

'One of the great novels of the twentieth century'

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STALINGRAD

BY THE AUTHOR OF *LIFE AND FATE*

A NOVEL

VASILY GROSSMAN

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VASILY GROSSMAN

Vasily Grossman (1905–64) is best known as the author of *Life and Fate*, regarded by many as the greatest Russian novel of the twentieth century.

Among his most acclaimed works of fiction are *Life and Fate*, *Everything Flows* and the short stories collected in *The Road*. *A Writer at War* collects Grossman's notebooks, war diaries, personal correspondence and newspaper articles from his time as a war reporter.

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ALSO BY VASILY GROSSMAN

Life and Fate

Everything Flows

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By Vasily Grossman, edited and
translated by Antony Beevor
and Luba Vinogradova

A Writer at War:

Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941–1945

VASILY GROSSMAN

Stalingrad

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This translation is dedicated to the translator's father,
Colonel Roger Elphinstone Chandler (1921–68)

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Introduction

1.

Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* (completed in 1960) has been hailed as a twentieth-century *War and Peace*. It has been translated into most European languages, and also into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Turkish and Vietnamese. There have been stage productions, TV series and an eight-hour BBC radio dramatization. Most readers, however, have been unaware that Grossman did not originally conceive of *Life and Fate* as a self-contained novel. It is, rather, the second of two closely related novels about the Battle of Stalingrad that it is probably simplest to refer to as a diology. The first of these two novels was first published in 1952, under the title *For a Just Cause*. Grossman himself, however, had wanted to call it *Stalingrad* – and that is how we have titled it in this translation.

The characters in the two novels are largely the same and so is the storyline; *Life and Fate* picks up where *Stalingrad* ends, in late September 1942. Ikonnikov's essay on senseless kindness – now a part of *Life and Fate* and often seen as central to it – was originally a part of *Stalingrad*. Another of the most memorable elements of *Life and Fate* – the letter written by Viktor Shtrum's mother about her last days in the Berdichev ghetto – is of central importance to *both* novels. The actual words of the letter were probably always intended for *Life and Fate*, but it is in *Stalingrad* that Grossman tells us how the letter reached Viktor and what he felt when he read it.

Grossman completed *Life and Fate* almost fifteen years after he first started work on *Stalingrad*. It is, amongst other things, a considered statement of his moral and political philosophy – a meditation on the nature of totalitarianism, the danger presented by even the most seemingly benign of ideologies, and the moral responsibility of each individual for his own actions. It is this philosophical depth that has led many readers to speak of the novel as having changed their lives. *Stalingrad*, in contrast, is less philosophical, but more immediate; it presents us with a richer, more varied human story.

Grossman worked as a front-line war correspondent throughout nearly all the four years of the Soviet–German war. He had a powerful memory and an unusual ability to get people from every walk of life to talk openly to him; he also had relatively free access, during the war years, to a wealth of military reports. His wartime notebooks include potted biographies of hundreds of individuals, scraps of dialogue, sudden insights and unexpected observations of all kinds. Much of this material found its way into *Stalingrad* and it endows the novel with great vitality and a certain democratic quality; Grossman writes with equal delicacy and respect about the experiences of a senior Red Army general, a newly recruited militiaman or a terrified housewife. And he devotes more space than other Soviet writers to the effects of the Battle of Stalingrad on the lives of dogs, cats, camels, rodents, birds, fish and insects in the surrounding steppe.

Few war correspondents can, in only a few years and without becoming desensitized, have experienced so many aspects of war. Grossman's extended analysis of the mood of a retreating army is subtle and penetrating. His evocation of the thoughts and feelings of the inhabitants of a large city subjected to a massive bombing raid is almost encyclopaedic. And the account of the defence of the Stalingrad railway station can stand comparison with the *Iliad*; Grossman's evocation of the inner life of young men who know they are certain to die within the next twenty-four hours is remarkably convincing.

Grossman is a master of character portrayal, with an unusual gift for conveying someone's feelings through some tiny but vivid detail. The quiet, modest Major Berozkin, for example, has lost touch with his wife and does not know if she is still alive. Grossman tell us that, on sitting down to an unusually lavish meal, Berozkin 'touched the tomatoes, hoping to find one that was fully ripe but not going soft. Then he felt embarrassed, thinking sadly how Tamara used to tell him off for doing exactly this. She didn't like him fingering the tomatoes or cucumbers on a shared dish.'

Grossman is equally deft in his shifts of perspective, moving between the microscopic and the epic and showing the same generous understanding towards his German characters as towards his Russians. One of his most interesting creations is Lieutenant Bach, an intellectual and former dissident now yielding to the seductions of Nazi ideology. A company commander in one of the first divisions to cross the Don, he feels he is taking part in a venture of epic grandeur: 'He rose to his full height and stamped his foot against the ground. He felt as if he were

kicking the sky [...] He could feel, it seemed, with his skin, with his whole body the furthest reaches of this alien land he had crossed.' A thousand pages later, in the last part of *Life and Fate*, Lieutenant Bach realizes he has been deluded. This, perhaps, will come as no surprise to the reader; what is astonishing is Grossman's ability to enable us to sense how easily we too might have been deluded.

Stalingrad is one of the great novels of the last century. If it has been overshadowed by its sequel, this is probably for two main reasons. First, we are still in thrall to Cold War thinking; people have been unable to conceive that a novel first published during Stalin's last years, when his dictatorship was at its most rigid, might deserve our attention. Eminent figures have been dismissive of *Stalingrad* and it has been easy to assume that there must be good reason for this. I too made this lazy assumption for many years and I am grateful to the historian Jochen Hellbeck for persuading me – albeit belatedly – to read the novel and judge for myself.

A second reason is that none of the published editions of *Stalingrad*, in Russian or any other language, do justice to Grossman's original vision of the novel. There are many bold, witty, vivid and perceptive passages in his early typescripts that have never been published and have probably only been read by a few dozen people. Grossman's editors – who, like all Soviet editors, also played the role of censors – required him to delete them and scholars have been slow to study and publish the wealth of material preserved in his archive. In this translation we have, wherever possible, restored these passages. It is an honour to be in a position to publish some of Grossman's finest writing for the first time. My hope is that this may allow readers to recognize the full breadth, humour and emotional generosity of another of Grossman's masterpieces.

2.

War and Peace has probably never been as widely read as in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. The authorities had every reason to promote the novel. Tolstoy was seen as a forerunner of Soviet socialist realism and the novel's implications for the outcome of the war were obviously positive.

War and Peace was broadcast at length on the radio. The two generals who played the most important roles in the defence of Stalingrad both spoke about how much Tolstoy meant to them; General Rodimtsev said he read the novel three times, and General Chuikov

said in a 1943 interview that Tolstoy's generals were the model by which he judged his own performance. According to the Soviet literary critic Lydia Ginzburg, civilians in blockaded Leningrad judged themselves in exactly the same way. The People's Commissariat for Education printed brochures with instructions on how to summarize *War and Peace* and explain the novel to soldiers.¹ In late August and early September 1941, Grossman's mother Yekaterina Savelievna used a French translation of *War and Peace* to teach French to the children of the doctor with whom she lived during her last weeks in the Berdichev ghetto, before being shot by the Nazis.² Grossman himself wrote, 'During the whole war, the only book that I read was *War and Peace*, which I read twice.'³ And Grossman's daughter Yekaterina Korotkova concludes a brief summary of her volume of memoirs with the words: 'I remember a letter of his from Stalingrad: "Bombers. Shelling. Hellish thunder. It's impossible to read." And then, unexpectedly: "It's impossible to read anything except *War and Peace*."' ⁴

The Soviet literary and political establishment wanted a Red Tolstoy to memorialize the war. A short article published by Grossman on 23 June 1945 testifies both to his determination to take on the challenge and to his awareness of the responsibility involved.

Grossman begins by evoking the atmosphere in an infantry-division command post during a hard-fought battle in 1944. The divisional commander is under pressure; his immediate superior is yelling at him down the field telephone and his subordinates are begging for support he is unable to offer. At one point, Grossman imagines himself in the commander's shoes, bearing such a weight of responsibility. 'Just then, as if reading my mind, the commander – who had seemed to have forgotten I was there – suddenly turned to me and smiled. Still smiling, he said with a certain *Schadenfreude*, "Well, I may be sweating now, but after the war it will be the writers' turn to sweat as they try to describe all this."' Grossman then returns to the present, late June 1945, only six weeks after the German surrender: 'And so, the time has now come for us writers to shoulder our responsibility. Do we understand the magnitude of this noble and far from simple task? Do we understand that it is we who, more resolutely than anyone, must now enter into battle against the forces of forgetfulness, against the slow and implacable flow of the river of time?' Grossman concludes: 'Are our labours worthy to stand beside the great literature of the past? Can they serve as an example to the future? Today we can only answer in the negative. And this makes it all the more painful when, in our literary milieu, we sometimes

encounter a certain boastful presumptuousness, a lazy, self-satisfied contentment with the paltry results of hurried and superficial work.²⁵

Structurally, the Stalingrad dilogy is clearly modelled on *War and Peace*, and Grossman directly refers to Tolstoy several times. It would have been unlike Grossman, however, to imagine he could simply copy his predecessor. His first step was to question him. Grossman visited Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana estate in autumn 1941 and the following paragraphs from *Stalingrad* convey his own thoughts and feelings, as recorded in his wartime notebooks. Here, as in several other chapters, Commissar Krymov is Grossman's mouthpiece.

The storm that had flung open every door in Russia, that had driven people out of their warm homes and onto black autumn roads, sparing neither peaceful city apartments, nor village huts, nor hamlets deep in the forest, had treated Lev Tolstoy's home no less harshly. It too was preparing to leave, in rain and snow, along with the entire country, the entire people. Yasnaya Polyana was a living, suffering Russian home – one of thousand upon thousand of such homes. With absolute clarity, Krymov saw in his mind Bald Hills and the old, sick prince. The present merged with the past; the events of today were one with what Tolstoy described with such truth and power that it had become the supreme reality of a war that ran its course 130 years ago.

[...] And then Tolstoy's granddaughter Sofya Andreyevna came out of the house, calm, downcast, shivering a little in spite of the coat thrown over her shoulders. Once again Krymov did not know whether this was Princess Maria, going out for a last walk around the garden before the French arrived, or whether it was Lev Tolstoy's elderly granddaughter scrupulously fulfilling the demands of her fate: applying all her heart and soul, as she prepared to leave, to checking the accuracy of her grandfather's account of the princess's earlier departure from this same house.

At this point Krymov seems to see little difference between the two wars. Later, however, he comes to understand that the atrocities of the Second World War were on a different scale from anything imagined by Tolstoy:

Krymov looked at the wounded who had fallen by the wayside, at their grim, tormented faces, and wondered if these men would ever enter the pages of books. This was not a sight for those who

wanted to clothe the war in fine robes. He remembered a nighttime conversation with an elderly soldier whose face he had been unable to see. They had been lying in a gully, with only a great-coat to cover them. The writers of future books had better avoid listening to conversations like that. It was all very well for Tolstoy – he wrote his great and splendid book decades after 1812, when the pain felt in every heart had faded and only what was wise and bright was remembered.

Grossman, of course, knew only too well how very different his position was from Tolstoy's. Tolstoy had relatively few problems with censors, whereas Grossman battled editors and censors throughout his career. Much of what he wrote in the 1930s was bowdlerized. And from 1943 to 1946, along with the poet, journalist and novelist Ilya Ehrenburg, he had worked for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee on *The Black Book*, a collection of eyewitness accounts of the Shoah on Soviet and Polish soil. A Soviet edition of *The Black Book* had been ready for production in 1946, but it was never published; the first Russian-language edition was published only in 1980, in Jerusalem. Admitting that Jews constituted the overwhelming majority of those shot at Babi Yar and elsewhere might have led people to realize that members of other Soviet nationalities had been accomplices in the genocide. In any case, Stalin had no wish to emphasize Jewish suffering; anti-Semitism was a force he could exploit in order to bolster support for his regime.

In late spring 1945 Grossman had taken over from Ehrenburg as head of the editorial board of *The Black Book*. Grossman's mother had been shot at Berdichev and he himself had written the first published account of the Treblinka death camp. What he must have felt when *The Black Book* was aborted is hard to imagine. That he continued doggedly working on *Stalingrad* – his other great post-war project – testifies to an extraordinary strength of character.

3.

It should come as no surprise that *Stalingrad* – written during the increasingly repressive and anti-Semitic last years of the Stalin regime – is haunted by the presence of what cannot be spoken about. During a meeting at Viktor Shtrum's institute, his colleague Maximov talks about his recent visit to German-occupied Czechoslovakia; he is appalled by what he has seen of the reality of fascism. The Nazi-Soviet

non-aggression pact is still in force, and so the institute director and a colleague try to silence him. In the early typescripts of *Stalingrad* Viktor then encourages Maximov to write an article about fascism; Viktor hopes, audaciously, to publish it in the institute bulletin. Maximov writes no less than eighty pages and brings them round to Viktor's dacha. But Hitler invaded the Soviet Union only a week later, and neither Viktor nor Grossman's readers ever get to see so much as a word of this article. Viktor and Maximov do not even manage to talk about fascism together, even though both desperately want to.

