of her brother, was now experienced by her as a movement in an opposite and terminal direction.

In the middle of the Sixties, not long before his accidental death, her brother had come to visit her. Marina, who was already a long way into her thirties (Petya was not yet fifty), threw herself into the task of looking after him: baked pies for him, presented herself as a housewife - although she was nothing of the sort - knocked at the door of his room ten times a day - invited him down to the beach, told him about the day's film or a concert given by the Crimean Philharmonic Orchestra, borrowed sugar or salt, not worrying about Pelageya Valerevna (who knew that she had plenty of sugar and salt), and just before he was due to leave turned up with a bottle of vodka, on the pretext that it was her nameday although there was no mention in the church calendar of a Marina or even a Maria for that day, - and the eyes in that animated, lively face were filled with the timidity and fear of her irrevocable loneliness... but Petya looked away from her and answered all her chatter with weary monosyllables, but mostly

remained silent, now and again pronouncing in obvious embarrassment a pensive “Ye-e-s...”. True, he drank the vodka, but having drunk it spent the night in his sister’s room, about which she thought, with a touch of reproach and sadness, but of course without saying anything to him: “He couldn’t even take pity on the poor woman...”. She would not have condemned him or Marina, for it seemed to her that the pity one person feels for another person is that which is most pleasing to God and in accordance with His will. But here it was a matter of Petya’s will, and God had done all that He could, having sent him to her that summer - because it was just at that time, in the middle of the Sixties, that the first independent holidaymakers - “guests”, “lodgers”, “tenants”, “wild fowl” - had begun to appear at Utyos, and everyone living in the old park hurriedly began to build small wooden huts, to knock up summer verandas and overhangs, to assemble and clean the rusty iron bedframes thrown out by the sanatorium - and to house these seaside visitors at a rouble per day per person...

She was one of the last to build, when all the land close to the house had already been taken by her neighbours, because she was already old and tired, had no male relatives or acquaintances - and no money to pay someone else. She had not written to Pyotr, not wanting to burden him, but he came of his own accord, by a fortunate chance, or, as she saw it, by divine providence, it had to be that - and in two weeks he had built a small, sturdy house on the very edge of the terrace that supported the hillside, and he had even covered a small space in front of the entrance with an overhang, from which there was an unexpectedly picturesque view, much better than that of her neighbours, who had chosen their sites after quarrels and conflicts. And entering her little house

with its light, unpainted walls and the fragrance of new timber, she unexpectedly and for the first time in many years burst into tears of happiness.

She had painted the little house with green paint (there hadn't been enough, and she had to use whitewash on the side facing the sea, which could not be seen from the yard) and she papered the inside walls with soft, light wallpaper with golden roses on a cream background, for which she had made a special trip to Yalta. She had not had the heart to make use of variously coloured left-overs as Marina, Granny Nadya and Zoika's Stepan, indeed everybody else at Utyos, had done. She put two iron bedsteads in the house and between them an old but clean and sturdy bedside table, which had previously stood in her hall and contained her crockery. She covered the windows with raffia blinds and on the bedside table she placed, leaning against the wall, a big framed mirror - which because of her swiftly advancing old age had been gathering dust behind her wardrobe for ten years - and above one of the beds, the newest one, which she had privately assigned to the woman, she hung a yellow-and-blue coloured rug on which a bearded brigand was carrying away a young girl. She put two old rugs on the bed - a green one and a blue one - but they didn't look good together, and, having thought about it, she brought her own blue rug and put the green one on her own bed. The room was radiant with heavenly colours, and for a moment she felt sorry to allow strangers into it, and at the same time she hoped that good and honest people would live and be happy in this comfort and beauty. She stood on the threshold, biting her lip, and suddenly she saw herself from the side - an old woman of sixty, confused and excited like a teenage girl. Annoyed with herself, she banged the door and hung a new nickel padlock on the latch.

She received her first lodgers at the end of that summer. She had not wanted to do so, had been afraid to take anybody during the first year: not knowing how to behave, and had counted on starting the following summer. But visitors suddenly started to pour in - and one day, returning from the shop, she saw in her little yard beneath the eave of the overhang, which was already weighed down by the rapid growth of a wild vine, an elderly and lost-looking couple standing as if among ruins with their things scattered around them; he - with a balding, shiny head, plump as a melon, and she - a slender, though elderly woman struggling with her last strength to look young, and with them, talking nonstop about something, Marina, who considered her life wasted if she lived an hour without striking her nose into somebody else's business... These were her first lodgers. The husband proved to be a nice, shy man, fearful of every step he took in someone else's house, while his wife, like all wives of nice, kind men, was an unpleasant - dry and arrogant - woman, whom she took a dislike to from the very first day - from the moment when the woman hung a washed frying pan on the wall, not as all normal people do - with the bottom facing outwards - but the other way round, making the pan jut out in a clumsy fashion so that Pelageya, entering the kitchen, hit her head on it. But despite this and a multitude of subsequent small unpleasantnesses which strangers, who do not know the habits of a house, always occasion by their very presence, - despite this she tried to please her first lodgers as much as possible: changed the bed linen each week, being ashamed to use a mended sheet, took out the garbage bucket, which was quickly filled up by the unpleasant and incompetent wife of the nice fat man, screwed in a new and more powerful light bulb - when Ivan Ivanych, a specialist of some kind (she had not grasped what) timidly complained that it was too dark... But already the next

year she got used to it and calmed down. The visitors, who came and left in rapid succession, six or seven times a season, for the main part resembled each other - and if some did stick out from the crowd, it was not in a positive way - and paid little attention to her. She stopped paying attention to them - and only noticed and was upset by the trouble and inconvenience they inevitably brought with them. They lost the keys, which could be copied only in Alushka, sometimes the last she had, and then she had to buy a new lock; they forgot to turn off the tap on the gas cylinder at night, and gas leaked out of the cooker; ignoring her request, they heated water and soup on the cooker instead of in the big electric kettle (which didn't cost anything as Zoika's Stepan had connected her to the grid, bypassing the meter, for the price of a bottle), and they wasted gas from the cylinder, which, far too heavy for her even to budge, was refilled at the garage up the hill twice a year, so that she had to ask Ivan for help or, if he was drunk, some stranger, which cost her a bottle of vodka each time; they washed up in town fashion, removing only leftovers and, if she was lucky, fat so that she had to clean the burnt bottoms of the pans herself, using sand, as she saved the soda for baking...

There were both amusing and unpleasant incidents. Close to the house, having pushed aside the fig trees that covered the slope, there grew four young and already productive walnut trees, which the locals had divided among themselves, and from the end of August they each collected a bucketful of nuts. Once, however, when it was time to pluck the harvest, she discovered that her tree was almost entirely bare - the ground was covered with the light-green leaves that had been torn from the nuts, and at first she had suspected (with some surprise) that this was the work of the squirrels, which though very fond of nuts never used to reduce the tree to such a state of devastation... That August her

visitors were a family from Moscow - a thin, large-nosed, heron-like man, his fat little wife, anxious and muddle-headed like a hen that has been chased away from its egg, and their fifteen-year-old son, a quietly behaved lad but apparently a great fidget... She cautiously asked about the nuts and received a negative and even indignant reply - the boy was sitting at the table, hiding his eyes and picking at a cluster of grapes with hands that were all black from the nutshells... She said nothing at that time... On another occasion, as she was returning home along the stony path past the toilet, she saw a thin stream of smoke emerging from the crack between the door and the lintel. She got terribly frightened - the toilet had been built a month ago and had cost a lot of money - and it was taken care of and kept locked. Many of the houses at Utyos did not have their own toilets, and the inhabitants used the public toilets, which by evening were overflowing with filth... She rushed towards the little shed with its still bright green paint - but stopped at the last moment: the padlock wasn't there, which meant that there was someone inside! She stood there in confusion - the thin trickle of smoke suddenly reappeared - and called cautiously, "What's burning?" In reply she heard after a minute's pause a muted cough and the embarrassed bass of her lodger from Ternopol saying: "It's alright...it's me, Auntie Polya, I'm smoking". She moved away, her heart hammering - and thought: "Damned Ukrainian!"

