

"Those are lovely girls. Let's go back, eh?" Ryazantsev continued with a snigger.

Yury blushed deeply in the darkness. A forbidden feeling stirred within him with its animal appetite; unusual and awe-inspiring pictures penetrated his excited brain, but he gained control of himself and replied dryly, "No. It's time to go home." Then he added maliciously, "Lyalya's waiting for us."

Ryazantsev suddenly shrank back, as if withdrawing into himself, and seemed to grow smaller.

"Well, yes . . . of course . . . it's really time . . ." he muttered hastily.

Clenching his teeth in malice and loathing, staring with hatred at the broad back in the white jacket, Yury said, "In general I'm not a devotee of such adventures."

"Hmm, yes . . . ha, ha, ha . . ." Ryazantsev said with a halfhearted, hostile laugh, and fell silent.

Oh, hell. It ended awkwardly, Yury thought.

They drove home in silence; the road seemed endless.

"Will you come in?" asked Yury, without looking at Ryazantsev.

"No. You know, I have to see a patient. Besides, it's late, isn't it?" Ryazantsev replied indecisively.

Yury climbed down from the carriage and didn't even want to take his gun and game. Everything that belonged to Ryazantsev now seemed repulsive. But Ryazantsev said, "What about the gun?"

Against his will Yury came back, collected his gear and game with disgust, shook hands awkwardly, and then left. Ryazantsev drove on quietly a short distance, then suddenly turned into a narrow little street, and the wheels of his carriage rolled off in the opposite direction. Yury listened with contempt and secret, unconscious envy.

"What a lout!" he muttered, and felt sorry for his sister Lyalya.

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After carrying his things inside and not knowing what to do with himself, Yury quietly went out onto the steps leading to the garden.

It was as dark as a chasm and strange to see the sky above with its gleaming stars.

Lyalya was sitting on the steps leading to the garden, lost in thought; her small figure showed dimly in the darkness.

"Is that you, Yury?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," Yury replied. Making his way carefully, he sat down next to

her. Lyalya dreamily rested her head on his shoulder. Yury smelled the fresh, clean, warm scent of her hair. It was a woman's scent, and Yury breathed it with unconscious but nervous enjoyment.

"Did the hunting go well?" Lyalya asked affectionately, and after a pause added softly and tenderly: "But where's Anatoly Pavlovich? I heard you drive up."

Your Anatoly Pavlovich is a filthy beast! Yury wanted to cry out in a sudden burst of rage, but instead he replied unwillingly: "I really don't know . . . he went to see a patient."

"A patient," Lyalya repeated mechanically and fell silent, gazing at the stars. She wasn't annoyed that Ryazantsev hadn't come in to see her: the young woman wanted to be alone so that his presence wouldn't hinder her from pondering the mysterious and momentous feeling, so dear to her, that filled her youthful body and soul. It was the feeling of a desired and inevitable though frightening turning point, after which her entire previous life would fall away and something new would begin. It would be so new that Lyalya herself would have to become entirely different.

Yury felt strange seeing his usually cheerful and merry sister so quiet and pensive. Because he himself was filled with irritating and depressing feelings, everything—Lyalya, the distant, starry sky, the dark garden—everything seemed sad and cold to him. Yury didn't realize that this mute, still pensiveness concealed not grief but rich life: an unknown, immeasurably powerful force surged in the distant sky, the dark garden absorbed vital juices from the earth with all its might, and the gentle Lyalya's bosom was filled with such complete happiness that she feared that at any movement, any impression might destroy this enchantment and muffle that resplendent music—as dazzling as the starry sky, as alluring and mysterious as the dark garden—that music of love and desire that resounded so profoundly within her soul.

"Lyalya . . . do you love Anatoly Pavlovich very much?" Yury asked softly and carefully, as if afraid to rouse her.

How can he ask that? Lyalya felt rather than thought, but she came to her senses immediately and snuggled up to her brother gratefully because he'd begun talking not about something unnecessary and irrelevant for her now but rather about the man she loved.

"Very much," she said so softly that Yury guessed rather than heard her reply; she made a courageous attempt to use her smile to restrain the tears welling up in her eyes.

But Yury detected a melancholy note in her voice and so felt even more pity for her and contempt for Ryazantsev.

"Why?" he asked involuntarily, feeling frightened at his own question.

Lyalya looked at him in astonishment, but couldn't see his face and began laughing softly.

"Silly! Why? Because . . . Haven't you ever been in love? He's so good, kind, honest. . . ."

Handsome, strong! Lyalya wanted to add, but she blushed to tears in the darkness and didn't say it.

"Do you know him well?" asked Yuri.