A still more important document we never read is the last letter Viktor Shtrum receives from his mother Anna Semyonovna. This is as powerful a presence in *Stalingrad* as in *Life and Fate*. We do not – in *Stalingrad* – get to read Anna's words, but we read *about* her letter again and again. Grossman describes each stage of the letter's journey from the Berdichev ghetto to Viktor's dacha. Altogether, the letter is passed from hand to hand seven times. There are moments of black humour along the way. At one point the Old Bolshevik Mostovskoy takes the letter to the Stalingrad apartment of Viktor Shtrum's mother-in-law Alexandra Vladimirovna. When he hands it to Tamara, the young friend of the family who opens the door to him, she responds, 'Heavens, what filthy paper – anyone would think it's been lying in a cellar for the last two years.' And she promptly wraps it up 'in a sheet of the thick pink paper people use to make decorations for Christmas trees'.

Tamara then gives the package to Colonel Novikov, who is about to fly to Moscow. Novikov goes to Viktor's apartment, where he happens to interrupt a romantic tête-à-tête between Viktor and a pretty young neighbour by the name of Nina. Viktor drops the package into his briefcase, then forgets about it. Twenty-four hours later, at his dacha, he momentarily mistakes it for a bar of chocolate – intended, at least in the early typescripts, as a present for this same Nina.

The morning after finally reading the letter Viktor looks at himself in the mirror, expecting 'to see a haggard face with trembling lips'. He is surprised to find that he looks much the same as he did the day before.

From then on Viktor carries the letter about with him wherever he goes, but he is unable to talk about it. He can hardly even talk about it to himself: 'Viktor reread the letter again and again. Each time he felt the same shock as at the dacha, as if he were reading it for the first time. Perhaps his memory was instinctively resisting, unwilling

and unable fully to take in something whose constant presence would make life unbearable.’

After the suppression of *The Black Book*, Grossman must have been well aware that he could not write freely about the events Viktor’s mother describes. It seems likely that, rather than toning her letter down to make it acceptable, he took a conscious decision simply to leave a blank space, to replace her letter by an explicit, audible silence. If so, this is a powerful example of Grossman’s unusual ability to make creative use of editorial interference.

On the surface, the Stalingrad dilogy has much in common with *War and Peace*. Both include general reflections on history, politics and philosophy. Both are divided between accounts of military and civilian life. The Stalingrad dilogy is structured around a single extended family much as *War and Peace* is structured around a group of families who become linked by marriage. There is, however, a fundamental difference. For all his appearance of being an omniscient and dispassionate narrator, Grossman’s dilogy is more personal than *War and Peace*. Grossman, unlike Tolstoy, lived through the war he describes. He felt profoundly guilty about having allowed his mother to stay in Berdichev rather than insisting that she join him and his wife in Moscow. Her death troubled him for the rest of his life and the last letter from Anna Semyonovna – who is clearly a portrait of Grossman’s mother – lies at the centre of *Stalingrad* like a deep hole. Or, in Viktor Shtrum’s words, ‘like an open grave’.

4.

Stalingrad is, amongst much else, an act of homage. One of Grossman’s aims was to honour the dead – especially those who had been forgotten. He writes of those who died in the many small battles of the war’s first months, ‘There were men who, recognizing they were hopelessly outnumbered, fought only the more fiercely. These are the heroes of the first period of the war. Many are nameless and received no burial. It is to them, in large part, that Russia owes her salvation.’ This may sound like orthodox Soviet rhetoric, but Grossman is, in fact, courting controversy. The brutality with which the Soviet authorities treated their own soldiers and their soldiers’ families is hard for a Western reader to comprehend. Most of the men Grossman calls heroes would have been officially classified as ‘missing’ rather than ‘killed in action’. If there were no witnesses to their death, they might – in the eyes of the authorities – simply have

been deserters. Their families, therefore, would have received no pension and would have lived under a shadow for the rest of their lives.

Grossman also remembers more famous figures. In particular, he pays homage to the biologist and plant breeder Nikolay Vavilov, one of the most important scientists to fall victim to Stalin's purges. With surprising straightforwardness – hiding him, perhaps, in plain sight – Grossman gives his name to one of his most appealing characters, the wise and heroic Pyotr Vavilov whom we see receiving his call-up papers and setting out for the war in one of the novel's first chapters. The similarities between the famous scientist and Grossman's peasant soldier are clear, though they seem to have gone unnoticed. The cultural historian Rachel Polonsky writes of Nikolay Vavilov, 'He wanted [...] to improve the quality of grain, make better harvests, feed the Soviet people. [...] He believed in global research; he wanted to understand the plant world of the whole planet, the cultivation and migration of grain varieties – rye, wheat, rice and flax.'⁶ Another historian writes, 'Vavilov was one of the first scientists to really listen to farmers – traditional farmers, peasant farmers around the world – and why they felt seed diversity was important in their fields.'⁷ And Grossman says of his peasant soldier, 'Vavilov thought of the terrestrial globe as a single vast field that it was the people's responsibility to plough and sow [...] [He] would ask people about their lives in peacetime: "What's your land like? Does your wheat grow well? Are there droughts? And millet – do you sow millet? Do you get enough potatoes?"'

Later, in *Life and Fate*, Viktor Shtrum laments 'dozens of people who had left and never returned'; among them is Nikolay Vavilov. In *Stalingrad*, Grossman has to write more obliquely. Nevertheless, he takes pains to draw our attention to the significance of the name Vavilov. Soon after he has begun his training, one of Pyotr Vavilov's fellow soldiers asks him if he is related to yet another Vavilov, a regimental commissar. Pyotr replies that he just happens to have the same surname. The function of this seemingly rather pointless exchange is, of course, to summon up the memory of the murdered scientist.

Another of Grossman's allusions to Nikolay Vavilov is more complex. The manager of a prestigious Moscow hotel is proud that famous scientists have visited his hotel and he even remembers which room each stayed in, but he gets oddly confused when he mentions Vavilov, failing to remember that he was a biologist. Vavilov's ambition was to end world hunger, but in 1943 he died in prison of starvation. It is no wonder that the hotel manager gets confused – as if there is something

he is unable to take in, or that he half-realizes it might be best not to remember.

Nikolay Vavilov remained well known; it was impossible for the authorities to erase his memory. There is another historical figure, however, of still greater importance to the Stalingrad dilogy, who has emerged from oblivion only recently. The German–Ukrainian scholar Tatiana Dettmer has established that Viktor Shtrum, Grossman’s fictional nuclear physicist, is modelled on a real-life figure – Lev Yakovlevich Shtrum, one of the founders of Soviet nuclear physics. Lev Shtrum was born in 1890 and executed in 1936; like many of the victims of Stalin’s purges, he was accused of ‘Trotskyism’. After his death, his books and papers were removed from libraries and he was deleted from the historical record.

During the years Grossman lived and studied in Kiev (1914–19 and 1921–3), Lev Shtrum taught physics and mathematics at several Kiev educational institutes. Eventually he became the head of the Kiev University Department of Theoretical Physics. Historians of science have been surprisingly slow to resurrect such figures and it was only in 2012 that a group of Ukrainian and Russian scholars published an article about Lev Shtrum, drawing attention to a theory he formulated in the 1920s about particles moving at speeds faster than that of light. Until then, it had been believed that such particles were first hypothesized only in 1962.

Grossman calls our attention to the name Shtrum, much as he calls our attention to the name Vavilov. During a visit to Moscow, Colonel Novikov telephones a friend with whom he is staying. The friend, Colonel Ivanov, says there is a postcard for him. Novikov asks him to look at the signature and say who it is from. After a brief silence, ‘clearly struggling to decipher the handwriting’, Ivanov replies, ‘Shturm, or maybe Shtrom, I’m not quite sure.’ And in a memorable passage of *Life and Fate*,⁸ Viktor Shtrum ponders a long, intimidating questionnaire: ‘1. Surname, name and patronymic ... Who was he, who was this man filling in a questionnaire at the dead of night? Shtrum, Viktor Pavlovich? His mother and father had [...] separated when Viktor was only two; and on his father’s papers he had seen the name Pinkhus – not Pavel. So why was he Viktor Pavlovich? Did he know himself? Perhaps he was someone quite different – Goldman ... or Sagaydachny?’ Sagaydachny (the name both of a seventeenth-century Cossack hetman and of an artist living in Kiev in the early 1920s) may be little more than a random name, but Alexander Goldman was another professor of physics, working in Kiev in the 1920s and 1930s. He was Lev Shtrum’s

supervisor and he taught at the institute where Grossman studied from 1921 to 1923.

Goldman was arrested in 1938, two years after Lev Shtrum. Unlike Lev Shtrum, however, he survived and was able to return to physics after the war. In Tatiana Dettmer's words, 'If we assume that Grossman knew the eventual fates of Lev Shtrum and Goldman, then Viktor's words in the novel about whether he was Shtrum, rather than Goldman, take on a deeper significance. Both Goldman and Lev Shtrum were victims of Stalin's Terror. Goldman, however, survived, while Lev Shtrum did not – except in so far as he is resurrected in the pages of Grossman's novel.'

There are many parallels between the lives of the fictional Shtrum and the historical Shtrum. Both were nuclear physicists with a particular interest in Relativity; both were also concerned with broader social and political questions. Like Viktor Shtrum, Lev Shtrum had two children – a son (called Viktor!) from his first marriage and a daughter from his second marriage. Lev Shtrum would have certainly known most of the physicists whom Viktor Shtrum meets or thinks about in the pages of *Life and Fate*.⁹ And the conflicts Grossman describes in Viktor's Physics Institute – the demotion of important scientists and laboratory workers and the promotion of less talented but more servile figures – seem to be closely modelled on real conflicts in the Moscow University Physics Faculty in 1944.

We know that Grossman himself was deeply interested in physics from his teenage years to his death. In a letter to his father he wrote, 'From when I was fourteen to when I was twenty [i.e. when he was living and studying in Kiev], I was a passionate devotee of the exact sciences and was not interested in anything else.'¹⁰ Grossman's wartime notebooks include a diagram of a chain reaction.¹¹ Like Lev Shtrum, Grossman passionately admired Einstein; an illustration in John and Carol Garrard's biography of Grossman shows two photographs of Einstein on a bookshelf in his study. Similarly, one of the few surviving photographs of Lev Shtrum shows him in *his* study, where there is one photograph of Einstein and one of Max Planck.

Two of Grossman's school friends, Lev and Grigory Levin, were cousins of Lev Shtrum. And in a letter to his father in 1929, Grossman mentions visiting Lev Shtrum and borrowing money from him – which suggests that he knew Lev Shtrum very well. There is, as yet, no incontrovertible documentary evidence for this, but it is highly probable that, when Grossman was still living and studying in Kiev, Lev

Shtrum was one of his teachers. This vivid passage from *Stalingrad*, an account of lectures given by Viktor Shtrum's mentor Chepyzhin, may well be Grossman's evocation of lectures that he himself was inspired by: 'These formulae seemed full of human content; they could have been passionate declarations of faith, doubt or love. Chepyzhin reinforced this impression by scattering question marks, ellipses and triumphant exclamation marks over the board. It was painful, when the lecture was over, to watch the attendant rub out all these radicals, integrals, differentials and trigonometric signs, all these alphas, deltas, epsilons and thetas that human will and intelligence had marshalled into a single united regiment. Like a valuable manuscript, this blackboard should surely have been preserved for posterity.' If Grossman did indeed have Lev Shtrum in mind, this last sentence is all the more poignant; Grossman *has* preserved this blackboard for posterity.

Grossman bestowed on the central figure of his dilogy the name, the profession, the family, the interests and even the friends of an 'enemy of the people'. Grossman was anything but naive; he would have known the danger to which he was exposing himself and his novel. One can only conclude that Lev Shtrum must have been a figure of extraordinary importance to him, that he must have felt deeply indebted to him.¹²

5.

In the aftermath of the war, Grossman may have hoped that his novel would play a healing, conciliatory role. Bitter arguments had erupted as to whether it was the Soviet infantry or the Soviet artillery that saved Stalingrad. Grossman goes to some length to establish that neither could have achieved anything without the other.

Grossman takes a similarly balanced line with regard to a more important and still unresolved question. He insists that the Red Army's absolute determination not to retreat any further arose spontaneously among the rank-and-file soldiers *at the same time* as Stalin issued his draconian 'Not One Step Back' Order of 28 July 1942. Grossman sees the soldiers' courage and patriotism as genuine; he would certainly not agree with those Western historians who have suggested that they fought with such desperation simply because they were terrified of being shot by the Soviet security police if they were seen to desert. But Grossman also sees Stalin's Order as crucial; he sees Stalin as giving voice to the soldiers' patriotism and so reinforcing it.

In other respects, however, Grossman is more challenging. His most sustained argument in *Stalingrad* is with Maxim Gorky. In 1932, Grossman was struggling to publish his first novel, *Glückauf*, set in a mining community in the Donbass; an editor had recently told him that some aspects of the novel were ‘counter-revolutionary’. Gorky was, at the time, the most influential figure in the Soviet literary establishment, and Grossman tried to enlist his support. In his first letter to Gorky, Grossman wrote, ‘I described what I saw while living and working for three years at mine Smolyanka-11. I wrote the truth. It may be a harsh truth. But the truth can never be counter-revolutionary.’ Gorky replied at length, clearly recognizing Grossman’s gifts but criticizing him with regard to his attitude to truth: ‘It is not enough to say, “I wrote the truth.” The author should ask himself two questions: “First, which truth? And second, why?” We know that there are two truths and that, in our world, it is the vile and dirty truth of the past that quantitatively preponderates. But this truth is being replaced by another truth that has been born and continues to grow [...] The author sees the truth of the past quite well, but he doesn’t have a very clear understanding of what to do with it. The author truthfully depicts the obtuseness of coal miners, their brawls and drunkenness, all that predominates in his – the author’s – field of vision. This is, of course, truth – but it is a disgusting and tormenting truth. It is a truth we must struggle against and mercilessly extirpate.’¹³

In *Stalingrad*, Marusya – a candidate member of the Communist Party – comes out with precisely the same thoughts while arguing with her younger sister Zhenya, who is an artist: ‘Instead of strange daubs no one can understand, you should paint posters. But I know what you’ll say next. You’ll start going on about truth to life ... How many times do I have to tell you that there are two truths? There’s the truth of the reality forced on us by the accursed past. And there’s the truth of the reality that will defeat that past. It’s this second truth, the truth of the future, that *I* want to live by.’ At this point, Sofya Osipovna, a surgeon and friend of the family, intervenes. ‘No, Marusya [...] You’re wrong. I can tell you as a surgeon that there is one truth, not two. When I cut someone’s leg off, I don’t know two truths. If we start playing at two truths, we’re in trouble. And in war too – above all, when things are as bad as they are today – there is only one truth. It’s a bitter truth, but it’s a truth that can save us. If the Germans enter Stalingrad, you’ll learn that if you chase after two truths, you won’t catch either. It’ll be the end of you.’