Once she experienced towards her lodgers a hateful hostility, for which she later asked for forgiveness before her icon. This was during the third or fourth summer. She had decided to buy a refrigerator - of the same kind as those which Marina, Zoika, Granny Nadya and many others at Utyos had already bought. There was no cellar in the rock foundation under their house, and she was already old, and it was hard for her to climb up to the

shop every day to buy fresh food: in the summer heat soup only barely survived the night, butter went runny, and fish would become doll-eyed after only an hour... The two hundred and fifty, maximum three hundred, roubles a year that her little house brought her had to cover twelve months - and together with the forty roubles from her pension were spent entirely on food and other necessities, there was nothing left over for things. The refrigerator cost almost a hundred roubles, not counting transport... In the spring of the year in which the idea of buying a refrigerator had formed in her she therefore paid Zoika's Stepan twenty (fifteen, his wife was told) roubles, and in the course of two days he built her a narrow overhang of boards, attached to a wall in the courtyard, and supported on two columns, and under which she placed her bed, protecting it from the yard with a screen. She rented out her own room, and the first lodgers were a young couple, as young, she now remembered as her Lena and Igoryok, who had already been visiting her for several years in succession and whom she was expecting this summer - but they were much noisier, livelier, freer, with drawling, self-assured voices and a patronising expression in their cold eyes... Once, turning out old things in her cupboard, which stood together with the other cupboards in the shared hall, she heard loud laughter from their room and involuntarily listened. "... and success in your work," the young man read in a solemn voice and the girl spluttered and snorted like a cat washing itself.

- "I wh-h-hish you happiness...". Well, what happiness can homo sovieticus have - without success in his work. Notice the address: to "RSFSR" - from "UKR.SSR". So it doesn't get sent to Switzerland by mistake. Wait a minute, is this really RSFSR? The old fellow must have got something mixed up."

Not until she heard “RSFSR” did she understand that they were reading her brother’s postcard - the last before his death, the top postcard in the pile lying on the window sill together with the only book in her room - the first volume of the novel “White Birch” by Bubennov, which she had tried to read and never finished, - because as soon as she got to the words “shining blue eyes”; which often occurred in the book, her heart winced and she had to put the book away: Sasha’s eyes had been a bright cornflower blue. When she was alone in the house, she took the pile of cards from the sill and read them one after the other, beginning with the first from 1949, in the firm handwriting of a still young man and ending with the last one written by the uncertain, trembling hand of an alcoholic, the last one, in which for the first time he had for some reason wished her success in her work and at which they had been laughing... She stood quite still, feeling heat flush her cheeks. How could they! For a minute she stood there dismayed, confused by the onrush of humming, painful although unclear feelings until they fused into a single despairing, helpless, powerless feeling of acute pity for her brother, for his fixed, apologetic smile, his dull voice, his big clumsy hands suited only for heavy unskilled labour...for example, putting together out of leftover timber her bright little house, in which these... people just like these... stayed, relaxed, laughed... She stood there, feeling her face crumbling, trembling, but she did not cry. In fact, she cried very rarely.

After this incident her attitude towards her lodgers was one - not of hostility - she had no trouble understanding that she should not transfer the sins of two people to the entire human race - but of complete indifference. She stopped changing the bed-linen once a week - and switched to doing so once every ten days like everyone else at Utyos, and for this reason made ten days the minimum

period for a stay during the hottest period. If during the first summer she had not wanted to use patched sheets, now these were the only ones she used, or worn out sheets which she had cut down the middle, and then joined at the sides. She replaced Ivan Ivanych's burned out bulb, which had lasted for an unusually long time, perhaps because there hadn't been any readers after him - with an equally expensive but weaker one of only forty watts. She divided up her pots and pans, keeping all the enamel ones for herself - the lodgers always ruined them by their carelessness in the course of a single summer. Finally, the lodgers had to empty the garbage bucket, why should she do it when it took a week to fill when she was alone.

She was sorry, however, that unlike most people in Utyos she had not acquired any regulars, lodgers who returned each year, having written in advance, sent birthday and New Year cards and brought presents that were not available in their out-of-the-way corner but quite common in the large towns. While regretting this fact, she had long since accepted it. Ivan was partly to blame: the shed in which he lived while renting out his room stood right opposite the entrance to her little house - it was to his roof that her brother had attached the trellised overhang beneath which she had placed a chair and three stools. At that time, fifteen years earlier, he had not drunk so unrestrainedly as now, but he had drunk heavily nonetheless - and he would often appear in the courtyard, a thin, largeeyed figure on uncertain legs, or he would mutter dully for hours about something and groan at nights in his shed, frightening and irritating the holidaymakers. Partly Marina was to blame - the passing of the years had no effect on her - and she tried to ingratiate herself with all the male visitors, paying no attention to the wives or women accompanying them. Sometimes there was a scandal, and the lodgers left - once from her own lit-

tle house - after a scene in which the women shouted at each other and the man remained silent like a whipped dog. Once she herself had been to blame: Tamara and Aleksey from Leningrad had sent a letter to say that they would be coming in the middle of August - but the previous lodgers left at the beginning of the month, and she could not permit herself to keep the house empty, and, unfortunately, there had been no takers for only a week or ten days. When Tamara and Aleksey arrived, they were very offended and never returned.

Yes, she felt that her life was approaching its end, although externally nothing had changed. She had not even noticed how the roads she walked had become longer, slower: up the hill - to the shop, across the hill - to the post office, down the hill - to the rubbish skip; - because in her slow life, empty for the last long years of both happy and sad events, old age and weakness also advanced slowly and imperceptibly every day. By chance she acquired a stick: once, gasping in the heat, she had returned with difficulty from the shop, and Granny Nadya, who had already entered into her ninth decade, invited her to try her stick, - because she herself just sat in the yard all day, while Marina, slovenly and still - now probably for ever - single, shopped and cooked for two. At first she was confused and ridiculously enough, hurt and offended, - because like everyone she had never thought that she would ever need to use a stick. But two or three days later, when she was going to pay her rent (the weather was so hot and dry that the cypresses drooped, and that devil Zoi-ka from the office only worked until four so that she could sit around in the cool of the evening and complain about her drunkard of a husband in her thick, lazy voice), she paused in indecision on the threshold, tentatively took Granny Nadya's stick, which was leaning against the lintel, left the house and the yard

carrying it horizontally and then - having looked around to check that nobody was watching her - began cautiously to ascend the steps. It was unexpectedly nice to have a stick, and more importantly it felt secure; the fear of losing her balance, of slipping and falling which had plagued her for the last two or three years disappeared, a fear that had forced her always to be on the lookout for something to grab hold of if the need should arise on the steep ascent - she had acquired a third, reliable and convenient point of support... The next day she went to the dispensary at the sanatorium and asked for a stick.

Her life passed in uncomplicated and unhurried tasks - but without the frustration at a purposeless idleness that one might have expected of a younger, quicker person leading such a simple and monotonous life. Because during the course of the slow day she herself moved long and slowly, her day, from early morning when she got up to early evening when she went to bed, was filled with domestic jobs, and for this reason there were very few moments in which she reflected on what she should do or where she should go. The business of every day life, the daily round, inexorably consumed her life.

Day after day flowed by. Getting up, making her bed, going to the toilet, washing, making breakfast, washing up and putting things away - in her deep old age all this was extended in time and exhausting for her body. Every action is divided up into a multitude of clear, completed movements which one does not notice while young. For forty, fifty, sixty years the making of breakfast is experienced as one indivisible movement like swallowing a mouthful of water - at eighty it was impossible for her not to notice that it was first necessary to unlock the kitchen door, and this required her to lift her arm, which had not yet come to life after the night, fumble under the eaves for the string of the key,

try to insert the key in the keyhole - upside down, of course, at the first try - and then to pull it out and, after a careful inspection, to try again to open and remove the padlock. The sagging door could only be closed by force - the two parts of the catch on the door and doorpost didn't meet so that the latch had to be compressed. Ten years earlier it had only been necessary to push the door with her knee, now she had to shove it with her shoulder, and having finally opened the door, she had to hang the padlock and key on a nail she could barely see in the semi-darkness inside... However, these weak, brief efforts evoked neither impatience nor irritation: each time of life has its own course of time, which fills life.