Hey, I shouldn't have asked that, he thought with sadness and irritation. Why? Naturally, he seems better to her than anyone on earth!

"Anatoly doesn't conceal anything from me!" Lyalya replied with timid triumph.

"Are you sure about that?" Yuri asked with a wry smile, feeling that he could no longer stop himself.

In Lyalya's voice there was a note of uneasy bewilderment when she replied: "Of course. Why shouldn't I be?"

"No reason. I just . . ." replied Yuri, startled.

Lyalya fell silent. It was impossible to understand what was going on within her.

"Perhaps you know something . . . about him?" she suddenly asked; the strange, painful sound of her voice struck Yuri and frightened him.

"No. I was only asking. What could I possibly know, especially about Anatoly Pavlovich?"

"No. Then you wouldn't have said that!" Lyalya insisted in a ringing voice.

"I just wanted to say that in general . . ." Already frozen in embarrassment, Yuri became muddled. "We men are generally such a depraved lot, all of us."

Lyalya was silent and suddenly started to laugh with relief. "Well, that I do know."

But her laughter seemed completely inappropriate to Yuri.

"It's not as easy as it seems to you," he replied with annoyance and wicked irony. "And you can't possibly know everything. You can't even imagine all the vile things in life. You're still too pure for that!"

"Yes, indeed," Lyalya laughed, feeling flattered. But then, placing her hand on her brother's knee, she said seriously: "Do you think I haven't thought about that? I have, a great deal, and it was always painful and shameful: why do we value our purity, our reputation so highly? Why are we afraid to take a step lest we fall, while men consider it almost a heroic feat to seduce a woman? It's terribly unjust, isn't it?"

"Yes," Yuri replied bitterly, castigating with enjoyment his own recollections and at the same time realizing that he, Yuri, was really different from other men. "That's one of the greatest injustices in the world. Ask any of us: Would you marry" a prostitute, he wanted to say, but he laughed and said instead, "a courtesan, and everyone will say no. But really and truly, is a man any better than a courtesan? At least she sells herself for money, to earn a living, while the man simply . . . becomes dissipated and depraved, always in the same vile, perverted way."

Lyalya was silent.

An invisible bat flew swiftly and timidly under the balcony, twice brushed its rustling wings against the wall, and then, with a faint sound, fluttered away again. Yuri fell silent, listening to this mysterious sound of nocturnal life, and then began talking again, becoming more and more irritated and carried away by his own words.

"The worst thing of all is that everyone not only knows it and keeps quiet, as if that's what they're supposed to do, but they even act out complicated tragicomedies. They sanctify marriage. They lie, as they say, before God and man! And it's always the purest, holiest young women," he added, thinking about Karsavina and feeling jealous of her, "who fall to the most depraved, filthiest, sometimes even contaminated men. The late Semyonov once said that the purer the woman, the filthier the man who possesses her. And that's the truth!"

"Really?" Lyalya asked in a strange tone.

"Oh, I'll say!" Yuri said with a bitter smirk.

"I don't know," Lyalya said suddenly, and there were tears in her voice.

"What?" Yuri asked, not hearing what she said.

"Is it possible that Tolya is just like all the rest?" Lyalya asked. It was the first time she'd referred to Ryazantsev that way to her brother; suddenly she burst into tears. "Well, of course he is!" she said with tears in her eyes.

Yuri took hold of her hand with apprehension and anguish.

"Lyalya, Lyalechka . . . what's wrong? I didn't mean to . . . My dear . . . please stop, don't cry!" he repeated incoherently, pulling her moist little hands away from her face and kissing them.

"No. I know . . . it's true," Lyalya repeated, gasping from her tears.

Although she said that she'd thought about it before, it only seemed that way to her; in fact, she'd never conceived of Ryazantsev's private life. Of course, she knew that she was not his first love, and she understood what that meant, but that awareness had never managed to become a clear concept; it had merely skimmed the surface of her soul.

She felt that she loved him and he loved her, and that was the main thing; nothing else really mattered. But now, because her brother had spoken with such shrill condemnation and contempt, it seemed that an abyss was opening up before her, that it was monstrous and irreparable, that her happiness had plunged into it irretrievably and forever, and that she could no longer love Ryazantsev.

Yuri, almost in tears himself, tried to cajole her; he kissed her, smoothed her hair, but she kept on crying, bitterly and desperately.

"Oh, my God, my God!" Lyalya repeated, sobbing like a child; because it was so dark, she seemed small and pitiful, and her tears were so helpless and bitter that Yuri felt overwhelming compassion.

Pale and hysterical, he ran into the house, knocked his head painfully on the door, and came back carrying a glass of water, spilling it on the floor and on himself.