Despite his earlier criticisms, Gorky evidently played a central role in orchestrating Grossman's remarkably successful literary debut in 1934.¹⁴ Like Lev Shtrum, he is a mentor to whom Grossman felt deeply indebted. Unlike Lev Shtrum, however, Gorky is a very ambiguous figure. In the aftermath of the Revolution his publishing projects rescued many writers from starvation, yet from 1928 until his death in 1936 he was complicit in the most brutal aspects of Stalinism. It is possible that Grossman's awareness of his debt to Gorky made him all the more determined to continue to write truthfully himself – not, like Gorky, to be seduced by the privileges that accompany power and success. David Ortenberg, the editor of *Red Star*, the main Soviet army newspaper, remembers arguing with Grossman about whether or not it was really necessary for the hero of one of his works to die. Grossman replied, 'We have to follow the ruthless truth of war.'¹⁵

6.

The Soviet regime needed a Soviet Tolstoy. After 1945, however, Stalin also needed a new, preferably internal, enemy to help justify his dictatorship. The choice of enemy was simple enough; anti-Semitism had always been widespread in Russia and Ukraine. Grossman – both a Jew and a candidate for the role of the new Tolstoy – was positioned on a dangerous fault line.¹⁶

The question of who to choose as the Soviet Tolstoy was, in any case, fraught. There had always been rivalry between the Soviet Writers' Union and the Agit-Prop Department (the Department of Agitation and Propaganda) of the Communist Party's Central Committee. In this instance the Agit-Prop Department was backing the now-forgotten novelist Mikhail Bubyonov, while Alexander Fadeyev (chairman of the Writers' Union) and Alexander Tvardovsky (chief editor of the journal *Novy Mir*) were backing Grossman. For all their political acumen, Fadeyev and Tvardovsky evidently underestimated how fiercely the anti-Jewish campaign would intensify. They began publishing *For a Just Cause* during the very month – July 1952 – when most of the leading members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were undergoing secret trial, before their execution in August.

Initial reviews of *For a Just Cause* were enthusiastic and on 13 October 1952 the Prose Section of the Soviet Writers' Union nominated the novel for a Stalin Prize.¹⁷ On 13 January 1953, however, an article appeared in *Pravda* titled 'Vicious Spies and Killers Passing Themselves

off as Doctors and Professors'. A group of the country's most eminent doctors – most of them Jewish – had allegedly been plotting to poison Stalin and other members of the political and military leadership. These ludicrous accusations were intended to serve as a prelude to a more general purge of Soviet Jews.

A month later, on 13 February, Bubyonov published a denunciatory review of *For a Just Cause*. A campaign against Grossman swiftly gathered momentum. Major newspapers printed articles with such titles as 'A Novel that Distorts the Image of Soviet People', 'On a False Path' and 'In a Distorting Mirror'. In response, Tvardovsky and the *Novy Mir* editorial board as a whole duly acknowledged that publication of the novel had been a grave mistake.

Soon after this Grossman committed an act of betrayal that troubled him for the rest of his life: he agreed to sign a letter calling for the execution of the 'Killer Doctors'. He may have thought – perhaps not unreasonably – that the doctors were certain to be executed anyway and that the letter was worth signing because it affirmed that the Jewish people *as a whole* were innocent. Whatever his reasons, Grossman at once regretted what he had done. A passage in *Life and Fate* based on this incident ends with Viktor Shtrum (who has just signed a similar letter) praying to his dead mother to help him never to show such weakness again.

Grossman's act of betrayal did nothing to ease his position. The campaign against him intensified. Mikhail Sholokhov, the most eminent Soviet writer of the time, had previously expressed admiration for *Stalingrad*.¹⁸ Now, however, he allowed Bubyonov to quote him at an important meeting as saying, 'Grossman's novel is spittle in the face of the Russian people.'¹⁹ Fadeyev published an article full of what Grossman described as 'mercilessly severe political accusations'. *Voenizdat*, the military publishing house that had agreed to publish *For a Just Cause* in book form, asked Grossman to return his advance – in view of what Grossman caustically referred to as 'the book's now unexpectedly discovered anti-Soviet essence'.²⁰ Fortunately for Grossman, Stalin died on 5 March 1953. But for this, he too – like many other writers with links to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee – might well have been executed.

Denunciations of Grossman and his novel continued for another few weeks, but then the campaign petered out. In mid-June *Voenizdat*, with Fadeyev's encouragement, repeated their original offer to publish *For a Just Cause*. Grossman had clearly known very well, from

the beginning, how difficult it would be to publish the novel and he recorded all relevant official conversations, letters and meetings in a fifteen-page document titled ‘Diary of the Journey of the Manuscript of the Novel *For a Just Cause* through Publishing Houses’. The final, laconic entry in this diary reads ‘26 October 1954. The book is on sale on the Arbat, in the shop “The Military Book”.’

7.

Almost every step of Grossman’s career – even after his death – has been marked by long delays and protracted battles. Editors, scholars and literary critics seem to have responded to the painful and intractable nature of much of Grossman’s subject matter with an equal intractability of their own. A Russian edition of *Everything Flows* was published in Frankfurt in 1970; a first English translation was published in 1972. Both attracted little attention – though *Everything Flows* is one of Grossman’s finest works, remarkable, above all, for its searing account of the Terror Famine in Ukraine in 1933 and its bold reinterpretation of several centuries of Russian history.

Life and Fate is now well known, but it too was slow to reach the reader. Even after the satirist Vladimir Voinovich had smuggled a microfilmed text to the West, it took almost five years to find a publisher for the first Russian-language edition – mainly, it seems, because of personal and political rivalries among Russian émigrés. Grossman’s friends and admirers were bewildered and shocked. In 1961, after what he always referred to as the ‘arrest’ of *Life and Fate*, Grossman said it was as if he had been ‘strangled in a dark corner’. Dismayed at being unable to find a publisher in the late 1970s, Voinovich said it was as if Grossman were being strangled a second time.

In 1980, however, the Russian text of *Life and Fate* was finally published, by L’Age d’Homme in Lausanne. At a conference in 2003 in Turin, Vladimir Dimitrijevic, the editor who accepted the novel, said he had sensed at once that Grossman was portraying ‘a world in three dimensions’ and that he was one of those rare writers whose aim was ‘not to prove something but to make people live something’. He could equally well have said this of *Stalingrad*.

The microfilms of *Life and Fate* were made from a copy of the typescript that Grossman had entrusted to the poet Semyon Lipkin and which Lipkin had kept in his dacha near Moscow. There is a curious parallel between the slow, faltering journey made by the text of *Life*

and Fate, from a dacha near Moscow to a Swiss publishing house, and the journey made in *Stalingrad* by Anna Semyonovna's letter, from the Berdichev ghetto to a dacha near Moscow. In each case there were delays and misunderstandings, and a strange lack of interest – at least initially – when the document first reached its destination. Even after the first publication of translations of *Life and Fate* in the mid-1980s, Grossman's international reputation grew only slowly.

Grossman is now seen as one of the greatest novelists of the last century – and Anna Semyonovna's letter is probably the best-known chapter in his entire *oeuvre*. Nevertheless, there is still much about Grossman and his work that we do not know. Few of his works are available – even in Russian – in definitive texts. His first novel, *Glückauf* (1934), is generally considered dull and has never been republished. It is entirely possible, however, that Grossman's original manuscript is more interesting than the published text. We know that the novel was heavily censored and that this appalled Grossman, yet no one – as far as I know – has seriously studied the manuscript.

Even more surprisingly, there is still no definitive Russian text of *Life and Fate*. In 2013, to much fanfare, the Russian security services released the typescripts confiscated by the KGB in 1961. These typescripts, too, have hardly been studied.

I hope one day to revise my translation of *Life and Fate* in the light of a definitive Russian text. For now, though, it is a joy to be able to bring out a version of *Stalingrad* that is more complete than any existing edition, in Russian or in any other language. This version is by no means definitive, but it includes a great deal of important material, from the earliest and boldest of Grossman's typescripts, that has never before been published.

Robert Chandler
London, 2018

PART I



On 29 April 1942 Benito Mussolini's train pulled into Salzburg station, now hung with both Italian and German flags.

After the official welcome in the station building, Mussolini and his entourage were driven to Schloss Klessheim, former summer residence of the archbishops of Salzburg.

There, in huge chilly halls newly refurnished with loot from France, Hitler and Mussolini were to hold another of their meetings – along with Ribbentrop, Marshal Keitel, General Jodl, Galeazzo Ciano, Marshal Cavallero, Dino Alfieri the Italian ambassador in Berlin, and other senior German and Italian officers, diplomats and politicians.

The two dictators, the self-styled masters of Europe, had met each time Hitler was preparing some new human catastrophe. Their tête-à-tête meetings, on the border between the Austrian and Italian Alps, heralded major political developments and the movements of vast motorized armies. The brief newspaper bulletins about these meetings filled every heart with foreboding.

Fascism had enjoyed seven years of triumph, in Africa as well as in Europe, and both dictators would probably have found it difficult to list the many major and minor victories thanks to which they now ruled over vast expanses of territory and hundreds of millions of people. Without bloodshed, Hitler had reoccupied the Rhineland and then annexed Austria and the Sudetenland. In 1939 he had invaded Poland and routed the armies of Marshal Rydz-Śmigły. In 1940 he had defeated France, avenging Germany's defeat in the First World War; he had also occupied Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands, and crushed Denmark and Norway. He had expelled Britain from the European mainland, driving her troops out of both Norway and France. In the first months of 1941, Hitler had defeated both Greece and Yugoslavia. Measured against these extraordinary successes, Mussolini's brigandry in Albania and Abyssinia looked petty and provincial.

The fascist empires had further extended their power in Africa, seizing Algeria, Tunisia and ports on the Atlantic Ocean. To the east, they threatened Cairo and Alexandria.

Japan, Hungary, Romania and Finland were all in military alliance with Germany and Italy. Powerful elements in the ruling circles of Spain, Portugal, Turkey and Bulgaria were also complicit in fascism.

In the ten months since Germany had first invaded the Soviet Union, Hitler's forces had seized not only Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania but also Belorussia, Moldavia and Ukraine. They were in control of all the provinces of Pskov, Smolensk, Oryol and Kursk, and large parts of the provinces of Leningrad, Kalinin, Tula and Voronezh.

The military-industrial machine created by Hitler had absorbed vast riches: French steelworks, French engineering and car factories, the iron mines of Lorraine, Belgian coal mines and steel furnaces, Dutch precision mechanics and radio factories, Austrian metalworking companies, the Skoda arms manufacturer in Czechoslovakia, the Romanian oil industry, Norwegian iron mines, Spanish tungsten and mercury mines, and the textile factories of Łódź. And all over occupied Europe the long drive belt of the 'new order' was spinning the wheels of hundreds of thousands of smaller businesses of every kind.

In twenty countries, mills were grinding barley and wheat, and ploughs turning over fields, for the fascist occupiers. In three oceans and five seas fishermen were catching fish to supply fascist cities. Hydraulic presses were at work in plantations throughout Europe and northern Africa, pressing grape juice, olive oil, and flax and sunflower oil. A fine harvest was ripening on the branches of millions of apple, plum, orange and lemon trees; fruit already ripe was being packed into wooden crates stamped with a black eagle. The Reich's iron fingers were milking Danish, Dutch and Polish cattle, shearing sheep in Hungary and the Balkans.

Dominion over vast areas of Europe and Africa appeared to be strengthening the power of fascism with every year, every day, every hour.

With sickening servility, those who had betrayed freedom, goodness and truth were predicting the defeat of all Hitler's opponents and proclaiming Hitlerism to be a truly new and higher order.

The new order established by Hitler throughout conquered Europe had seen the modernization and renewal of all the methods and techniques of violence that had arisen in the course of thousands of years of the rule of the few over the many.

This meeting in Salzburg heralded a major German offensive in southern Russia.

Hitler and Mussolini began their meeting in their usual way, displaying all the gold and enamel of their false teeth in broad, friendly smiles and saying how delighted they were that circumstances once again allowed them to meet.

Mussolini at once thought that the past winter and the cruel defeat outside Moscow had left their mark on Hitler. There was more grey in his hair, and not just at his temples. The dark rings under his eyes had become more pronounced and his general complexion was pale and unhealthy; only his trench coat still looked fresh. All in all, the Führer looked grimmer and harsher than ever.

Hitler for his part thought that in another five or six years the Duce would be looking wholly decrepit. His short legs would grow still shorter, his heavy jaw still heavier and his old man's belly would protrude still further. There was a terrible mismatch between his dwarf's body and his huge chin, face and forehead. His intelligent dark eyes, however, remained cruel and penetrating.