Her life was ending, slowly and indifferently. She never thought about such concepts as the species, the continuation of life, the future - but she instinctively felt herself to be the last, abandoned and awaited by her son and brother - not understanding why she also sensed that with her, with her death, something would end for ever. When this strange feeling came to her - usually while she was resting, lying on the high bed or sitting in the shade of the now large walnut trees, with the sun occasionally falling on her face and hands like soft, warm petals, and remote, obscure and radiant images began to wander in her slumbering brain - when this indistinct sense of something coming to an end together with her life came to her, she would feel sad and a little hurt... She clearly saw her death: waiting outside for the shop to open, someone would say: "Pelageya has died." Verka would throw up her hands and happily announce that last week she had seen Pelageya in a dream wearing a black scarf; stingy Evdokiya would immediately wonder how much they would collect for the funeral (for Liza they had paid two roubles a head); Kapa would decide that she would go to the office that very day to ask for the room that

was now vacant - for her son, who worked as an electrician and was dying from vodka in Simferopol - but of course there was no reason to mention the vodka; Lyusya would press her thin lips together (thirty years ago they had been indecently plump and red) - and remember how (was it in 1950?) Pelageya had almost stumbled over her when she was sitting in the bushes with that blue-eyed miner from Stalino - one of the recent arrivals would ask how old she had been, the shop would open before anyone could answer, and they would forget her for ever. At home Marina would burst into tears - but Marina would cry over a cat that had eaten some poison. Neither her life nor her death were necessary to anyone. In the shade of the sundappled leaves she waited for life to be over - and under the bench some recently born kittens tumbled and played.

As the poet so wonderfully put it, suddenly a happenstance changed everything.

They had first appeared at Utjos eight years ago, in the middle of August - the worst time to come, when everyone had already arrived, and nobody was planning to leave. The day was declining into evening when they walked into the yard: a young fellow, tall, thin, almost transparent, with light eyes and fair hair, in jeans and a white shirt, the open collar of which failed to disguise how much too big it was for his thin, pale neck; the girl was small and firmly built, very nice-looking with short and also fair hair, also in jeans and a sweatshirt with some kind of multicoloured design across her high pointy breasts, probably made extra prominent by her bra. The boy - that was what she privately called him from the very first moment, never calling him anything else, in her mind right up to today - held in his thin, painfully tensed right hand a large, swollen, reddishyellow leather bag which dragged him over to one side - in the same way as a heavy fruit bends a thin

branch - , and when with a repressed groan he carefully placed it on the ground, the gold band of a ring could be seen on one of his fingers.

They looked very tired - especially the boy, in whose eyes there was an almost pleading look, while the girl seemed more cheerful and less worried. It was clear that they had been looking for a long time and everywhere they had been turned away - Kuchuk-Lambat was crammed. She came out of the kitchen when they entered the yard.

- Good evening, said the boy desolately, and having made an effort continued more energetically: - Excuse me, but do you have a room to let?

- There are two of us, his wife said in a voice that was surprisingly firm for her small, almost rosy like figure, but for a split second her eyes also had the same weak pleading expression as her husband's.

Pelageya paused, taken aback, not knowing what to say. Two hours ago her little house had been vacated - a metallurgist from Donetsk, a gnarled man burnt black by the sun with a strident, over-painted wife, had left early, having received news that his father had been paralysed by a stroke. The day had been unhealthily hot, and since the morning she had felt as tired and weak as if the day had begun in late evening. All day she had felt a need to sit down in Ivan's armchair in the shade of the huge old cypress, its branches all hanging with age - and for this reason she had not been intending to allow anyone into the little house: the bed linen had to be changed, the floor washed and the space under the overhang belonging to the house had to be swept. To wash the floors prior to the arrival of new guests was a matter of principle for a landlady with respect for herself. It was a question of *self-respect* and nothing else, neither necessity or practical consider-

ations, because crowds of people were wandering around in Kuchuk-Lapvat, prepared to stay under an overhang, in a courtyard under a tree, to sleep on a bed without linen, placed on any kind of floor, or without a floor at all: self-respect because self-respect can only derive from respect for others, not for what they might say, but for what they might think, otherwise it would be not self-respect but shameful boorishness... She had felt bad all day; since morning she had felt dizzy, and a few times after lunch she had an unpleasant sense that she would fall. She didn't have the strength to make the bed and even less so to wash the floor, but she looked at their tired, pale faces, still without a tan at the end of the summer, at the boy's thin hands and the large bag at his feet, at the girl, in whose eyes a timid hope had begun to appear the longer she remained silent, and suddenly she felt towards the couple - alone among the dozens of people who had stayed in her house during the long years - an inexplicable attraction and sympathy, and at first having given in to this feeling against her will, she was, a moment later, already beginning to worry - not even having had time to register surprise at this - that if she said they should come the next day, they would go one terrace up the hill - the steps were right behind the toilet - to Sonya Omelchenko, who lived in a flat in Aivazobsk which went with her job, and who let out her large house in its entirety to tourists. Some people had left Sonya's today - in the morning she had seen a couple of young men with familiar faces descending the central avenue with rucksacks on their backs... She hastily consented.

However, the reason for her invitation at that time eight years ago - besides the pity that she felt for almost everybody arriving in the evening and an obscure feeling, obscure because its origin can't be said to have been their tired, likeable faces, for in the course of fifteen years she had seen a multitude of tired, likeable

people, but this was a new feeling - the reason for her invitation was first and foremost a wish to let the room to holidaymakers who seemed quiet and modest, in contrast to the just departed steelworker and his unbalanced wife, whose normal speaking voice was a scream and who became completely hysterical when she was upset by anything - or to the two men from Kremenchug, who had appeared at the beginning of the summer and had drunk deeply all three weeks of their holiday - they had done so quietly, trying not to be noticed, and had nevertheless frequently crossed her path, and then it had been decidedly unpleasant to look at their puffy, sun-tanned faces distorted by vodka, which - when they met her - stiffened, tightened, froze in a meaningless expression - in a hopeless attempt at assuming a human aspect... The two new arrivals made a favorable impression.

Having heard her decision, they beamed like children, - like little children because they were in fact children. She asked them to wait a while while she tidied up; when the bucket placed in the sink was one third full - she simply couldn't manage it if it was any fuller - on the handle next to her dry brown hand she saw a white little hand... She looked around.

- There's no need. We'll do it ourselves, the girl said shyly. Where do you have a cloth?

In recent years it had happened that pitying her feebleness, and hoping, perhaps, to get in her good books, lodgers who had arrived before she had cleaned up the house had offered to wash the floors. She invariably declined their help. It was her work, she had been brought up to be hardworking since her childhood, and having turned to God she now saw in work God's divine purpose for man - a purpose that to the extent of one's strength and even beyond that one had to seek to fulfil to the very end of one's life. She had worked as a laundress and as an orderly and as a

cleaner in the sanatorium. Keeping the little house clean was now her work. But today she felt so weak that the bucket seemed to have stuck to the sink, and having protested for appearance's sake, she yielded with relief and gratitude to the little white hand.

She accepted this first help as a fortunate, isolated incident - but already on the following day she saw the girl coming towards her with a shopping bag in her hand, and thinking that they needed something turned to meet her. The girl wished her good morning.

- Pelageya Valerevna, we're going to the shop. Is there anything we can buy for you?

In sheer surprise she didn't know what to say. Among her neighbours and their lodgers such offers were not unusual, but perhaps because of her taciturnity and unsociability this was the first time she had received such an offer. Not so long ago, furthermore, she had been hale and hearty. She weakly declined: - Thank you, my child, I don't need anything. She had got used to doing everything herself or to paying someone to do what she could not manage to do, and she felt uncomfortable.

- But that can't be right, the girl said slightly surprised but firmly. Bread or milk... or maybe a watermelon - they're heavy. We'll bring you one.

She needed both bread and milk, and even a watermelon, which she was very fond of and rarely ate because in recent years she was unable to carry them home... and the small ones seldom became properly ripe. After some vacillation she asked for bread and milk - the melon was too much, she thought, and the girl went off very pleased with herself.

The same thing happened the next day, and became almost a daily occurrence. After refusing and protesting for some time, she finally gave in and stopped going to the shop altogether - especially after they had once met her with a full bag on the way

home, and the girl had seriously and indignantly ticked her off.... She was surprised and touched by their unexpected attention, which became daily more comprehensive and insistent: the garbage bucket never had time to fill up now - the boy emptied it two or three times a day; from Alushta they brought her a full shopping bag - full of bulbs, washing powder, lids for jam-making - and two loaves of real black - not grey - bread, which she was extremely fond of and which couldn't be got at Utyos... Finally, the biggest and last thing, to which she had not assented and which she was powerless to resist - they transported the gas cylinder up the hill and filled it - this was the second, spare cylinder, as the first one was still full - and she had suffered as she watched the boy dragging the cylinder up the steps and especially as he brought it down again, when it was filled with gas and much heavier, on a shaky trolley, with the girl hanging on to the handle with her soft little hands, trying to help him...