"Lyalechka, stop it. How can you carry on like this? What's the matter? Perhaps Anatoly Pavlovich is better than all the rest. Lyalya!" he repeated in despair.

Lyalya was shaking with sobs and her teeth rattled weakly on the rim of the glass.

"What on earth is all this?" asked the maid, who appeared at the door in alarm. "What's wrong, miss?"

Lyalya, leaning on the railing, stood up; still weeping, shaking, and shuddering, she went to her room.

"Oh dear, what is it, miss? Shall I call the master? Yuri Nikolaevich!"

Nikolai Yegorovich emerged from the study with his firm and measured tread and stopped in the doorway, looking at the weeping Lyalya with amazement.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Nothing . . . mere trifles," Yuri replied, forcing a smile. "I was talking about Ryazantsev. It's all nonsense!"

Nikolai Yegorovich looked at him inquisitively, thought of something, and then suddenly there appeared on the elderly face of this former gentleman a look of disgust.

"What the devil's going on?" he cried, shrugging his shoulders abruptly and then, turning to the left, went out of the room.

Yuri blushed terribly, wanted to say something rude, but felt excruciatingly ashamed and afraid. Filled with outraged malice toward his father, bewildered pity for Lyalya, and painful contempt for himself, he went out quietly onto the porch, down the steps, and out into the garden.

A small frog croaked fitfully and darted beneath his feet; it was crushed and burst like an acorn. Yuri slipped, gave a shudder, cried out, and jumped to one side. For a long time he kept wiping his shoe on the wet grass; he felt a nervous shiver of disgust run up and down his spine.

The anguish in his soul and the foul, squeamish feeling in his foot made him grimace in pain. Everything seemed tedious and hideous. In the darkness he groped his way toward a bench and sat down; he directed his anxious, dry, and mean gaze into the garden, and saw nothing there except indistinct patches of blackness. Difficult and dismal thoughts swarmed in his head.

He looked at the place where, in the dark grass, the small frog he'd stepped on was dying or perhaps suffering horribly. A whole world had ended there, full of individual and independent life, yet its appalling, unimaginably painful conclusion was neither seen nor heard.

Somehow imperceptibly Yuri found himself thinking a new and tormenting thought—that everything filling his life, even the most important ideas, for whose sake he loved one thing and hated another, rejected one desire and accepted another against his will, all this—both good and evil—was merely an obscure cloud of mist surrounding him alone. For the world in its

huge totality, all his most agonizing and heartfelt sufferings didn't even exist, just like the unknown suffering of this small creature. Imagining that his suffering, his intellect, and his concept of good and evil were terribly important to someone besides himself, he had deliberately yet senselessly woven an intricate fabric connecting himself and the world. Only the moment of death would tear this net apart and leave him alone, without reward or result.

Once again he remembered Semyonov and the late student's indifference to his most cherished thoughts and goals, those that had affected him, Yuri, so deeply, as well as millions of others just like him; suddenly his innocent and candid admiration of life was profoundly eclipsed by pleasure, by women, by the moon, and by the nightingale's song—all of which had so struck him and painfully wounded him the day after his despondent conversation with Semyonov.

At that time he didn't understand how Semyonov could attribute importance to such trifles as a boat ride or to women's lovely bodies after he had consciously rejected these same profound thoughts and elevated concepts; but now Yuri easily understood that it couldn't be otherwise. All these trifles constituted life—real life, full of enthralling experience and overwhelming enjoyment, and all great concepts were merely empty, determining nothing in the inscrutable mystery of life and death, a mere combination of words and thoughts. As important and conclusive as they might seem, afterward there would come—there couldn't help but come—other words and thoughts no less meaningful and definitive.

This conclusion was so uncharacteristic of Yuri and had so unexpectedly emerged from his reflections on good and evil that it dismayed him. A great void opened before him, and for one second there dawned on him such an intense sensation of clarity and freedom, like the feeling of floating in air while asleep, that he wanted to take wing. But Yuri felt alarmed. With all his might he collected his customary thoughts and concepts about life, and the bold sensation that had so frightened him disappeared. Everything became obscure and complicated again.

For a moment Yuri was willing to admit that the meaning of real life lay in the realization of freedom; that it was natural and consequently good to live only for pleasure; and that even Ryazantsev's point of view regarding the unity of a lower order, aspiring to as many sexual pleasures as possible as the most urgent of life's sensations, was more integral and logical than his own. But, according to this argument, he had to admit that his concepts of debauchery and purity were like dry leaves covering the young, fresh grass, and that even the most romantic, chaste young women, even Lyalya and Karsavina, had the right to plunge freely deep into the stream of sensual pleasures. Yuri was frightened by this idea, regarded it as obscene and blasphemous, was horrified that it aroused him, and banished it from his mind and heart with his customary oppressive, stern words.