The Führer, still smiling, complimented the Duce, saying he looked younger than ever. The Duce, in turn, complimented the Führer; he could see at once that he was in excellent health and good spirits.

They began to talk about the winter campaign. Mussolini, rubbing his hands, as if the mere thought of the Moscow winter had been enough to chill them, congratulated Hitler on his victory over the Russian snow and ice, over those three great Russian generals: December, January and February. His voice was solemn; he had clearly prepared his words in advance, just as he had prepared his fixed smile.

They agreed that, despite the losses of both men and equipment during what, even by Russian standards, had proved an unprecedentedly severe winter, the German divisions had suffered no repeat of Napoleon's experience at Berezina; the invader of 1941 was evidently a superior strategist to the invader of 1812.²¹ The two leaders went on to discuss the overall outlook.

Now that winter was over, there was nothing that could save Russia – the only remaining enemy of the new order on the European continent.

The impending offensive would bring the Soviets to their knees; it would cut off the supply of oil to factories in the Urals and would leave Soviet agriculture, the Soviet air force and the Red Army without fuel. It would bring about the fall of Moscow. Soon after the defeat of Russia, the British would capitulate too, overwhelmed by air raids and submarine warfare. The United States would do little to help them. General Motors, US Steel and Standard Oil had no wish to increase production. On the contrary, it was in their interests to limit production and so be in a position to increase prices. It was the same with every other company producing steel, magnesium, artificial rubber, aircraft and engines for military vehicles. And Churchill, in any case, hated his Russian ally more than his German enemy; in his senile mind he no longer understood who he was fighting. Neither Hitler nor Mussolini had anything to say about Roosevelt, that 'absurd paralytic'. They did, however, have something to say about the situation in France – and their views were identical. Although Hitler had recently reorganized the Vichy cabinet, anti-German sentiment was intensifying and there was the possibility of French treachery. But this was no cause for alarm: once Germany had its hands free in the east, it would be able to establish peace and order in the rest of Europe.

Hitler said with a little smile that he would, in any case, soon recall Heydrich from Czechoslovakia and send him to France to restore order there.²² He then turned to African matters. Without a hint of reproach, he listed the various units comprising Rommel's now reinforced Afrika Korps, sent to support the Italians.²³ Mussolini understood that Hitler was clearing the ground, that he was about to move on to the main topic of their meeting – the impending offensive in Russia – but that he had felt obliged first to emphasize his readiness to support the Italians in Africa.

And Hitler did indeed soon begin to talk about Russia and the coming offensive. What he did not say – and evidently preferred not to admit even to himself – was that the hard battles and cruel losses of the previous winter had made it impossible for the German army to conduct a simultaneous offensive along all three axes: in the south, in the north and in the centre. Hitler believed his plans for a southern campaign to be the product of his own free will; he still thought that he and he alone was determining the course of events.

He told Mussolini that the Soviets had suffered huge losses. They no longer received supplies of Ukrainian wheat. Leningrad was under continuous artillery bombardment. The Baltic States had been wrested from Russia's grasp once and for all. German armies had already advanced far beyond the Dnieper. The coal mines, the

chemical and metal-processing plants of the Donbass were in the hands of the Fatherland. German fighters now flew over Moscow. The Soviet Union had lost Belorussia, most of Crimea, and many provinces in the heart of the country that had been part of Russia for a thousand years. Russia had been driven from such ancient cities as Smolensk, Pskov, Oryol, Kursk, Vyazma and Rzhev. All that remained – Hitler continued – was to deliver the final blow. But if it were truly to be a final blow, then it must be delivered with fantastic strength. The generals in the strategy department thought it would be a mistake to advance simultaneously on both Stalingrad and the Caucasus. But he himself thought otherwise: if, during the previous year, he had had the strength to wage war in Africa, to pound Britain from the air, to paralyse American shipping with his submarine fleet and at the same time to advance swiftly into the heart of Russia along the whole of a 3,000-kilometre front, why should he hesitate today? Why should he hesitate when the supine weakness of Britain and America freed him to concentrate such vast power against a single section of a single front? The new offensive had to be overwhelming. Once again, Hitler would redeploy large forces from France, Belgium and the Netherlands, leaving only the divisions required to patrol the Atlantic and North Sea coasts. The troops transferred to the east would be regrouped; the Northern, North-western and Western Army Groups would be playing a passive role – the force of the impact was to be concentrated in the south-east.

Never, perhaps, had so much artillery, so many tank and infantry divisions, so many bomber and fighter aircraft been brought together. This seemingly limited offensive would acquire universal significance. It was the final, definitive stage of the advance of National Socialism. It would determine for ever the fate not only of Europe but of the world. The Italian army, therefore, should play a worthy role in the offensive. And not only the Italian army, but also Italian industry, Italian agriculture and the whole Italian people.

Mussolini was well aware that these amicable meetings were always accompanied by considerable material demands. Hitler's last sentences meant the despatch to the Eastern front of hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers, a sharp increase in the Wehrmacht's requirement for Italian grains and other foods, and additional forced recruitment of Italian workers for German companies.

After their tête-à-tête, Hitler followed Mussolini out of the room and walked beside him through the large hall. Mussolini glanced with

a pang of envy at the German sentries. Their shoulders and uniforms seemed cast from steel – though their eyes took on a look of ecstatic tension as the Führer walked past. Somehow the splendid colours of the Italian army paled before the grey of these sentries' uniforms and of Hitler's trench coat – a dull monotone grey, similar to that of military vehicles or the hull of a battleship, that appeared to embody the power of the German army. Was this self-assured commander-in-chief really the same man as the awkward figure who, during their first meeting in Venice eight years ago, had made the crowd laugh as he stumbled during a parade of the Guardia and Carabinieri? Wearing a white raincoat, old shoes and a crumpled black hat, the Führer had looked like some provincial actor or painter – while the Duce himself had worn an officer's cloak, a plumed helmet and the silver-embroidered uniform of a Roman general.

Hitler's power and success never ceased to astonish Mussolini. There was something unreal, something that didn't make sense, about the triumph of this Bohemian psychopath. In his heart of hearts Mussolini saw Hitler's success as a bizarre freak, an aberration on the part of world history.

That evening Mussolini talked for a few minutes with his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano. The two men had gone out for a short walk in the charming garden – it was, after all, possible that their friend and ally might have installed secret Siemens microphones in the rooms of the schloss. Mussolini expressed his irritation: once again, he had had no choice but to comply with Hitler. It was events in the godforsaken Don or Kalmyk steppes – rather than in the Mediterranean or in North Africa – that would now determine his own success or failure in establishing the Great Italian Empire. Ciano asked about the Führer's health. Mussolini replied that he seemed strong, though somewhat exhausted – and, as always, had been unbelievably verbose.

Ciano said that Ribbentrop had been courteous and solicitous, to the point of seeming almost unsure of himself. Mussolini replied that the war's final outcome would soon be decided; everything would be clear by the end of the summer.

'I fear,' said Ciano, 'that any failure of the Führer's will be our failure too. But whether or not we will share in any final and definitive success of the Führer's is another matter. I have my doubts, and have done for some time.'

Mussolini said he considered such scepticism unjustified. He then retired to his room.

On 30 April, after breakfast, Hitler and Mussolini met for a second time, in the presence of generals, field marshals and both countries' ministers of foreign affairs. Hitler was in an excited state. Without so much as a glance at the papers in front of him, he cited details about the deployment of German divisions and statistics showing the power of German industry. He spoke for an hour and forty minutes without a pause, occasionally licking his lips with his large tongue, as if his own words tasted sweet to him. He touched on a huge variety of questions: *Krieg, Frieden, Weltgeschichte, Religion, Politik, Philosophie, deutsche Seele* ...²⁴ He spoke quickly and forcefully, but calmly, seldom raising his voice. He smiled only once, his face twitching as he said, 'Soon the laughter of Jews will fall silent forever.' He raised his fist for a moment but quickly unclenched it and let his hand drop to the table. Mussolini frowned; the Führer's rages scared him.

Hitler moved several times to questions about life after the war. Expecting a successful summer offensive to put a quick end to the war on the European mainland, he was devoting much thought to questions about the peace that would follow: to questions about social laws and the position of religion – and about the National Socialist science and art that would at last be free to develop in a new, purified Europe, now purged of Communists, Democrats and Jews.

And it was indeed time to consider such matters. In September or October, when the final collapse of Soviet Russia marked the beginning of a new era of peace, when the last blaze was extinguished and the dust of the last battle in Russian history had settled, there would be countless questions demanding urgent resolution: about the peacetime organization of German life, about the administrative divisions and political status of the defeated countries, about restrictions to be placed on the legal rights and entitlement to education of inferior nations, about breeding and reproduction control, about the transfer of human masses from the former Soviet Union to carry out restoration and reconstruction work in the Fatherland and the organization of long-term camps for these masses, about the dismantling and liquidation of industrial units in Moscow, Leningrad and the Urals, and even such minor but inescapable tasks as the renaming of Russian and French cities.

There was one peculiarity about the Führer's manner of speech: he seemed hardly to care whether or not people were listening to him. He spoke with relish, as if taking pleasure in moving his large lips, his gaze directed at some point between the ceiling and the top of the white satin drapes hanging over the dark oak doors. Now and then he would

come out with a resonant sentence: ‘The Aryan is the Prometheus of mankind’; ‘Violence is the mother of order and the source of all true greatness – I have restored to violence its true meaning’; ‘We have now established the eternal dominion of the Aryan Prometheus over all human and other earthly beings.’

He would say these things with a radiant look, gasping excitedly, almost convulsively.

Mussolini frowned. He made a quick movement of his head, looking to one side, as if trying to see his own ear. He twice looked anxiously at his wristwatch – he too liked to have his say. During these meetings it was always the younger man, the disciple, who played the leading role; the Duce’s only consolation lay in his awareness of the superiority of his own intelligence, but this made it all the more painful to have to remain silent for long periods. He was constantly aware that Ribbentrop was watching him; the look in the German diplomat’s eyes was friendly and respectful, but also penetrating. Sitting next to Ribbentrop was Ciano. He was leaning back in his armchair and watching the Führer’s lips: might he say something about the North African colonies and the future Franco-Italian frontier? On this occasion, however, the Führer did not descend to such details. Alfieri, who had heard Hitler speak more often than most Italians, was looking up at the same spot as the Führer – just above the top of the white drapes, with an expression of quiet submissiveness. General Jodl, sitting on a distant couch, was dozing, while somehow maintaining a look of delicate attentiveness. Marshal Keitel – who was sitting directly opposite Hitler and so could not afford to fall asleep – kept throwing back his massive head, adjusting his monocle and, without looking at anyone, scowling morosely. Marshal Cavallero seemed to be drinking in every word Hitler said. He was craning his neck, his head cocked a little to one side, and listening with an expression of obsequious joy. From time to time he gave a quick nod.

To all those who had already attended one of these occasions, this meeting in Salzburg seemed in no way exceptional.

As during previous meetings, the main topic of discussion was European politics and the progress of the war. And the Führer and the Duce behaved the same as always: those close to them were well aware of each man’s attitude – by now only too settled and fixed – towards the other. They knew that Mussolini felt he was now the subordinate partner and that he resented this. It upset him that new initiatives and decisions always came from Berlin, rather than from Rome. It upset him never to be asked in advance for his thoughts about the joint

declarations he was so solemnly and respectfully asked to sign. It upset him to be woken just before dawn, when he was soundly asleep, by telephone calls from the Führer, whose attitude towards the patriarch of fascism seemed surprisingly casual.

Galeazzo Ciano also understood that Mussolini looked down on Hitler. It comforted him to consider the Führer a fool. The Führer's power derived merely from numbers, from statistical superiority: German industry and the German army were bigger than Italian industry and the Italian army. Mussolini's strength, on the other hand, came from Mussolini himself. The Duce even enjoyed making fun of Italian weakness and pusillanimity; these qualities set off all the more clearly the personal power of a leader who was fighting to make a hammer out of a people who for sixteen centuries had played the role of an anvil.

The members of the two leaders' entourages, alert to their masters' every look and gesture, noted that nothing had changed between the Führer and the Duce; both superficially and at a deeper level, their relations were the same as during previous meetings. The external surroundings appeared equally similar: Schloss Klessheim, like other buildings where the leaders had met, was endowed with a severe grandeur appropriate to the protagonists' extraordinary power and military might. Hitler's speeches, admittedly, differed in one small respect: here in Salzburg he was talking for the first time about a final, decisive military operation. Apart from Soviet armies that had already retreated a huge distance, Hitler now had no armed adversary on the European mainland. This difference might have been noted by some future National Socialist historian. This historian might also have noted that Hitler seemed more self-confident than ever.

Nevertheless, there was a difference of far greater significance. The Führer had always been eager for war; he had always been intoxicated by war. In Salzburg, however, he spoke insistently and with remarkable confidence about peace, so betraying an unconscious fear of the war he had himself unleashed. For six years Hitler, through a combination of satanic violence and astute bluffing, had won victory after victory. He had been certain that the only real force, the only true strength in the world was that of his own army and his own empire; everything opposed to him was imaginary, arbitrary and insubstantial. Only his own fist possessed weight and reality. His powerful fist had smashed through the military, political and constitutional settlements agreed at Versailles; these proved no stronger than gossamer. Hitler sincerely believed that by giving free rein to primitive brutality he had opened

up new avenues of history. And he had demonstrated all too clearly the impotence of the Treaty of Versailles, first violating individual clauses, next trampling the whole treaty into the ground, and then rewriting it in front of the American president and the prime ministers of Britain and France.