All this time she secretly and with tender eagerness observed her new lodgers. Like all weak old people whose minds are still clear and whose own lives are deprived of any variety, she was curious. The boy was called Igor, the girl Lena. He called her Hare, often through force of habit, while other people were around - and then he blushed and frowned. She called him Igorechek, pronouncing the long word with pleasure. He tried to help her in everything - rather he wanted to do everything himself, but she chased him away and he had to accept the role of an assistant. He cleaned the vegetables for lunch - this did not seem enough to him, and he kept coming into the kitchen, where there was barely room for one person, until on one occasion he oversalted and spoiled the soup and was finally banished. They washed up together - she washed and he stood patiently behind her back, receiving the washed plates and taking them away to dry them.

Old Granny Nadya, who sat on a bench in the courtyard all day, and before whose eyes the whole life of the yard passed, disapproved: "What kind of a man is that who takes plates away from his wife? My Vasily...". The long since deceased husband of Granny Nadya, a small, thin, inveterate drunkard - used to water the old park and having drunk too much tried to pick fights with Granny Nadya, who was stronger than him. While he was alive, she usually called him *good-for-nothing* and *parasite* and very rarely by his first name... Towards the end of lunch the young people like to bicker about the last slice of melon - each wanted the other to have it. They argued for a long time, recalling who had eaten how much, pushing it back and forth across the table - and finally finished it off after having cut it in two - unless a new argument began as to which part was bigger. This game gave them enormous pleasure, the one who succeeded in giving away his or her share would be radiant with happiness.

To pass his wife and not kiss her was quite impossible for him. Having looked around and thinking himself unobserved - except by Granny Nadya, who was always sitting in the yard and to whose presence he had apparently become reconciled though she always mumbled her disapproval after each such kiss, he would approach her from behind and kiss her on the ear or the neck. She would bow her head and say something in a fearful whisper, and as if he had been waiting for this he would then begin to kiss her downy nape - until she twisted out of his grasp and looked up at him with indignation.

With wonder and gladness she watched this for her unknown, unexperienced love. No one had ever loved her like that - although all her long life she had borne within herself a happy and proud certainty that her husband, as she called Nikolaj, had loved her, of course only for a month, but he had loved her and

given her Sasha. All the rest of her life she had lived alone and had hardly been together with any men - three chance meetings before the war, and after the war, after Sasha's death, she had felt old and indifferent. She had seen neither her own love, nor that of other people: the families she knew were tired, unaffectionate, even rough; the husbands often drank, and when they were drunk, they roved and brawled, and the wives scolded them with words that she could not have brought her tongue to utter even to someone she did not know... And now an affectionate, radiant life had come into her little yard, right up to her sky-blue window with the old vine along the top, like one of the fairystories her mother had told - and she observed this life without the jealousy and weakness of old age, without envying what she had never had and never would have, even without sadness and pity for herself, lonely, abandoned by all on earth, and unneeded - unneeded by any living soul. She observed it with a feeling that could not be put into words, but which contained a warmth from the happiness of others, which seemed to infuse her cold, solitary life; and fear for the permanence, for the future of this happiness - a premature pity for the boy and girl, who would suffer if, God forbid, their happiness should end, - and gladness and excitement at its proximity - her involuntary participation in this miracle... Though not involuntary, she corrected herself with satisfaction: for it was she, who had the door of her little house to them, had sensed their love and taken pity on them, although she had firmly resolved not take in any lodgers that evening.

In the first days they were very frightened of doing something wrong and were extremely careful - and nevertheless they made a lot of mistakes: they hung the frying-pan upside down, rinsed the floor cloth in the bowl intended for tomatoes, poured salt into the sugar tin, having failed to distinguish the right tin in the dark,

and once after locking the toilet they had failed to put the key back in its place, so that next morning after a lengthy but fruitless search she had to toil up the hill to the public toilet... But while such mistakes committed by other, stout and adult lodgers had irritated and upset her, she felt, looking at the boy and the girl in their anxiety, only pity and the wish to make them forget their error as quickly as possible. Everything about her former life, with its weariness and slowness, was changing, was being transformed.

Once Igor Igorechek set off for the shop with the embarrassingly ancient, multi-coloured shopping bag stuffed into his pocket and a shopping list, which the girl had composed and given to him with the serious instruction not to waste money. She herself, as soon as his thin, hurrying figure was out of sight, had darted into the house and with a happily conspiratorial air run out again carrying a packet of flour, a bottle of milk and a couple of eggs. The old woman approached her with unconcealed curiosity: the girl was making a batter.

- I'm going to make blinys, she said with quiet pride.

On her way past the kitchen twenty minutes later she heard a short sniffling sob - like a kitten that has stuck its nose too deep into the milk - and having cautiously passed the door, she peered in through the little window. Smoke and fumes were emerging from the kitchen; the girl was standing at the stove, pouring batter onto the red-hot frying-pan; the blinys were bubbling up, burning explosively, they stuck to the pan and came away from it in tatters... On a plate next to the stove there already rose a stack of singed remnants resembling the brown, dried out leaves of autumn. The girl scraped the last bliny from the pan and burst into tears.

The old woman was moved and rushed anxiously into the kitchen. There would never come any blinys out of this: the batter was too runny, the heat too fierce, the light aluminium pan was quite the wrong sort for blinys, which needed the black cast-iron pan with a thick, heavy bottom hanging on the wall... Seeing her the girl cried even more bitterly - and she, muttering some consolatory words, suddenly stroked her soft shoulder with her desiccated, wrinkled hand. The stack of burnt blinys was thrown to the cats. There was not much time - Igorechek would soon return! She mixed the batter herself, greased the black frying-pan, hurriedly explaining each step as she went along, - and at the very moment the boy appeared at the top of the path, the blinys were ready, and she minced nonchalantly out of the kitchen as if nothing particular had taken place. The girl was happy: the boy brought the old woman some blinys on a dish and said: - Pelageya Ivanovna! My wife (pronouncing the words proudly and with pleasure) said that you helped to make blinys... Many, many thanks! And she - nothing like this had ever happened before in her life - actually it had, of course, with Sasha, but it had all been forgotten again - felt that now she needed nothing more from life.

The days, previously so uniform and slow, now passed swiftly and variedly. Each day there was something new - unfamiliar (forgotten) and wonderful things to be done: the boy got badly sunburnt - sour milk was needed; the girl made borscht, without frying the onions, carrots and beetroots - what kind of borscht was that!? The days began to get cooler, and she worried that it would be cold in the little house at night - and went to Marina to borrow an electric stove. The neighbours watched - and watched in different ways: Marina laughed and called the girl and the boy the grandchildren; Granny Nadya grumbled from her chair: - See how the old fool's lost her head. Only Ivan did not react - he had

received payment in advance from his lodgers and was drinking non-stop. Her neighbours occasioned new and previously unknown worries: with respect to Marina she was afraid (although this was ridiculous - Marina was almost fifty) that she would begin making up to the boy; with respect to Granny Nadya she feared that the old woman would suddenly say something hopelessly embarrassing; Ivan worried her most of all, although he had never yet harmed a fly - it was other people who harmed him - but you never know what a drunk might do... If she was anywhere near, she'd give him something to remember - but what if she wasn't? However, these were all fantasies, the product of a suspicious old woman's mind and of her daily increasing affection for her new lodgers. She herself knew this - and was in fact only really worried about Ivan. When he was drunk he would mutter to himself for hours sitting in his shed or in the chair under the cypress, sometimes shouting incomprehensible words, and she was afraid that he might use indecent language in the girl's presence. She felt that in that world, in that life from which the girl had come the effect of such words would be like a blow in the face.