Hmm, yes, he thought, gazing up at the infinite, dazzling sky, strewn with stars. Life is sensation, but people aren't irrational beasts; they must direct their desires toward the good, and not allow those desires to gain control over them. . . . What if there's a God above the stars? Yuri recalled, and a terrifying feeling of vague reverence held him to the earth. Without tearing himself away, he gazed at the large shining star in the tail of the Great Bear and involuntarily recalled how the peasant Kuzma in the watermelon field had referred to this constellation as the "cart."

For some reason, once again involuntarily, this recollection seemed inappropriate and even somewhat offensive. He started to gaze at the garden, which, after the starry sky, now seemed totally black, and once again he thought: If the world were to be deprived of female purity, which resembles the first flowers of spring, still so timid yet grand and touching, what would remain that is still sacred to mankind?

He imagined thousands of fair, chaste young women, like spring flowers in the sunlight under blossoming trees. Their undeveloped breasts, rounded shoulders, supple arms, and graceful hips, bending timidly and mysteriously, flashed before his eyes, and his head began to swim in sweet ecstasy.

Yuri slowly drew his hand across his forehead and suddenly came to his senses.

My nerves are strained. I must get some sleep. Feeling unsatisfied, distraught, and still languishing over his voluptuous vision, Yuri, his soul filled with undirected malice, headed home, all his movements jerky and abrupt.

Lying in bed and trying in vain to fall asleep, he remembered Ryazantsev and Lyalya.

Why precisely am I so upset that Lyalya isn't Ryazantsev's first and only love?

This question didn't yield an answer, but the image of Zina Karsavina floated before his eyes, stirring gentle tenderness and soothing his overheated brain with inexpressible kindness; however much he tried to obscure this feeling, it became clear to him just why he needed it: she was pure and unsullied.

And I do love her! Yuri thought for the first time; this idea suddenly banished all others and brought tears of tenderness to his eyes at this new feeling. But by the next minute Yuri was asking himself with bitter sarcasm: Yet haven't I loved other women before her? True, I didn't know of her existence, but then Ryazantsev didn't know about Lyalya either. Back then, at that time, each of us thought the woman we wished to possess was the "real one," the most necessary and appropriate choice. We were mistaken then, but perhaps we're also mistaken now! That means either we preserve our chastity perpetually or allow ourselves absolute freedom . . . and, of course, allow women to enjoy love and passion. But really . . . Yuri interrupted his

own thought. With Ryazantsev . . . It's not so bad that he loved before, but that now he wants to go on enjoying several women. I'm not like that!

This thought filled Yuri with a feeling of pride and purity, but only for an instant; the next moment he remembered the feeling that had overwhelmed him at his vision of thousands of nubile, chaste young women permeated by sunlight, and he was ashamed of his absolute inability to control himself and cope with this turmoil of feelings and thoughts.

Yuri felt uncomfortable lying on his right side, so he turned over clumsily.

The fact is, he thought, none of the women I've known could satisfy me for my whole life. . . . So what I call real love is unrealizable; it's simply foolish to dream about it!

Yuri grew uncomfortable on his left side and, getting his sticky, sweaty body all tangled up in the warm sheet, he turned over again. He felt hot and uncomfortable. His head began to ache.

Chastity is an ideal, but mankind would perish in the realization of that ideal. The thought occurred to him unexpectedly. That means it's absurd. But . . . then all life's absurd! Yuri almost said it aloud, clenching his teeth with such malice that gold circles spun before his eyes.

And until early morning, lying in a painful, uncomfortable position, with the dull ache of despair in his soul, Yuri turned these weighty, contradictory thoughts over in his mind.

At last, in an effort to extricate himself, he began to persuade himself that he was a bad, excessively voluptuous, egotistical man, and that his doubts were simply the result of his hidden lust. But this idea merely oppressed his soul even more, and gave rise in his mind to a multitude of disparate thoughts; his tormented state was finally ended by the question:

Why, in the final analysis, am I tormenting myself like this?

And with a feeling of disgust for the very process of any and all self-examination, Yuri fell asleep in a dull state of nervous exhaustion.



Lyalya wept in her room until, her face buried in the pillow, she finally fell asleep. She awoke the next morning with a headache and swollen eyes.

Her first thought was that she shouldn't cry because Ryazantsev was coming for dinner later that day and he wouldn't want to see her looking so unattractive after her tears. But she recalled that it didn't make any difference now because everything was over between them and she could no