He reintroduced compulsory military service and began to recreate the navy, army and air force forbidden by Versailles. He remilitarized the Rhineland, bringing in 30,000 soldiers. These 30,000 men turned out to be enough to alter the apparently decisive outcome of the First World War; there had been no need for an army of millions or masses of heavy weapons. Hitler then struck blow after blow. One after another, he destroyed the new states of post-Versailles Europe: first Austria, then Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia.

But the greater Hitler's success, the blinder he became. He was unable to conceive that not everything in the world was propaganda or political posturing, that there might be other real forces in the world and that there might exist governments able to do more than transmit their own impotence to their workers, soldiers and sailors. Hitler was unable to conceive that his fist could not smash through everything.

German armies had invaded Soviet Russia on 22 June 1941. Hitler's initial success blinded him to the true nature of the granite, of the spiritual and material forces, that he had chosen to attack. These were not imaginary forces; they were the forces of a great nation that had already laid the foundations of a future world. That first summer offensive, followed by the winter's devastating losses, bled the German army and placed overwhelming demands on the military-industrial complex. Hitler was therefore unable, in 1942, to do as he had done the previous year, to advance simultaneously in the south, in the north and in the centre. War had become slow and heavy; it was no longer a pleasure. But it was impossible for Hitler not to advance; far from being a strength, this was what doomed him. He began to tire of the war, to feel afraid of it, yet it went on growing and growing. He himself, ten months earlier, had ignited this war, but he no longer had any power over it; it was impossible for him to extinguish it. The war was spreading like a forest fire; its scope, its rage, its strength and duration were constantly growing. No matter what the price, Hitler had to bring it to an end, but it is easier to achieve initial success in a war than to bring it to a successful conclusion.

This new note in his speeches was a clear pointer to the true course of the historical forces that in time led to the death of almost everyone who took part in this fateful Salzburg meeting.

Pyotr Semyonovich Vavilov's call-up papers arrived at the worst possible moment. Had the commissariat given him another six weeks, or a couple of months, he would have been able to leave his family with enough wheat and firewood to see them through the coming year.

When he looked out and saw Masha Balashova crossing the street with a slip of white paper, walking straight towards his house, he felt something go tight inside him. Without even pausing, she went past the window. For a second Vavilov thought she must be going somewhere else, but then he remembered that there were no young men left in any of the neighbouring houses and that old men do not receive call-up papers. And he was right – the next thing he heard was a loud crash in the entrance room.²⁵ Masha had stumbled in the half-dark. She had knocked against the yoke – and it had fallen onto the bucket.

Masha sometimes came round in the evenings. It wasn't long since she'd finished school; she'd been in the same class as his daughter Nastya, and the two girls often went around together. Usually she addressed Vavilov as 'Uncle Pyotr', but this morning she merely said, 'Please sign in receipt of this letter.' And she did not ask to speak to Nastya.

Vavilov sat down and signed his name.

'So that's that,' he said, as he got to his feet.

These three syllables related not only to his signature in Masha's delivery book. Vavilov was thinking of his whole life here in this hut, his life with his family – a life now suddenly ended. The home he now had to leave seemed good and kind. The stove – which had let out a lot of smoke in the raw days of March, with one side now convex, swollen from old age, with bare bricks that had lost their whitewash – seemed splendid and glorious, a living being who had spent her whole life beside him.²⁶ Entering the house in winter, he had often stood in front of the stove, breathing in her warmth as he stretched out his numb fingers, and at night, spreading his sheepskin coat across her, he had lain on her warm bricks, knowing where would be hotter and where cooler. Getting up early to go out to work, he had gone up to the stove in the dark and felt, with practised hands, for his matchbox and his foot

cloths, which he had left there to dry overnight.²⁷ And everything – the white curtains on the windows, the table with its black half-moons left by hot pans, the little bench by the door where his wife sat to peel potatoes, the chinks between floorboards through which the children spied on the lives of the mice and cockroaches below, the flatiron, so black from soot that in the morning you couldn't make it out at all inside the warm dark of the stove, the windowsill, where there was a towel on a nail and a little red houseplant in a pot – everything was now dearer than ever to him, dear and precious in a way that only living beings can be dear and precious.

Vavilov had three children. Alyosha, the eldest, had already left for the war. Still living at home were his daughter Nastya and little four-year-old Vanya, who was both very wise and very silly and whom Vavilov called 'Mister Samovar'. Puffing and snuffing as he went about the house, with red cheeks, a pot belly and a little spigot often visible through unbuttoned trousers, he really did resemble a samovar.

Sixteen-year-old Nastya was now working for the kolkhoz.²⁸ With her own money she had bought a dress, a pair of shoes and a little red cloth beret that she thought very smart. She would put on this beret and look at herself in a hand mirror. This mirror had lost half its silver, and Nastya saw not only her beret but also her fingers holding the mirror – her face and her beret in reflection, her fingers as if through a window. She'd have gladly slept in this beret, only she was afraid of crushing it; instead, she put it beside her and stroked it when she woke up. When he saw his daughter walking down the street with her girlfriends, looking merry and excited and wearing her beloved beret, Vavilov would think sadly about how, when the war was over, there were sure to be many more young women than young men.

Yes, much had happened in this house. Alyosha had sat at this table at night with his friends, going through algebra, geometry and physics problems with them as they all prepared for the entrance exams to the agronomy institute. Nastya had sat at this same table with her girlfriends and studied the textbook *Literature of the Motherland*. His neighbours' sons, visiting from new homes in Moscow and Gorky, had sat here and talked about their new lives and work. Vavilov's wife Marya had responded, 'Well, our children will soon be studying in the city too. Soon it will be their turn to become technical experts and engineers.'

Vavilov took from a chest the red scarf that he used as a wrapper for important documents and found his military service record. He then put the red bundle with his little boy's birth certificate and his wife's

and his daughter's work records back into the chest, slipped his own document into his jacket pocket – and felt as if he had severed himself from his family. His daughter was looking at him with a new, questioning look. During these last moments he seemed to her to have changed, as if an invisible veil now hung between them. His wife would not be coming back until late; she and the other women had been sent to level the road to the station – army trucks now used this road to take hay and grain to trains bound for the front.

‘Well, my daughter,’ he said, ‘now it’s my turn.’

And she replied quietly, ‘Don’t worry about me and Máma. We’ll keep working. Just be sure to come back in one piece.’ Looking up at him, she added, ‘Maybe you’ll come across our Alyosha. That would be good. Then neither of you will be lonely.’

Vavilov was not yet thinking about what lay ahead. He was still thinking about his home and the various tasks at the kolkhoz that he had left unfinished. Nevertheless, his thoughts had changed; they were no longer the thoughts of a few minutes earlier. His intention this morning had been to patch a felt boot, to solder a leaking bucket, to adjust and set the saw, to mend his sheepskin coat, and to re-heel his wife’s boots. What mattered now, though, were the jobs his wife would be unable to manage on her own. He had to be at the office in the district town, eighteen kilometres away, by nine o’clock the following morning.

He began with the very simplest job; he replaced the haft of his axe – he had a spare ready and waiting. Then he replaced a shaky rung in the ladder and went up to repair the roof, taking with him a few new planks, the axe, a hacksaw and a small bag of nails. For a moment he felt as if he were not a forty-five-year-old man, the head of a family, but a naughty boy who had climbed up onto the roof for fun. Soon his mother would come out of the house. Shading her eyes from the sun with the palm of one hand, she would look up and shout, ‘Get down, you little rascal!’ And she would stamp her foot impatiently, wishing she could grab hold of him by the ear, and repeat, ‘Petya, I’m telling you to get down!’

Without thinking, he glanced at the hill behind the village. It was overgrown with elders and rowans and the few crosses still visible had sunk into the ground. For a moment he felt guilty before everyone and everything. He felt guilty before his late mother – there would be no time now to mend the cross on her grave. He felt guilty before his eldest son Alyosha – the kolkhoz chairman had found his own son a job in a military factory where he’d be exempt from conscription, but

he himself hadn't managed to get Alyosha exempted. He felt guilty before the earth – before the fields he would no longer be able to plough this autumn; and he felt guilty before his wife, on whose shoulders he would be laying a burden he had until then borne himself. He looked up and down the village – at its one wide street, at its huts and yards, at the high clear sky, and at the dark forest in the distance. Yes, this was where his life had gone by. The new school was a vivid splash of white, the sun shining on its large expanse of glass. The long wall of the kolkhoz cattle-yard was equally white.

How hard he had worked, without ever a break. At the age of four, plodding about on his bandy legs, he had looked after the geese. A year or two later, when his mother was digging up potatoes, he had searched for the ones she'd missed and brought them along to the main pile. When he was older still, he'd taken the cows to pasture, and then he'd dug the vegetable garden, fetched water from the well, harnessed the horse and chopped firewood. Then he'd become a ploughman, and he had learned to scythe and work the combine harvester.

He had worked as a carpenter. He had put in windows; he had sharpened tools; he had done the plumbing; he had made felt boots and repaired leather boots; he had flayed horses and sheep and tanned their skins; he had made sheepskin coats; he had sown tobacco; he had built a stove. And then there had been all the voluntary work. Standing in cold September water, he had constructed a dam. He had helped build a mill; he had paved a road; he had dug ditches; he had kneaded clay; he had crushed stone when they were building the kolkhoz stockyard and barn; and he had dug trenches for the kolkhoz potatoes. And there was all the land he had ploughed, all the hay he had mown, all the grain he had threshed, all the sacks he had carried. There were all the planks he had transported to the new school, all the forest oaks he had felled and rough-hewn, all the nails he had hammered, all the blows he had struck with an axe, all the work he had done with a spade. He had spent two summers digging peat, turning out 3,000 bricks a day – and what had he and his two mates been given to eat? A kilo of bread, a bucket of *kvas*²⁹ and a single egg for the three of them, while the mosquitoes buzzed so loudly that they drowned the sound of the diesel engine. And there were all the bricks he had moulded – bricks for the hospital, and the school, and the club, and the village soviet,³⁰ and the kolkhoz administration building, and even for buildings in the district town. And he had worked two summers as a boatman, taking materials to the factory. The current had been too strong to swim

against – and there they were taking eighty-ton loads. They had had to row for all they were worth.

He looked around him: at the buildings, the vegetable patches, the street and the paths. He looked at the whole village – and it was as if he were looking back at his life. Two old men – Pukhov, who was cross and quarrelsome, and Vavilov's neighbour Kozlov, known behind his back as 'Billy Goat'³¹ – were on their way to the administration building. Another neighbour, Natalya Degtyarova, came out of her hut, went up to her gate, looked first to the right and then to the left, shook an arm threateningly at the chickens and went back into the house.

Yes, traces of his work would remain.

He had seen tractors and combine harvesters, mowing machines and threshing machines invade this village where his father had known only sickle and scythe, only the wooden plough and the flail. He had seen young men and women leave the village to study, then return as agronomists, teachers, mechanics and livestock experts. He knew that the son of Pachkin the blacksmith had become a general, and that other young men who'd come back to the village to see their parents were now engineers, factory directors, and officials in the provincial party apparatus.

Sometimes people used to gather in the evenings and talk about how life had changed. Old Pukhov thought that life had got worse. He had worked out how much grain had cost in the days of the tsar, what you could buy in the village shop, the price of a pair of boots, and how much meat people had put in their cabbage soup. From all this it appeared that life had been easier in the old days. Vavilov disagreed. The more the people helped the state, he argued, the more the state would be able to help the people.

Old women said that peasants were now treated as human beings like any others; their children could get on in the world and become important. Maybe boots had been cheaper in the old days, but the peasants themselves were seen as worthless.

Pukhov replied that the peasants had always had to support the state and that the state was a heavy burden. There had been hunger in the days of the tsar – and there was hunger today. They had had ways of fleecing the peasant in the old days – and today's taxes were no different. Peasants were looked down on in the past – and they still were. The kolkhozes might help the state, but they didn't help people.

When the war began, Pukhov had thought that life would be better under the Germans. There'd be trade and smallholdings. There'd be clothes, tea, sugar, spiced breads, shoes, boots and coats. But the

Germans had killed his three sons and his son-in-law. No one in the village had suffered more than Pukhov.

Vavilov saw the war as a catastrophe. He knew that war destroys life. A peasant leaving his village for the war does not dream of medals and glory. He knows he is probably on his way to die.

Vavilov looked around him once more. He had always wanted the life of mankind to be spacious and full of light like the sky today, and he had done what he could to build such a life. And he and millions like him had not worked in vain. The kolkhoz had achieved a great deal.

When he had finished, Vavilov got down from the roof and walked towards the gate. He remembered the last night of peace, the night before Sunday, 22 June: the whole of the vast young country, the whole of workers' and peasants' Russia had been singing and playing the accordion – in little city gardens, on dance floors, in village streets, in groves and copses, in meadows, beside streams.

And then everything had gone quiet; the accordions had suddenly broken off.

For nearly a year now there had been only stern, unsmiling silence.

Vavilov set off towards the kolkhoz office. On the way, he saw Natalya Degtyarova again.

Usually she looked at Vavilov with sullen reproach – *her* husband had been called up some time ago, as had her son. Now, though, she was looking at him thoughtfully and with sympathy. She must have known that he had now received his papers.

‘You too, Pyotr Semyonovich?’ she asked. ‘Does Marya know yet?’

‘She will soon enough,’ he replied.

‘That she will,’ said Natalya. And she went back into her hut.

The kolkhoz chairman turned out to be away for a couple of days; he had gone to the district town. Vavilov went up to Shepunov, the one-armed accountant, and handed over the kolkhoz money he had collected the day before from the district office of the state bank. He took the receipt, folded it twice and put it in his pocket. ‘There you are,’ he said. ‘Every last kopek due.’