There was one aspect of human relations that had previously evoked in her a feeling of contempt and distaste and now - in connection with the boy and girl - made her feel embarrassed and uneasy. Although she had had a son and three men before the war, her thoughts, feelings and for many years her actual life had been more appropriate to an old spinster than a woman who had given birth and sinned. Very long ago, almost sixty years previously, she had loved her first lover - that is, she had been happy, when he talked with her and smiled to her, when he took her to the cinema to see "Mr West in the Country of the Bolsheviks", when he simply sat silently with her, when strangely and indecently he

touched and caressed her in those rare, short minutes which occurred during the month of their brief love, - and in these minutes it was nice that he was tender, affectionate and kind to her - but what he did after these moments of tenderness and kindness brought her neither pleasure nor happiness - happiness came later, when Sasha was born; sometimes it was even unpleasant, as it seemed to her that he - so close beside her that it was impossible get any closer - was moving away from her in those last minutes, no longer even noticed her - a strange feeling, the cause of which she could not explain... And the men to whom she was drawn for a brief period after this had attracted her not because of the desire for physical contact, for the male body, but simply because in a weak moment she wanted some kind of concern, of warmth - of kindness that was directed towards her, and she kept this kindness, which she saw, which she hoped for from these men, completely separate from all the physical things the man did to her; he didn't have to do anything except just sit close by her side so that she did not feel alone... She would gladly have accepted this kindness from a woman, perhaps even more gladly because it would not be connected with all that happened afterwards with a man - but women of the same age are rarely kind to one another, except when a great sorrow has entered someone else's house - when the other woman is totally prostrated... And whether it was because physical love brought her little pleasure, whether it was because she had hardly had any relations with men (and none at all after the war), or whether it was because she was so totally alone, she thought about carnal love between a man and a woman, especially those fat, no longer young men and heavily painted women who stayed in her little house and emerged in the mornings to wash - with puffy faces, unshaven and sickly pale with blemishes and wrinkles unconcealed by make-up - she

thought about the love-making of these men and women with a sensation of repulsion and almost physical distress as of something unclean, and even with irritation, although she realised that it was wrong and ridiculous to do so. It had been especially unpleasant for her during these last - long - years after she had retired: to make some extra money she had rented out not only the little house but also her own room and moved out under the overhang put up by Zoika's Stepan, with her bed placed right next to the thin plywood wall... Fortunately she fell asleep quickly, and although she woke easily, she would immediately fall asleep again. Nevertheless in the brief moments of waking she sometimes heard the cautious, uncertain creaking of the iron bedstead, and then, involuntarily recalling the faces of her lodgers, she would try to fall asleep again as quickly as possible in an agony of shame for herself and those men and women... She was fond of children, however.

And suddenly, now that the boy and the girl had arrived (that was how she called them in her mind - Boy and Girl, because Igor was for her a very unfamiliar, unaccustomed name and Igorechek a very long one, while she did not remember the girl's name, and Hare was too intimate for her - she was fonder of the boy) - now that Boy and Girl had arrived, she suddenly felt, having chanced to think about *it*, that in connection with them the idea of *it* evoked no sense of distaste, - that between them it must all be natural, clean and even beautiful like the endearments that he used to her, like the way in which he surreptitiously embraced her, softly and carefully kissed her cheeks, her nose - Sometimes she thought that he spoiled her. And once, some days after following her realisation of this feeling - or, rather, of the absence of her usual disgust and shame -, she suddenly caught herself thinking that it was unnaturally quiet in the little house at night... she nev-

er heard anything - and unexpectedly (it was ridiculous and she reproached herself for it) she began to be worried. They were both so timid... perhaps her presence bothered them?..

...She woke up in the middle of the night - for her it was deep night, for she went to bed when it got dark and woke up at dawn. She woke up at the sound of the aluminium bowl in which a hedgehog was nosing around - it always came at night and licked up the remnants of the cat's food, snuffling and scratching the bowl with its needles. And almost at the same moment as she heard the sound of the bowl and woke up, a thin, insidious creaking from the bedstead continued and prolonged this sound - and suddenly broke off - abruptly, in mid-creak - as if it had also heard a sound from outside and got frightened. Mechanically, half-asleep, she threw off the painted bed-rug and shushed the hedgehog: - Shh, away with you! And the hedgehog scurried off, its feet padding on the stone floor, its needles rustling... She lay down again and suddenly remembered the other sound - the faint interrupted creaking. She did not have time to speculate about it before it began again - the wires creaked three times, and then she heard - without being able to make out the words - Girl's hurried, frightened, indignant whisper, after which all was quiet - and silence reigned.

She lay with her eyes closed, but sleep instead of swiftly carrying her away into its quiet, distant realm, rushed away from her, abandoned her altogether. She asked it to return, tried to run after it herself, but this only made the silence of the night all the more resonant, and opening her eyes, she could clearly make out the blue outlines of the posts and the cross-beams of the overhang. She was desperately embarrassed at the thought of what must

take place within half a yard - less - of her behind the thin plywood of the wall, - and at the same time she thought about it with a strange sense of relief and tenderness.

Sleep did not return. Five, perhaps ten minutes passed - it was very quiet: the cicadas sang, now and then a bush rustled in the night, or a cypress dropped a needle... And suddenly she was gripped by alarm, she remembered Girl's hurried, anxious whisper, the subsequent silence. She felt an unexpected pang of guilt and shame at her own clumsiness. She was a problem for them. They thought that she was not asleep, they were afraid of her...

And seized by pity for these frightened children and by the wish to help them, she began to snore quietly.

She was wide awake. She lay with vainly closed eyes and tried to make her breathing sound like that of a sleeper, emitted a snore or two, a sniff, smacked her lips, and after a minute or two the tender creaking - the unpractised singing of the old bedstead, written off by the sanatorium and bought by her for ten roubles some years previously - started again. She felt the blood suffuse her face - a distant, long forgotten sensation - and snored all the louder and more happily, smacking her lips, swallowing and even mumbling something incomprehensible - as if she were talking in her sleep. The creaking was cautious, wary, ready to break off at any moment, like the last breath of a softly plucked string, almost weightless - like the movement of the night wind, like the scent of the flowering oleander that reached her from the avenue. She floated together with this nocturnal music of love, now fading, now growing in tender strength, softly whispering, laughing, an inaudible, happy laughter. Forgetting herself, she stopped snoring, breathed softly and evenly, falling into sleep. Suddenly the creaking stopped, and the silence tore her out of her oblivion, and shocked, she began to snore so loudly that the bridge of her nose

ached - and to the very end she kept on snoring regularly, afraid of falling asleep, straining to listen to the fragile, timid song, as a conductor listens to an inexperienced orchestra... When it was all over, she quickly fell asleep, and descending into sleep, she thought of herself with a weak, happy smile: silly old fool!

Next morning, seeing their defenceless, sleep-crumpled faces, she understood that there was no one in the world - and that for a very, very long time there hadn't been anyone - who was nearer to her than they were. And together with this realisation the bitter thought that was always alive in her of her loneliness, her uselessness, her close and inevitable death, which would be the end not only of her life but also of something big and long, which had existed before her and would cease for ever with her - this thought faded and melted. Nothing would cease... they were still so young!

And for the first time she called them both out loud - whispering to herself the word that had long sounded muffledly in the depths of her soul, afraid to come closer, to be revealed, to be sounded aloud, perhaps fearing to presume, fearing her unpreparedness for it - she called them for herself - "Children", meaning and feeling "my Children"...

From that day it was as if her life ceased to belong to her - passed over to them, became their life. Now she hardly ever left the kitchen, a place she had never been fond of - every day she cooked something new for them, something unusual, tasty, drawn from deep memories of the Little Russian cooking tradition: aubergine with caviar, cherry dumplings, stuffed peppers, sultana pies. They ate with pleasure, tired and hungry after the sea, and scolded her, expelled her from the kitchen, concerned about her age and her labours, and once Girl took courage and even threatened to take the key away from her, but she only laughed inward-

ly, as she had spare keys and cooked when they were down by the sea, or, even better, in the morning, because she got up at six o'clock, and the Children never got up before nine. There was room for three at the table under the overhang - one side stood against the wall of Ivan's shed - and her favourite occupation was to sit down on the stool facing the shed and watch them eat - her pies, potato pancakes, squash in sour cream and enjoy the almost visible realisation of the idea that with each minute they were gaining strength, growing, getting fatter... yes, getting fatter, for they were almost painfully thin, especially Boy. She liked to sit and listen to their lively chatter after dinner, although there was much she did not understand: some Statics, after which they had got married, some Station, where everybody was rolling around, some time machine, on which a certain Makarevich had apparently travelled. In evacuation her foreman had been called Makarevich. She was interested, but she did not interrupt. Sometimes they asked about her life, and she told them about it in detail and with pleasure - this was the first time she had ever wished to tell the story of her meagre life, each step of which had previously evoked sadness in her.