Lying on the table was a copy of the district newspaper. Shepunov pushed it towards Vavilov, his ‘For Military Merit’ medal jingling against a metal button on his soldier’s tunic. ‘Comrade Vavilov,’ he asked, ‘have you read the latest news from the Sovinform Bureau?’

‘No,’ said Vavilov.

Shepunov began reading: ‘On 12 May our troops launched an offensive in the Kharkov area, broke through the German defences and, repelling counter-attacks by motor infantry and major tank formations, are continuing their drive west.’ He raised a finger and winked at Vavilov. ‘Our troops have covered from twenty to sixty kilometres of ground and liberated more than 300 inhabited localities. Yes, and this too! Around 365 artillery pieces, twenty-five tanks and 1 million rounds of ammunition have now been captured.’

Looking at Vavilov with the benign interest an old soldier shows in a new recruit, he said, ‘Understand now?’

Vavilov showed him his call-up papers. ‘Of course I understand. Why wouldn’t I? And I also understand that this is only the beginning.

I'll be there in time for what really counts.' He smoothed his call-up papers between his hands.

'Anything I should say to Ivan Mikhailovich?' asked the bookkeeper.

'What's there to say? He knows everything already.' They began talking about kolkhoz matters, and Vavilov, forgetting that the chairman knew everything already, began giving instructions for Shepunov to pass on to him: 'Tell Ivan Mikhailovich not to allow the boards I brought from the sawmill to be used for repairs, only for construction. Yes, you must tell him that. Now, as for our sacks – the ones still in town – we must send someone to fetch them. Otherwise they'll disappear, or we'll be palmed off with who knows what. And the papers about the loan, just say that Vavilov ...'

Vavilov did not like the chairman. He was sly, out only for himself. He had lost touch with the earth. He drew up reports making out that the kolkhoz had overfulfilled its plan when everyone knew this was nonsense. He would think up spurious reasons to visit the district town and even the provincial capital, and he always made sure he had presents to give to the people he met there – sometimes honey, sometimes apples. Once he had even taken someone a piglet.

His reports to the authorities naturally contained no mention of the sofa, the large lamp and the Singer sewing machine he had once brought back from the city. When their province received some award, he was awarded a medal 'For Excellence in Labour'. In summer he had worn it on his jacket and in winter he had pinned it to his fur coat. When he came into a heated room after being out in the cold, the medal would look as if it were covered in little droplets of dew.

What really mattered in life, to the chairman's mind, was not work but knowing how to cultivate the right people. He would say one thing and do something quite different. His attitude to the war couldn't have been simpler: he understood immediately that there were few people more important than the district military commissar. And his son Volodya did indeed start work in a military factory, which made him exempt from conscription; sometimes he came home to pick up supplies of fatback and moonshine to pass on to the appropriate people.

The chairman, for his part, disliked Vavilov and was afraid of him, telling him that he was contrary and that he had no manners. The chairman preferred to spend time with people who were useful to him, people who understood what was what. Some people in the kolkhoz were a little wary of Vavilov, finding him sullen and taciturn. Nevertheless, Vavilov was a trusted figure and, whenever the village was

engaged in some communal enterprise, it was he who was asked to receive and take care of the money. Any voluntary work, anything for which the villagers had to club together – it was Vavilov who was chosen as treasurer. He had never been interrogated or involved in any legal proceedings and he had only once been inside a police station. A stupid little incident, a year before the war.

One evening an elderly man had knocked at the window of his hut and asked if he could stay the night. His face was covered by an unkempt black beard. Vavilov had looked at him in silence, taken him to the hay barn, spread out a sheepskin coat for him to lie on, and brought him some milk and a piece of bread.

During the night some young men in yellow leather jackets had appeared. They had arrived in a car and gone straight to Vavilov's barn. They then set off again in their car, taking both Vavilov and the stranger. In the police station a senior officer asked Vavilov why he had let this bearded man sleep in his barn. Vavilov had thought for a moment, then said, 'I felt sorry for him.'

'But didn't you ask him who he was?' asked the officer.

'Why?' Vavilov replied. 'I could see. He was a human being.'

Without uttering a word, the officer looked for a long time, for what seemed a very long time indeed, into Vavilov's eyes. And then he said, 'All right then, go back home.'

Everyone in the village had had a good laugh about all this, asking Vavilov if he had enjoyed his ride in a car. The chairman, though, had shaken his head and said, 'You're a fool.'

*

Vavilov went down the empty village street, walking more and more quickly. He couldn't wait to see his home and children again; it was as if not only his mind but his entire body felt the anguish of the imminent separation.

He stood for a moment by the open door of his hut. His life there had not been easy. His children were badly dressed, and they did not always have enough to eat. His boots were worn out. There was no kerosene for the lamp, and it was dim even when it was lit. It had no glass and it smoked. Sometimes they did not even have bread. He seldom ate meat. There had been meat once, but it would have been better if there hadn't. Their cow had fallen into a pit that wasn't fenced off and had broken both her front legs. They had slaughtered her and

eaten meat every day for the next week, their eyes swollen with tears. Vavilov seldom ate fatback. And he never ate white bread.

He went into his hut, where everything was familiar – and these long-familiar things seemed strangely new. His heart was touched by all of them: the chest of drawers covered by a knitted tablecloth; the felt boots he had resoled and repaired with black patches; the pendulum clock above the wide bed; the wooden spoons with edges nibbled away by impatient childish teeth; the picture frame with the family photographs; a small heavy mug made from dark copper; a large light mug made from fine white tin; and little Vanya's tiny trousers, all colour now washed out of them except for a sad, hazy, pale blue. And the hut itself was endowed with an astonishing quality unique to Russian huts: the interior was at once cramped and spacious. It was well lived-in, warmed by the breath of its owners and the breath of its owners' parents, as deeply imbued with human presence as any dwelling can possibly be – and at the same time it was as if no one had meant to stay for long, as if a few people had come in, put their things down for a minute and would be off again straightaway, leaving the door wide open behind them ...

How beautiful children seemed in this hut! Early in the morning, when little fair-headed Vanya came running across the floor on his bare feet, he was like a warm, moving flower.

*

Vavilov helped Vanya up onto a high chair and sensed, through his rough calloused hand, the precious warmth of Vanya's little body. The child's clear bright eyes looked at him with a trust that was pure and absolute – and the voice of a very small human being who had never uttered a single coarse word, never smoked a single cigarette or drunk even one drop of vodka, asked, 'Pápa, are you really going to the war tomorrow?'

Vavilov smiled, and his eyes moistened.

That night Vavilov stood in the moonlight, chopping up the tree stumps stacked under an awning behind the shed. He had collected these stumps over many years and they had long been trimmed and stripped of their bark. Really, they were little more than bundles of twisted roots; he couldn't split them or chop them cleanly – all he could do was hack at them and then tear them apart.

Marya – tall, broad-shouldered and dark-skinned like her husband – was standing nearby. Now and again she bent down to pick up stray pieces of wood and occasionally she gave her husband a sideways look. And he too caught glimpses of her as he worked away with his axe. As he bent down, he saw her legs or the hem of her dress; straightening up, he would see her large, thin-lipped mouth, her intent dark eyes, or her high, clear, convex forehead, without a single wrinkle. Standing beside each other, they could have been brother and sister. Life had forged them in the same fashion, beaten them into the same shape; hard labour had not bowed them but straightened them. Neither was speaking, which was their way of saying farewell. Vavilov struck with his axe at the springy wood. It was soft, yet unyielding, and the blows resonated both in the earth and in Vavilov's own chest. The axe blade shone blue in the moonlight, flaring as he lifted it into the air, fading as it moved nearer the ground.

All around was silence. Like soft linseed oil, the moonlight covered the ground, the grass, the broad fields of young rye and the roofs of the huts, dissolving in the puddles and little windows.

Vavilov wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand and looked at the sky. It was as if he were out in the hot summer sun, though the light shining down on him was from the bloodless luminary of the night.

'That'll do,' said his wife. 'You're not going to lay in enough firewood for the whole of the war.'

Vavilov glanced at the mountain of wood he had chopped.

'All right – but the moment we get back, Alyosha and I will chop you some more.' And he drew the back of his hand across the axe blade, just as he had wiped it across his sweaty forehead a moment before.

Vavilov took out his tobacco pouch, rolled a cigarette and lit up; the smoke from the coarse tobacco drifted slowly away in the still air.

They went back inside. He felt the hut's warmth on his face, and he could hear the breathing of his sleeping children. This quiet, this warmth, these two fair heads in the half-dark – here beside him was his life, his love, his good fortune. He remembered how he had lived here as a young bachelor – how he had gone about in blue riding breeches and a pointed Red Army helmet from the time of the Civil War, how he had smoked a pipe with a little lid that his elder brother had brought back from the imperialist war, that earlier war against the Germans. He had been proud of this pipe. It had made him look dashing, and people had held it in their hands and said, 'It's beautiful, it's so interesting.' Shortly before getting married, he had lost it.

Nastya was asleep. He saw her face and the dark shape of her beret. He looked round at his wife – and felt that there could be no greater happiness in the world than to stay here in this hut, never to leave it. Never had he known a moment more bitter; in the sleepy silence before dawn he could sense the power of a harsh whirlwind that was entirely indifferent to Vavilov and all that he loved and desired – and he could sense this power in every cell of his body, on his skin and in the marrow of his bones. He felt the horror that a splinter of wood might feel if it suddenly realized that it was not moving of its own accord past the river's green banks but was being carried by the insuperable power of the water. The whirlwind had snatched him up and he no longer belonged either to himself or to his family. For a moment he forgot that his own fate and that of the children asleep on the bed were bound to the fate of the country and all its inhabitants, that the fate of his kolkhoz and the fate of the huge stone cities with their millions of citizens were one and the same. In this bitter hour his heart was gripped by a pain that neither knows nor wants consolation or understanding. He wanted only one thing: to go on living here – in the wood that his wife would put into the stove in winter, in the salt with which she would season the potatoes and bread, in the grain she would receive in return for his many workdays on the kolkhoz. And he knew that this was impossible, that it would be need and shortage, not plenty, that would make him live in their thoughts. They would think of him as they looked at the empty salt cellar, when they asked a neighbour for a measure of flour, as they tried to persuade the chairman to allow them a horse to drag a sledge-load of firewood from the forest.

‘We’ll run out of potatoes before spring. Same with bread. Same with firewood. The only thing we won’t be short of is grief.’ Quickly, quietly but bitterly, Marya listed what they would run out of before winter, what before Christmas, what before the beginning of Lent and what before Easter.³² Pointing to the sleeping children, she went on, ‘It’s all very well for you, you won’t need to worry about bread. But what about me? Where am I going to find bread for *them*?’ And she picked up a towel that had been dropped on the floor.

This upset Vavilov. It wasn’t as if he were going away for his own pleasure. But he understood that his wife was in pain and that she was trying to stop this pain from bursting out into the open.

When she had had her say, he said, ‘And my knapsack? Have you put everything in?’

She put his knapsack on the table and said, ‘Yes, but it’s not much. The knapsack itself weighs more than everything I’ve put in it.’

‘All the easier for me to carry,’ he said gently. The knapsack was indeed very light: bread, some rye rusks, some onions, a tin mug, a needle and thread, two pairs of clean foot cloths, a penknife with a wooden handle.

‘Mittens?’ she asked angrily.

‘No. *You* need them more.’

‘That’s for me to say,’ Marya replied sharply. She knew she was being unkind and this made her angrier still.

‘Pápa!’ came Nastya’s sleepy voice. ‘Your jacket. I don’t need your jacket. Take it with you!’

‘Jacket, your jacket,’ said her mother, imitating Nastya’s sleepy voice. ‘You go back to sleep. What if they send you out in midwinter to dig trenches? What’ll you wear then?’

‘My darling, my silly darling,’ Vavilov said to his daughter. ‘I love you, my silly girl. I love you. Don’t think I’m strict with you because I don’t care.’

And the girl began to cry. Pressing her cheek against his hand, she sobbed, ‘Dearest Pápenka! Do at least write to us!’

‘Maybe you *should* take your padded jacket with you,’ said Marya.

There was so much more that Vavilov could have said. He wanted to say that it was no use his taking the mittens because he’d be dead before winter anyway, and they’d simply be wasted. He wanted to say dozens of things, both important and unimportant, that would have served to express not only his concern over practical matters but also his love for his family. The potatoes needed sorting – they were

beginning to rot. The young plum tree needed protecting from the frosts. His wife should have a word with the kolkhoz chairman about getting the stove repaired. And he wanted to talk about the war, this war that had mobilized the entire nation. Their son was already fighting, and now he himself would be fighting too.

But there was so much to say that he said nothing at all. Otherwise he'd be talking all night.

'Well, Marya,' he said. 'Before I go, let me fetch you some water.'

He took the buckets and walked to the well. He lowered the first bucket and it clattered against the slimy walls of the well frame. Vavilov leaned over and looked down. There was a smell of something cold and damp, and the absolute dark was as blinding as bright sunlight. 'There it is,' he thought. 'My death.'

The bucket quickly filled to the brim. As it came up again, Vavilov heard the sound of water falling on water. The closer the bucket came to the surface, the louder the sound. Then the bucket emerged from the darkness. Swift streams of water were flowing down its sides, eager to return to the dark below.

Going back into the entrance room, he found his wife sitting on the bench. In the half-dark he couldn't make out her face, but this didn't matter; her feelings were not hard to guess.

She looked up and said, 'Sit down for a few minutes. Have a rest and a bite to eat.'

'All right,' he said. 'There's no hurry.'

It was already getting light. He sat down at the table. On it stood a bowl of potatoes, a saucer with a little white, crystallized honey, some slices of bread and a mug of milk. He ate slowly. His cheeks were stinging, as if he'd been out in the winter wind, and his head felt as if full of smoke. He thought, talked, chewed and shifted about on his chair. Any moment now the smoke would blow away and he'd be able to see things clearly again.

His wife pushed a bowl towards him and said, 'Eat these eggs. I'll put another dozen in your bag. I've boiled them already.'

In answer he smiled such a clear and shy smile that she felt almost burned. He had smiled in exactly the same way when she entered this hut aged eighteen. And what she felt now was the same as what thousands upon thousands of other women were feeling. Her heart clenched, and all she really wanted was to let out a scream – to silence her grief by giving voice to it.

But she merely said, 'I should have baked lots of pies. I should have bought a few bottles of vodka. But ... with it being wartime ...'

And he just got to his feet, wiped his mouth and said, 'Yes.' And got ready to leave.

They embraced.

'Petya,' she said slowly, as if trying to persuade him to come back to his senses and change his mind.

'I have to,' he said.

His movements were slow. And he was trying not to look in her direction.

'We must wake the children,' said Marya. 'Nastya's gone back to sleep.' She wasn't sure what to do. It was for her own sake that she wanted to wake the children, so she would have someone to share her pain with.

'There's no need. We've already said our goodbyes,' he replied. And he listened for a moment to his sleeping daughter's slow breathing.

He adjusted his knapsack, took his hat, stepped towards the door and glanced quickly back at his wife.

Both looked around the room – but how very differently they each saw it, at this last moment, as they stood together on the threshold ... She knew that these four walls would witness all her loneliness, and to her they seemed bleak and empty. He, on the other hand, wanted to carry away in his memory what he saw as the kindest home on this earth.

He set off down the road. Standing by the gate, she watched him walk away. She felt that she would survive, that she would be able to endure everything – if only he would come back again and stay for another hour, if only she could look at him one more time.

'Petya, Petya,' she whispered.

But he didn't look round. He didn't stop. He just carried on walking towards the dawn. It was reddening over land that he had ploughed himself. A cold wind was blowing straight into his face, blowing the last vestige of warmth, the last breath of hearth and home, out of his clothes.

It was the birthday of Alexandra Vladimirovna Shaposhnikova, the widow of an eminent specialist in bridge construction, but this was not the only reason why her family were giving a party.

There is something moving about a family sitting together around a table in order to be with a loved one about to go on a long journey. This custom answers a deep need; it is not for nothing that – unlike many other old customs – it is still so widely observed.

The country was at war. Friends, family – everyone understood that this might be their last gathering. There was no knowing how many of them would meet again.

It had been decided to invite Mikhail Mostovskoy and Pavel Andreyev, family friends of long standing. As a nineteen-year-old polytechnic student, Alexandra Vladimirovna's late husband had gone to Stalingrad for a few months to work as an engineer on a tugboat on the River Volga. Andreyev had been a stoker on the same boat, and he and the young Shaposhnikov had often chatted together on deck. Andreyev had later become a friend to the whole family. When Alexandra moved to Stalingrad with her children, he became a regular visitor.

Zhenya, the youngest of Alexandra's three daughters, had joked, 'Clearly one of Máma's admirers.'

The Shaposhnikovs had also invited Tamara Berozkina, whom they had got to know only recently. Tamara and her children had seen so many burning buildings, air raids and hurried evacuations that the Shaposhnikovs had got into the habit of referring to her as 'poor Tamara': 'What's happened to poor Tamara?'; 'How come poor Tamara hasn't been round?'

For many years, this three-room apartment in Stalingrad had felt spacious – home only to Alexandra Vladimirovna and her grandson Seryozha. Now, though, it was crowded. First, Zhenya had moved in. And then, after the German summer offensive, Alexandra's middle daughter, Marusya, had moved in, along with her husband Stepan Spiridonov and her daughter Vera. Until then the three of them had lived a few miles away, near Stalgres, the central power station.

Anticipating night air raids on Stalgres, most of the engineers with relatives in the city had sent their wives and children to join them. Spiridonov had installed not only his family but also a piano and several items of furniture.

When she wasn't on night shift, another old friend, Sofya Osipovna Levinton, would sleep at the Shaposhnikovs. She had first got to know Alexandra long ago, in Paris and Bern. She now worked as a surgeon in one of the city hospitals.

And only the previous day, Tolya had arrived unexpectedly. He was another of Alexandra Vladimirovna's grandchildren, the son of her eldest daughter Ludmila, and he was on his way from military school to his new unit. He had come to the apartment with his travelling companion, a lieutenant on his way back to the front after a spell in hospital. When they first appeared, his grandmother had failed to recognize Tolya in his army uniform and had asked rather severely, 'Who is it you're looking for, comrades?' And then she had yelled, 'Tolya!'

Zhenya had said that they absolutely must celebrate this family reunion.

The pie dough had already been mixed. Spiridonov had come in his car, bringing a large bag of white flour and a yellow briefcase full of butter, sturgeon and caviar. Zhenya had got hold of three bottles of sweet wine through her artistic contacts. Marusya had sacrificed part of her inviolable fund of emergency bartering currency – two half-litre bottles of vodka.

It was usual in those days for guests to bring supplies of their own when they came round; it was difficult for anyone to lay their hands on enough food for a large group.

Zhenya's cheeks and temples were moist from the heat. In a dressing gown thrown over a smart summer dress, her dark curls peeking out from under a headscarf, she stood in the middle of the kitchen, holding a knife in one hand and a kitchen towel in the other.

'Heavens, is Máma still not back?' she asked Marusya. 'Should I be turning the pie round by now? I don't know the oven and I'm afraid of it burning.'

At this moment she had no thought for anything except the pie she was baking. Amused by her younger sister's zeal, Marusya said, 'I don't know this oven any better than you do, but there's no need to get so worked up. Máma's already here, and so are one or two of the guests.'

'Marusya, why are you wearing that hideous brown jacket?' asked Zhenya. 'You're beginning to stoop anyway – and that jacket makes

you look a real hunchback. And your dark scarf makes your hair look even greyer. Someone as thin as you needs to wear something brighter.’

‘Who cares?’ replied Marusya. ‘It won’t be long before I’m a granny. Vera’s already eighteen now – would you believe it?’

Someone had started to play the piano. Marusya frowned. Staring angrily at Zhenya with her large dark eyes, she said, ‘Trust you! Who else could have dreamed up something like this? What will the neighbours think? It’s embarrassing. This really isn’t the time for music and feasting!’

Zhenya often took decisions on the spur of the moment, and some of these decisions ended up causing her and her family a great deal of grief. While still at school, she had neglected her studies because of her passion for dance – and then she had taken it into her head that she was an artist. In friendship she was inconstant. One day she would be telling everyone that some friend or other was truly noble and extraordinary; the next day she would be bitterly denouncing this same friend. She had studied at the Moscow Art Institute, graduating from the Faculty of Painting. Sometimes she felt she was an accomplished master and was full of enthusiasm both for her finished works and for her future projects; but then she would remember some indifferent look or mocking remark and tell herself she was a useless old cow without the least hint of talent. And she would wish she had studied some applied art, like painting on fabric. At the age of twenty-two, still in her last year at the Arts Institute, she had married a Comintern³³ official, Nikolay Krymov. He was thirteen years older than her and she was drawn to almost everything about him: his contempt for bourgeois comfort, his romantic past in the battles of the Civil War, his work in China and his Comintern friends. Nevertheless, in spite of Zhenya’s admiration for him, and in spite of his apparently deep and sincere love for her, their marriage did not last. One day in December 1940 Zhenya had packed her belongings into a suitcase and gone back to live with her mother.

Zhenya’s explanations to her family had been so confusing that no one understood anything at all. Marusya called her a neurasthenic. Her mother kept asking if she had fallen in love with someone else. Vera had argued with the fifteen-year-old Seryozha, who believed that Zhenya had done the right thing.

‘It’s very simple,’ he’d insisted. ‘She’s fallen out of love – and that’s all there is to it. How can you not understand?’

‘Quite the little philosopher! Into love, out of love ... What do you know about love, you little brat?’ Vera had replied. Then in her

ninth year at school, she considered herself experienced in matters of the heart.

The neighbours and some of Zhenya's acquaintances had their own rather straightforward explanations. Some thought that Zhenya had been very sensible. Things were not going well for her husband. Several of his friends were in trouble; some had been dismissed from their positions; a few had been arrested. Zhenya had decided to leave before it was too late, so as not to be dragged down by her husband. Others, who preferred more romantic gossip, affirmed that Zhenya had a lover. Her husband had set out on a trip to the Urals but had been called back by a telegram and had found Zhenya in her lover's arms.

There are people who like to ascribe only the basest of motives to the actions of others. This is not always because they act basely themselves; often they would not dream of acting as they suspect others of doing. They talk like this because they think that cynical explanations testify to their knowledge of life. A readiness to believe that others are acting honourably, so they imagine, is a sign of naiveté.

Zhenya had been appalled when she heard what was being said about her divorce.

But that had been before the war. None of these things troubled her now.

The younger generation had gathered in Seryozha's little room, where Spiridonov had somehow managed to squeeze in his piano.

They were joking about who did, and who didn't, look like who else in the family. With his dark eyes and slender build, Seryozha looked like his mother, the wife of Alexandra's son Dmitry. He had her dark hair, her olive skin and her nervy movements. He also had the same quick look in his eyes, a look that could be both timid and bold. Tolya was tall and broad-shouldered. He had a broad face and a broad nose, and he was constantly looking in the mirror and smoothing his straw-blond hair. When he took from his tunic pocket a photograph of himself next to his half-sister Nadya, a small thin girl with long fine plaits, everyone burst out laughing – so little did the two resemble each other. Nadya was now with her parents in Kazan; they had been evacuated from Moscow. As for Vera – tall, rosy-cheeked and with a short, straight nose – she had nothing in common with any of her three cousins; she did, however, have the quick, fiery brown eyes of her young Aunt Zhenya.

Such a lack of external resemblance between members of a single family was especially common in the generation born just after the Revolution, a time when marriages were entered into simply for love, regardless of differences of blood, nationality, language and social class. The inner, psychological differences between family members were equally great; the products of these unions were endowed with rich and complex characters.

That morning Tolya and his travelling companion, Lieutenant Kovalyov, had gone to the Military District HQ. Kovalyov had learned that his division was still being held in reserve, somewhere between Kamyshin and Saratov. Tolya had also received instructions to join one of the reserve divisions. The two lieutenants had resolved to stay an extra day in Stalingrad. 'We'll be seeing more than enough of the war,' Kovalyov had said sensibly. 'It won't run away from us.' But they had decided not to wander about on the streets, in case they were picked up by a patrol.

Throughout the difficult journey to Stalingrad, Kovalyov had helped Tolya in all kinds of ways. Kovalyov had a mess tin, while Tolya's had been stolen the day he graduated from military school. Kovalyov always knew at which stations they would be able to find boiled water, and which of the army canteens would provide them with smoked fish and mutton sausage and where they would only get pea and millet concentrate.³⁴

At Batraki he had managed to get hold of a bottle of moonshine, and he and Tolya had drunk it together. Kovalyov had told Tolya how he loved a girl from his village and would marry her as soon as the war was over. This had not prevented him from talking about his front-line liaisons with a frankness that took Tolya's breath away and made his ears burn.

Kovalyov also told Tolya many things about war that you can never learn from books or service regulations and that are important only to those who are actually fighting, with their backs against the wall – not to those trying to imagine the reality of the war many years later.

This good-natured friendship, on the part of a lieutenant who had seen his share of action, was flattering to Tolya. He had pretended to be older than his years, to be a young man who knew the ways of the world. 'That's women for you,' he had said when the conversation turned to girls. 'Best just to love 'em and leave 'em.'

Now, though, Tolya wanted more than ever to talk freely to his cousins, but, without understanding why, he felt embarrassed. If it weren't for Kovalyov, he'd have talked about all the things he usually talked about with them. There were moments when he felt burdened by Kovalyov's presence, and this made him feel ashamed: Kovalyov had, after all, been a loyal travelling companion.

He had lived his whole life in a world he shared with Seryozha, Vera and his grandmother, but this family reunion now seemed like something chance and ephemeral. He was now fated to live in a different world, in a world of lieutenants, political instructors,³⁵ sergeants and corporals, of triangles, diamonds and other badges of rank, of travel warrants and military ration cards. In this world he had met new people; he had made new friends and new enemies. Everything was different.

Tolya had not told Kovalyov that he wanted to enter the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics and that his ambition was to bring about a scientific revolution that would eclipse both Newton and Einstein. He had not told him that he had already made a short-wave radio receiver

and that, shortly before the war, he had begun building a television. Nor did he say that he used to go to his father's institute after school and help the laboratory assistants assemble complex apparatus or that his mother used to joke, 'How the boy's managed to inherit Viktor's scientific gifts I really can't understand!'

Tolya was tall and robust-looking. His family liked to call him a 'heavyweight', but at heart he was timid and sensitive.

The conversation was not flowing. Kovalyov was at the piano, playing 'The town I love can sleep peacefully' with one finger.³⁶

'And who's that?' he asked with a yawn, pointing to a portrait hanging above the piano.

'That's me,' said Vera. 'It was painted by Auntie Zhenya.'

'It's not like you at all,' said Kovalyov.