Suddenly, out of the blue, there awoke in her a suspicious, old-womanish jealousy. She didn't allow Marina to have any contact with the Children at all, simply drove her away, and if Marina happened to start up a conversation with Boy or Girl or even just stopped by the table, she would go up to her and mumble angrily: - "Off with you, off with you...". Old Granny Nadya suddenly stopped muttering to herself when Boy brought the crockery out to dry it, and if they were nearby began to complain about her aches and pains and her difficulties in breathing, and they listened sympathetically... but how could she suffer from breathlessness, when all she did was to sit in the yard all day long! This troubled

her: once Boy, clearly saddened, expressed pity for Granny Nadya, calling her "poor Granny Nadya" - and she lost her temper: - What's so poor about her? She's got a daughter and son-in-law in Simferopol. She worked all her life as a ticket-collector. I wish I'd had that kind of work!

Most of all she hoped fearfully that the Children would come the following summer, that they would stay with her and not find a better place. Once Boy came back from the shop and said that up at the top the streets had been dug up - the houses up there were going to have hot water and flush toilets. She got terribly frightened, shaken to the core: - Hot water? she asked contemptuously, desperately trying to think of something to say. - But where is it, that water? It's already been ten years since they laid down the pipes for hot water to the sanatorium. The pipes are there, but there's no water! Flush toilets, she remembered, straining her weak old brain to the uttermost, - if you have a flush toilet in the house, it gets stuffed up - and you sit on it up to your ears.

They laughed merrily, and she laughed happily with them.

She was shaken when she discovered by chance that they would be leaving the day after tomorrow, not so much shaken even, but simply devastated, and only the fact that they took her address and their solemn promise to write and come again the following year cheered her up for a short time. She passed the last two days of their stay sadly awaiting their departure, - hobbled purposelessly around in the little courtyard, in the mornings sat for hours at the table, staring at the tulle curtain behind which her Children slept - and only the evening before their departure did she come to her senses and rush into the kitchen. Breaking her habit for the first time, she worked until the middle of the night: baked, fried, boiled, producing food for the Children's journey... The last day arrived, they bustled around in the courtyard, cheerfully packing

their things - curiously shaped pieces of driftwood, stones, plants - the little house was wide open, the tulle curtain drawn to one side, piles of blankets lay on the beds - it already looked deserted, no longer alive. She sat on the long bench rather than at the table so as not to be in the way and took no part in the preparations. She had already done all that she could and felt a deep sadness and weariness. She thought about the fact that the summer had ended, and no one could know if it would return...

When Girl said cheerfully: Well, let's sit down for a moment before leaving - and Boy sat down on his tall, overflowing rucksack, suddenly plunged into sadness like a child, - her eyelids trembled, she coughed and sniffed, and was the first to stand up again, saying with a feeble wave of the hand: - God bless you!

The boy worked his way into the straps of his rucksack, stood up, his thin legs trembling with the effort, and walked out of the courtyard, barely visible behind his burden, and the girl followed him with in one hand the brightly coloured bag, in which she had put the food she had got ready for their journey, and with a long, winding red root in the other hand, and before going down she stopped on the top step, put down the root and waved her hand, while Boy did not have the strength to stop. And she wandered off behind them, seeing only their indistinct, blurred figures through the tears that filled her eyes, and stood long at the top looking down the empty cypress avenue, from which they had already turned off in the direction of the bus stop...

And they drove away.

Next morning her first unhurried, leisurely thought was that she would make dumplings for the Children - the homemade cottage cheese made from kefir was ready in the fridge - and, suddenly remembering that the Children weren't there any more remained lying in bed, motionless, neither able or willing to get up. After

having breakfasted, slowly and without pleasure - not tasting what she ate, she washed up and then walked to and fro in the cool courtyard, not yet reached by the sun, not knowing what to do with herself, then sat down on a stool in front of the little house, on the door of which - as if wiping out all that had been - there hung a desolate padlock. The day was horrifyingly long and empty, and she had nothing to fill it with. Her old, slow brain, which was used to living on memories, had not yet had time to grow accustomed to the fact that the Children had left - and made mistakes all the time: the loudspeakers came on at the sanatorium, so it would soon be time for the Children to get up; Marina unlocked the kitchen, so the Children would be back from the sea in half an hour; the sun had passed Bear Mountain and was moving towards Roman-Cat, so the Children would have supper now and afterwards go to the cinema - and she herself would go to bed... She came to life, her heart shuddered as she happily prepared to go to meet them... but the Children had left, and, remembering this, she froze and sat motionless for five minutes, ten minutes, for a long time, seeing nothing, hearing nothing and thinking about nothing.

Gradually, in the course of two or three days, her life returned to its customary rhythm, or, rather, it did not return but calmed down, fell into a new order: there was no way back to the old order because the Children had not gone away for ever but had left her the hope that they would return... She did not rent out the little house any more even though a week later a young couple from Lvov wanted to take it. They were about thirty, much older than her children, both suntanned, strong, smiling, satisfied with life... But she did not want to let anyone into the little house, *their* house - she could not have explained why, but she did not even consider the idea, and she moved back into her own room

because the September nights were getting too cold for her. Anyway they would have no trouble finding another place to stay - in autumn the village was empty...

Slowly, together with the dormant cypresses, the bare vines, she survived the winter. Her sadness left her - on the contrary, she long remembered the summer with a smile: Girl crying over her burnt bliny, Boy rolling the gas cylinder, both of them coming down towards the house along the path overgrown with box. Deep down, inside she was waiting for them as she had never waited for anything or anybody in the world - except, perhaps, for her son Sasha to return from the war, but she had forgotten this feeling. However, she tried not to think, not to dream about this, because it upset her - and for the first time in her life was afraid that she would fall ill and not live to see the spring. At that time, eight years ago, she was long past seventy. But as soon as spring arrived and with it the first tourists, her resolution failed and she began to look down the road for them. Once in the beginning of June she was sitting looking through the postcards in her room, which was already midsummer hot, when the door opened without a preceding knock and raising her eyes, she was irritated to see Marina, who always came at the wrong time, standing on the threshold.

- Auntie Polya, there's a letter for you!

Her hands trembled, and the cards from Pyotr fell fanwise to the floor.

- Who... what..., she mumbled, in such confusion that her tongue barely obeyed her; it all came upon her in a rush: the fervent hope that the letter was from them and fear that this paper was from the social security, and embarrassment in front of Marina that she was so happy and nervous about this letter, and the wish to hide her happiness and nervousness from Marina...

- What are you saying, Marina! Who could... a letter...
- Probably your grandchildren, said Marina acidly but joyfully, not handing over the letter and not approaching, but insolently rocking from foot to foot in the doorway and reading the sender's address: - Moscow, Sokolov...

She rose hastily to her feet so that her glasses almost fell off her nose.

- Come on, give it to me then.

She did not remember, did not know their surname. Marina handed over the letter but made no sign of being about to leave.

- They've just got some canned cherries in at the shop. There's a queue right up to the Registry. Are you going?

What? I don't know. No, I probably won't. Well, off with you... off with you! Busybody!

- All right, all right, Marina smiled mockingly as if understanding and teasing her impatience. - I'm going.

Carefully with shaking hands she cut open the envelope - a narrow slip of paper - fearing to damage the inserted letter.

"Dear Pelageya Valerevna,"

Usually she read slowly - because her eyes were bad and she had done little reading in her life - and at this moment she wanted to read this letter unhurriedly, experience every word, but she could not - her eyes ran down the paper as quickly as they could though to her the process seemed terribly slow, seizing hold of individual lines and briefly alighting on specific words: *rain... the Olympic games...* and almost at the very end she stopped as if rooted when she saw, embraced and grasped with all her strength the precisely, gracefully written word with its elegantly linked *r*'s: "arrive" - and having paused a moment, moved her eyes to

the beginning of the line and read aloud in a whisper: "... would like to arrive at your place..." They wanted to come at the beginning of August.

She laughed quietly, weakly. There were tears in her eyes.

From that time they came every year, and for her the partings were no longer a desolation - there was only a slight sadness that they were leaving. There were enough memories for her patient old age for her to be able to live calmly through the winter in expectation of the following year. As the years passed they changed: Boy firmed out, his shoulders broadened, and he became a proper man and was no longer so timid and quiet - and Girl, in contrast, got thinner. This did not harm her looks, but it worried the old woman: according to the Little Russians a healthy, good-looking woman had to be plump - blood and milk - perhaps she was ill. When they graduated from their institute Boy started to put on airs, became very much the man of the house, shouted - though affectionately - at his wife, gave orders - and she sagely assented and submitted, unless what he said was absolute nonsense, in which case she assented and did things in her own way.

Each year when she received from them a sheet of paper folded in two around the money, she experienced an awkward and unpleasant feeling that depressed her. It seemed meaningless and wrong to take money for the fact that they were the support and content of her life. She herself would have paid anything to what ever authority could have ensured that for the rest of her life the two Children would be brought to her little house, which lived only for them. It would have been a pleasure for her not to receive any money from them - but it would have seemed strange and she was embarrassed to suggest it - and she was afraid that the Children would not merely refuse her proposal but even, God forbid,

be offended... In recent years she had genuinely suffered her fill because of the wretched one hundred and twenty roubles. She had learned by chance that the Children were engineers, and the poverty of engineers was wellknown even in their remote backwoods. The only thing she could do for them - and for herself - was that when last year prices had gone up locally to two fifty per night, she rented the house all summer at the new rate, but took only two roubles from the Children as she had done six years running, promising herself that no matter what, she would never raise that price for them. This year a bed already cost three roubles (under Gorbachev something strange was happening - prices were rising as they had done during the Revolution), and after doing some sums on a piece of paper, she felt a quiet happiness: the Children would save fifty roubles by staying with her, and if they came for a full month, the saving would be sixty roubles. This made her glad, and she repeated her sums a number of times with deep pleasure.

She was already into her ninth decade, but it seemed to her that time had happily stopped. It was not that she had ceased to feel her physical age, or that the remorseless process of aging had come to a halt, although it had slowed down; no, it continued as before - she felt weaker and weaker, less and less able to do things, not with each day that passed, not with each month because she did not have, did not know those unexpected, pitiless illnesses that destroy the body rapidly and, in old age, irrevocably, but with each year that passed she felt, remembered, rather, as she strained for breath carrying the garbage bucket, that at this time last year, having thrown out the garbage, she had rested sitting on the bench and had then gone on to the shop; now the bench no longer restored her strength - on the contrary, it seemed somehow to demand her strength - and before going to the shop

she had to lie down on her bed and rest for half an hour. The stopping of time expressed itself in the fact that the sense of the approaching end of her life, the sense that her life was moving towards its end, which had been born in her after her brother's death and had not left her until the appearance - the arrival - of the Children, the sense not only of approaching death, the departure from life, but also that with her death something would be broken off, would cease, something whole, important, very long, that had gone on since the dawn of time and had stumbled in her, had died - never to be born again - this sense had disappeared. And together with its disappearance, surprising and confusing her, the wish had come to her, a strange wish, which she had not fully understood at first - why to her and why should she think about it? - but which had become clearer to her with each year and had now grown firm and distinct: that Boy and Girl, her Children, should have a child. And in the course of the last two years this had turned into her last aspiration. Into a higher goal, and it seemed to her that having achieved it, she would have achieved all that her long, her for so many years useless and joyless life could give her, so that she could leave it not only calmly, not only without a sense of sadness and weariness, but with a sense of hope and even of satisfaction.

Often, realising the senselessness of her old woman's dreams, but nonetheless with pleasure, she would engage in a leisurely and exhaustive consideration of a possible name for the future child. She had long ago made up her mind - but each time, sitting on the bench under the ageblackened cypress tree, - she would exert her old memory and begin to play at this game of which she never grew tired: first of all she would remember names that didn't sound good or which had gone out of use, for instance, Ustin or Dormidont, then names which had in her lifetime been

borne by unhappy or bad people, such as Andrey, the official at the radiator factory, or Ivan, the drunkard, and gradually narrowing the circle, pretending to pause on beautiful, nice-sounding names belonging to good and happy people, she would approach closer and closer to the one name at the sound of which her soul would fill with gladness... She wanted the boy to be called Sasha. And when, in a relaxed mood and having permitted her dream to bear her far, far away into a never-never land, she imagined him as a two-year-old, toddling around her yard on chubby little legs, whom Girl - his mother - would call Sasha (and she could also call him by that name...), it was as if something inside her softly broke in tenderness and sadness, and her breath stopped - and she was frightened and made herself return to reality by an effort of the will. She thought less about a girl's name; half of the little girls in Kuchuk-Lambat bore the apparently new name of Christal (at least, that's how she thought it was spelt), which had immediately appealed to her. Christal was all right... But she would prefer a boy.

Each year, meeting Girl, she would put on her glasses and, screwing up her eyes nevertheless, would look at her stomach - but Girl only got thinner from year to year, and the old woman would sigh in disappointment. She wasn't even worried by the sacrifice that she would have to make for this unknown, non-existent little person - separation from Boy and Girl for a year or even two, during which Girl would carry, give birth to and breast-feed the child - and which because of her age she might not survive; she was prepared to be satisfied with the knowledge that he existed and in two or three years would come to old Kuchuk-Lambat, from which she would already have departed, and Boy and Girl would tell him about the old woman who had passed her last eight years together with them, years that had constituted all

her life during the past half-century - and then he would grow up and come here, just the same Boy with just the same Girl as her Children had been - and everything would begin all over again, and nothing would end for ever, and she would live... She thought about this often and long, sitting in the shade of the old cypress - patiently awaiting the minute when the early Crimean night would fall on the park and she would go to bed, to lie down on her on her broad, but old-fashionedly high bed with its flaking nickel spheres and would slowly fall asleep enveloped by her slow, warm, joyful thoughts... However, she did hope to live long enough to touch this child - her continuation, her hope; she believed that God would not refuse her this last happiness.

She put on her glasses and raised her eyes to the calendar - the red calendar with the blue Bear Mountain imperceptibly merging with the blue sea and the heading "Crimea" in red, apparently handwritten letters. She had received the calendar from Ivan - he had been moving furniture in the administration building, and he had been given a pile of them. It was Wednesday today, the twelfth day of August, the day of Sila, Andronicus and John - this she had been told by the all-knowing Lida, a sixty-year-old woman who had taken over Granny Nadya's room after the latter's death that spring. Wednesday, the twelfth of August - she found the day with a gnarled brown finger and was glad to see how many days were left to the beginning of autumn. Earlier Boy and Girl had always left at the beginning of September, because of their studies - and therefore the approach of September had bothered her; now they had regular holidays and no reason to hurry away, but in recent years the weather had worsened (people said it was because of the rockets) and she worried that it might be cold for Boy and Girl in September. She did not know precisely when they were going to arrive - usually they arrived at the

beginning of August - but already from the fifth, after having said goodbye to her last lodgers, she had kept her house vacant, only allowing occasional visitors who had nowhere to stay to spend a night or two, without linen, of course. This year she had not received the usual letter - only a New Year card - but that didn't worry her: Boy was very busy, he was writing some kind of thesis - she didn't know what that was, but knowing how much labour it cost her to think up and write a short postcard to them, she imagined some terrible process that demanded all his strength... They would be arriving any day now, and her only worry was that there wouldn't be any of the peaches left that had appeared in the shop and were being sold cheaply only to registered local inhabitants and the staff of the sanatorium.

This year Ivan had done repairs and maintenance on the little house: he had put up new blue wallpaper, painted the exterior and put in new glass to replace the old cracked pane in the window facing the sea - he hadn't been expensive. She had noted with sadness that her little house was deteriorating; the door had swollen up during the snowy winter and didn't fit the frame; one wall had shifted - a sewage pipe had been laid the previous year, the fortieth anniversary of victory over the Germans, and a deep crack now ran from the courtyard and into the foundation; the wooden overhang had rotted in places, holes had appeared in its plywood cover, and no matter how much Ivan tried to make them good with canvas, it dripped whenever it rained... In general their house and their courtyard - like a number of other houses and yards situated close to the sea - had a neglected and abandoned look. One terrace higher up, almost on a level with the buildings of the sanatorium, they had put in hot water and gas and placed bright streetlamps along the now asphalted path. Their part even experienced breaks in the cold water supply, and she always had

to keep a bucket of water as a reserve, painfully filling it from a one-liter tin; she still got her gas from a cylinder - at night it was pitch-black and the holidaymakers returning from the cinema used matches or torches... Most importantly a sewage system had been introduced up above, and everyone had installed WC's in little cabins - while they still had their old earth closet in the little, crooked shed, fortunately with a wooden bench that Ivan had brought from somewhere or other and she had upholstered (for the Children) with a padded cotton cover. It was easier to begin from above; the authorities at the sanatorium had explained, promising that they would work down to the sea in a year or two. Perhaps this was true, but up above there mainly lived young families, workers who the sanatorium needed: Sergey Ivanych - the garage manager, fat Dusya, the shop assistant, madcap Petka - the organiser of recreational activities, Grigory - the new mechanic from the pumping station... all energetic, strong people, some with cars, with relatives in Alushta and Simferopol, while down below lonely old women and drunkards like Ivan and Stepan (the former electrician who had once carpentered the overhang and had bypassed the electric meter for her and who, having been left by Zoika, was rapidly and visibly going downhill) lived out their days... Anyway, none of this mattered to her.

- To the shop, Auntie Polya?

- I'm on my way...

It was hard going up the path, past the toilet, to the narrow steps leading up to the next terrace: a fig tree unable to penetrate the rock had pushed out its roots, small pebbles rolled beneath her feet; half of the path was blocked by the trunk of a walnut tree which had been bent down by the snows of the winter and not straightened up again. Bending forward she passed the walnut and slowly began to ascend the high steps. The stairway wound

steeply upwards, going round boulders and cypresses - the boulders and the trees were older than the stairway; as she went up she paused at the frequent platforms to recover her breath, seeking the shade to avoid the sun. "Why doesn't she have a baby?" thought the old woman, listening to her heart, which was beating weakly and evenly, grateful for the short rest. "She's so thin... but she's not flat-chested. Perhaps she's ill. Or it's the thesis." She arrived at the first sanatorium building, an ugly white structure, resembling an elongated beehive, in front of which a pond shone in its concrete box with water gurgling out of a rusty pipe. She thought about the fact that water continually flowed from that pipe, while their water was cut off from nine in the morning till five in the evening. Now she had to go up to the next level, up to what corresponded to the third floor of the sanatorium building, after which there was no more ascent; along the pine-tree avenue, planted with dense yellow bushes, past the old castle wound about with ivy up to its grey towers, past the bus stop - the road even went down a little, to the shop. She stepped into the shade of the first pine, planted her stick firmly and stopped to get her breath.

High above her head the wind rustled the pine needles.

Boy and Girl appeared from around the bend.

She recognised them without her glasses, although she saw badly without them, and to be on the safe side - with a violently trembling hand - she pulled out her glasses and, almost dropping them in the process, put them on after a number of unsuccessful attempts at getting the flimsy loops around her ears... Yes, it was her Children, as if they had never left her - they were walking towards her from the direction of the castle, in the jeans they always wore. Boy in a sweatshirt with an incomprehensible inscription on his already broad chest, Girl... Girl was not in

jeans, the habit of years had made her think that she had seen them, Girl was wearing a voluminous sarafan that went below the knees - and even in this loose tunic she could see the protruding mound of her stomach.

She stood there, unable to move, immersed in a sea of happiness and warmth, her dry lips smiling. She had sensed... she had known... God could not have acted otherwise. They were walking quickly, obviously they hadn't noticed her; she drew in her breath, deeply, joyfully, breathed out again and began hobbling towards them; it seemed to her that she was flying.

- Auntie Polya!

She could not help it, wrinkled her eyes and nose to get rid of the tears of weakness.

- Lena... Igorechek!

They stopped face to face. Unable to check herself she tentatively stroked Girl's white hand with her dry, sinewy hand. She loved them both - although secretly she had always loved Boy more, felt more sorry for him - but now Boy was in second place.

- Hello... hello... You've arrived.

- Hello, Pelageya Valerevna, Boy said in his husky, man's voice.

She tore herself away from Girl and grasped his powerful hand with her fingers.

- Well, how are things? she asked, not yet daring and not wishing to speak of the cardinal point, here, on the road, hurriedly. What about your... thesis?

- It was accepted last autumn... How are things with you? Your health?

- Touch wood... In February I had a spot of trouble, with my back, I treated it with grasses. My legs aren't what they were... But what can you expect - I'm in my eighty-fourth year!

She said this with quiet pride, she was genuinely proud of herself - that she had carried on, hung on till this moment - and, God willing, she would live a little longer.

.. - Granny, Nadya has died, she suddenly remembered with a pang of shame. On the ninth it was forty days since. We had a little get-together..

- I'm sorry, said Girl.

- She was ninety... And I've had the house done up! Ivan did it. I didn't let him out of my sight. Everyone knows what he's like. You turn your back on him and he's drunk already. And it's a mystery where he gets it from; they're combating... But never mind, it looks nice. You'll see. There's not much to buy this year: hardly any butter, vegetables only at the market, no meat at all. But I suppose you've brought some salted meat with you... But where are your things?

She had only just noticed that they did not have any luggage with them - and was surprised.

They remained silent, and the old woman looked at them, her sunken cheeks extended in a joyful smile.

- We..., Girl said quietly and fell silent. - Igor!

Boy drew out a cigarette and lit up, cupping the flame with his hands. She looked at his suntanned unshaven cheek. Eight years ago the hair hadn't grown on his cheeks - occasionally he scraped something away from his upper lip and chin. He was a man now.

- I'm going to buy some bread, I've run out of bread. Don't wait for me. There's no point in your traipsing after an old woman. Here... - she dug in her pocket, found her key ring, detached the key - a small, dark one in the form of a cross - and held it out towards Girl. Fetch your things and go home. I'll be there soon.

- Igor!

The girl looked at the key, like a frightened child. Boy slung his cigarette away. Her raised arm had grown tired of holding up the bundle of keys and their key separately, but she did not lower her arm, waiting for Girl to take the key.

- You see, Pelageya Valerevna... Auntie Polya, Boy said in a lively and cheerful voice she had not heard before. - This year... we decided to change our lodging just to try something new. And you must have got tired of us...

- What? she asked, not understanding.

All at once, suddenly, Boy became confused, turned deep red and moved towards Girl. Girl was looking down at the ground, scuffing a leathery leaf with her toe.

- We... we had so much luggage... my wife, you see - Boy made a movement with his hand as if he was about to embrace Girl, but stopped half-way and stuck his hand in his pocket.

- We, said Girl delicately. - We stopped a little higher than you... in another place. It's quite close...

The old woman looked at them, blinking confusedly, still not fully understanding what they were saying, but sensing in her heart - something terrible.

- Where did you - where did you stop?

- On the top terrace, not far from you, Boy said, wiping his forehead and lighting another cigarette.

- We'll come round...

Suddenly she understood. She understood what had happened, but was unable to understand how such a thing could happen.

- A-a-h.

Slowly she turned her head and looked at the white building of the sanatorium with its hundreds of little balconies.

- Whose... whose house are you staying in?

- Evdokiya Grigorevna, Girl said quietly and tore off a leaf.

- Auntie Dusya, Boy said.

Dusya Panchenko...the assistant in the local shop, her son-in-law drove the bus. Yes, they were on the top terrace... hot water, drains, last year Vasily had installed a shower.

Have you been here long? she asked mechanically, feeling a terrible tiredness.

- No, said Girl.

- Since the second, said Boy simultaneously and stopped.

The old woman stood silently looking at Girl's stomach. The sun had emerged from behind a pine tree and was burning her face. In the house behind her a baby was crying.

- Well... I'll be on my way, she said. It seemed to her that she had spoken loudly and distinctly, but in fact her voice was so faint that they barely heard her. With difficulty she took off her glasses. - I'll be on my way... Have a good holiday.

- We'll come round, Girl, said quietly. Tomorrow.

- Yes, yes, Boy said.

- You're welcome, she said, and turning cautiously, she began to go down, towards her house, in the opposite direction to the shop. She did not feel her body; she had a strange sensation that she was following her stick, which was walking by itself, carefully and tentatively prodding the road. Bread, she remembered when she was already down by her house. "Oh yes, bread... I must buy some bread."

- You were quick, Auntie Polya, said Ivan, who was sitting smoking a cigarette.

- Yes.

She entered her room and lay down on the bed with the stick still in her hand. Her son looked merrily at her from the darkened photo standing beside the pile of postcards, which had doubled in height with the postcards that they had sent her from Moscow.

For a long time she lay motionless, looking at the ceiling that had not been white washed for many years, as if she were looking into darkness; then she slowly closed her eyes.

Such a long life - and it had ended so quickly.
Probably God could not have acted otherwise.

Translated from Russian by John Kendal