The worst embarrassment of all was Seryozha. Any normal boy would have been full of admiration for two young lieutenants – especially for Kovalyov, with his scar and his two medals 'For Bravery' – but Seryozha was just supercilious and mocking. He didn't ask even a single question about military school. This was particularly upsetting; Tolya was longing to talk about their sergeant, about the shooting range, and about the cinema he and his mates had managed to visit without authorization.

Everyone knew Vera's habit of bursting into laughter for no apparent reason, simply because laughter was always there within her. Now, though, she was sullen and silent. And she kept staring at Kovalyov, as if sizing him up. As for Seryozha, anyone would have thought he was taking a malicious pleasure in being unfailingly tactless.

'Vera, why are you being so silent?' Tolya asked crossly.

'I'm not being silent.'

'The wounds of love,' said Seryozha.

'Imbecile!' said Vera.

'She blushed – and that's a fact!' said Kovalyov, giving Vera a roguish wink. 'No doubt about it, she's in love. With a major, yes? Every young woman today complains about lieutenants and says they get on her nerves.'

'Lieutenants do not get on my nerves,' said Vera, looking Kovalyov straight in the eye.

'So it's a lieutenant, is it?' said Kovalyov. He was a little upset, since no lieutenant likes a young woman to fall for another lieutenant. 'Well then,' he went on after a pause, 'I think we should drink to the two of them. I've got the necessary here in my water bottle.'

‘Yes!’ said Seryozha with sudden animation. ‘Let’s drink to them!’

Vera demurred, but ended up downing her vodka in one. And then, just as if she were a soldier too, she took a hunk of dried bread from a green bag.

‘You’re the kind of companion a soldier needs,’ said Kovalyov.

And Vera began laughing like a little girl, wrinkling her nose, tapping her foot and tossing her mane of fair hair.

Seryozha became tipsy straightaway. First, he launched into a critique of Soviet military operations; then he began reciting poems. Tolya kept glancing at Kovalyov, afraid he would be laughing at Seryozha, that he would think it ridiculous for a young man to be waving his arms about and reciting Yesenin, but Kovalyov was listening attentively. Now less like a lieutenant and more like an ordinary young man from a village, he opened his knapsack and said, ‘Stop. Let me write it down!’

As for Vera, she frowned, fell into thought and then turned to Tolya. Stroking him on the cheek, she said, ‘Oh Tolya, dear Tolya, what do *you* know about anything?’

She sounded more like a sixty-year-old than an eighteen-year-old.

Many years before the Revolution, Alexandra Vladimirovna Shaposhnikova – now a tall, imposing old woman – had studied natural sciences at a women’s college. After her husband’s death, she had worked first as a teacher and then as a chemist in a bacteriological institute. For the last few years she had been head of a small laboratory that monitored working conditions in factories. She had never had many members of staff and now, with the war, she had still fewer; she herself had to visit factories, railway depots, grain silos, shoe factories and clothes factories in order to collect dust samples and check the quality of the air. She loved her work and in her small laboratory she had constructed her own apparatus for the quantitative analysis of air pollution in industrial enterprises. She could analyse metallic dust, drinking water, water for industrial use and a variety of lead compounds and alloys. She could detect the presence of mercury and arsenic vapours, carbon bisulphite, nitric oxides and harmful levels of carbon monoxide. And she loved people no less than her work; during her visits she made friends with lathe-operators, seamstresses, millers, blacksmiths, electricians, stokers, tram conductors and engine drivers.

A year before the war she had begun working during the evenings in a library for the applied sciences, doing translations for herself and for engineers in various Stalingrad factories. She had learnt English and French as a child, and German when she and her husband were political exiles, living in Bern and Zurich.

When she got home on the day of the family party, she spent a long time in front of the mirror, arranging her white hair and pinning a small brooch – two enamel violets – to the collar of her blouse. She looked once again in the mirror, thought for a moment, unpinned her brooch with an air of decision and placed it on the bedside table. The door half-opened and Vera announced in a loud whisper, ‘Hurry up, Granny! That scary old man’s here – Mostovskoy!’

After another moment of uncertainty, Alexandra put her brooch back on again and walked quickly towards the door.

She found Mostovskoy in the tiny hall, which was piled high with baskets, old suitcases and sacks of potatoes.

Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy was a man of inexhaustible vitality – the kind of man of whom others say, ‘He’s a breed apart.’

Before the war, he had lived in Leningrad. After surviving four months of the Blockade, he had been flown out in February 1942. He was still light on his feet. He had good sight and good hearing. His memory and mental faculties were intact and he retained a genuine, lively interest in life, the sciences and people. All this in spite of the fact that the experiences he had been through were enough for several more ordinary lives: forced labour and exile, persecution, disillusion, bitterness, joys and sorrows, deprivations of every kind, and endless nights of unceasing work. Alexandra had first met Mostovskoy before the Revolution, when her late husband was working in Nizhny Novgorod. Mostovskoy, who had gone there to help organize clandestine political activities, had stayed in their apartment for a month.

Mostovskoy stepped into the main room and looked around: at the wicker armchairs and stools by the table, at the white tablecloth spread out in anticipation of guests, at the wall clock, the wardrobe and the folding Chinese screen on which an embroidered silk tiger was moving stealthily through yellow-green bamboo.

‘If your room were to be dug up in a thousand years,’ he said, ‘an archaeologist could learn a great deal about the juxtaposition of different social strata in our time.’ There was a hint of laughter in his eyes; the little wrinkles around them appeared, disappeared and reappeared. Pointing to the plain wooden shelves, he went on, ‘Look. Here we have *Das Kapital* and Hegel in German. And on the wall – portraits of Nekrasov and Dobrolyubov.³⁷ That’s your revolutionary past. But the silk tiger must be from your merchant father. And the huge wall clock too. And then there’s a cupboard, a vase as big as a cupboard and a huge dining table – they’re all symbols of our new prosperity, the prosperity of the present day. They must have been brought here by your chief engineer son-in-law.’ Then he raised an admonitory finger. ‘Oh! Judging by the number of place settings, this is going to be a real banquet. Why didn’t you say? I’d have got out my best tie!’

Alexandra always felt uncharacteristically unsure of herself in Mostovskoy’s presence. Now too, thinking he was criticizing her, she blushed – the sad, touching blush of an old person.

‘I yielded to the demands of my daughters and grandsons,’ she said. ‘After a winter in Leningrad, I fear all this must seem strange and excessive.’

‘Far from it, far from it,’ Mostovskoy replied. He sat down at the table, began filling his pipe and then held out his tobacco pouch, saying, ‘You enjoy a smoke too. See what you think of this!’ He looked at her tobacco-stained fingers and added, ‘But you really should use a cigarette holder.’

‘It’s better without,’ she replied. Once again, she felt the need to justify herself. ‘I started when we were in exile, in Siberia. Goodness knows how many times Nikolay and I argued about it. But I’m hardly likely to stop now.’

Mostovskoy took a flint from his pocket, along with a piece of thick white string and a steel file. ‘I’m having trouble with my Katyusha,’³⁸ he said. He and Alexandra smiled at each other. His Katyusha truly was refusing to light.

‘Let me get some matches,’ said Alexandra.

‘No,’ said Mostovskoy, with a dismissive wave. ‘Why waste precious matches?’

‘Yes, nowadays people like to hang on to their matches. I’ve got a tiny night light in my kitchen and my neighbours are always coming round “to borrow a light”.’

‘It’s the same everywhere. People tend their little flames like cave dwellers thousands of years ago. And the old like to keep two or three matches in reserve. They’re afraid the war may bring them some night-time surprise.’

She went to the cupboard, came back to the table and said with mock solemnity, ‘Allow me, from the bottom of my heart ...’ And she held out an unopened box of matches.

Mostovskoy accepted her gift. They both lit up, drew on their pipes and exhaled at the same time. The two curls of smoke met and drifted lazily towards the window.

‘Are you thinking about leaving?’ asked Mostovskoy.

‘Yes, of course. Who isn’t? But we haven’t yet talked about it at all seriously.’

‘And where might you go, if it’s not a military secret?’

‘To Kazan. Part of the Academy of Sciences has been evacuated there. And Ludmila’s husband’s a professor, or rather, he’s a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences,³⁹ and so they’ve been given an apartment. Well, two rooms, anyway – and he’s asking us to go and

join them. But don't worry – you'll be all right. I'm sure the authorities will take proper care of you.'

Mostovskoy looked at her and nodded.

'Are they really so unstoppable?' asked Alexandra. There was a note of despair in her voice that somehow didn't fit with the confident, even haughty expression of her handsome face. Slowly, with effort, she began again, 'Is fascism really so very powerful? I don't believe it. For the love of God, tell me what's happening! This map on the wall – sometimes I just want to take it down and hide it. Day after day Seryozha keeps moving the little flags. Day after day – the same as last summer – we hear about some new German offensive. Towards Kharkov. Then, all of a sudden, Kursk. Then Volchansk and Belgorod. Sevastopol has fallen. I keep asking, "What's happening?" None of our soldiers can tell me.'

She fell silent for a moment and then, moving one hand as if to push away some frightening thought, she went on, 'I go over to the book shelves you were just talking about. I say to Lenin, Chernyshevsky, and Herzen,⁴⁰ "Can we really not defend you? Is this really going to be the end of you?" And then I say, "Defend us! Help us! Some kind of darkness has fallen on us."'

'What *do* our soldiers tell you?' said Mostovskoy.

Just then, from behind the kitchen door, came the sound of a young woman's voice – half amused, half angry: 'Máma! Marusya! Where are you? The pie's burning.'

'A pie!' said Mostovskoy, clearly glad to evade Alexandra's questions. 'Seems this is going to be quite a dinner!'

'A feast in time of plague,'⁴¹ Alexandra replied. Pointing towards the door, she went on, 'Zhenya, my youngest ... you've met her. Really all this was her idea. She arrived just a week ago, unexpectedly. Everyone else is parting from their nearest and dearest – while here we have this surprise reunion. And there's another of my grandchildren, Ludmila's son Tolya. He's on his way to the front, he's just passing through. So we decided to celebrate both meetings and partings.'

'It's all right,' said Mostovskoy. 'No need for explanations. Life goes on.'

'It's harder when you're old,' Alexandra said quietly. 'I feel the country's tragedy differently from the young. Forgive me weeping, but who else can I say these things to? Nikolay so loved and respected you. And then we're all ...' Looking straight at Mostovskoy, she went on, 'Sometimes I just want to die. And then I think not – that I've still got the strength to move mountains.'

Mostovskoy stroked her hand and said, 'Quick – or the pie really will burn.'

*

'And now – the moment of truth,' said Zhenya, bending down towards the half-open oven door. Glancing at Alexandra and then putting her lips to her ear, she said very quickly, 'I got a letter this morning ... Long ago, before the war ... Remember, I told you about him ... A commander I once met, Novikov ... We met again on a train. Such a strange coincidence. And then today ... Just imagine, I was thinking about him as I woke up. He's probably no longer alive, I said to myself. And an hour later there was a letter from him. And our meeting in the train, when I was on my way here from Moscow, that was extraordinary too.'

Zhenya put her arms around Alexandra's neck and began kissing her – first on the cheek and then on the white hair falling over her temples.

When Zhenya was studying at the Art Institute, she had been invited to some gala at the Military Academy. There she met a tall, slow, heavy-footed man, the 'elder' for his year. He had escorted her to her tram and then called on her several times. He graduated from the academy in the spring and then left Moscow. He wrote to her two or three times, asking her to send him a photograph but not saying anything about his feelings. She sent a very small photo she had had taken for her passport. And then, around the time she finished at the Art Institute and got married, he stopped writing.

But when she left Krymov and was on her way to her mother's, the train had stopped in Voronezh and a tall, fair-haired commander had entered her compartment.

'Do you remember me?' he asked, holding out a large, pale hand.

'Comrade Novikov,' she replied, 'of course I remember you. Why did you stop writing?'

He smiled, silently took a small photograph out of an envelope and showed it to her.

It was the photograph she had sent him long ago.

'The train was just coming to a stop,' he said, 'and I saw your face in the window.'

The two elderly women doctors sitting in the compartment with them listened avidly to every word she and Novikov said. For them, this meeting was an unexpected diversion; after a while, they joined

in the conversation. One of them, with a spectacle case sticking out of her jacket pocket, talked almost without stopping, recalling all the unexpected meetings she could think of – in her own life and in the lives of her friends and family. Zhenya felt grateful to her; Novikov – evidently seeing this meeting as deeply significant – seemed to be wanting a heart-to-heart conversation, whereas she just wanted to be quiet. Novikov got out at Liski, promising to write, but he never did. And now she had suddenly received a letter from him, which had reawoken thoughts and feelings from a time she had thought gone forever.

As Alexandra watched Zhenya working away in the kitchen, she admired her fine gold chain, thinking how it looked just right against her pale neck. She noticed how her perfectly chosen comb brought out faint gleams of gold in her dark hair. But, had they not been touched by the living beauty of a young woman, the comb and the gold chain would have been nothing. There was a sense of warmth, she thought, that emanated not from her daughter's flushed cheeks or half-parted lips but from somewhere deep in her clear brown eyes – eyes that had seen so much, that were now so much older and wiser, yet still as immutably childlike as two decades earlier.

Towards five o'clock they sat down at table. Alexandra Vladimirovna offered the wicker armchair to Mostovskoy, the guest of honour, but he chose instead to sit down beside Vera on a little stool. To his left was a young lieutenant with bright, clear eyes. He had two cherry-coloured diamonds on his collar tabs.

Alexandra then turned towards Spiridonov. 'As our chief supplies officer,' she said, gesturing towards the armchair, 'you, Stepan, must sit here.'

'Pápa is the source of all light, warmth and pickled tomatoes,' said Vera.

'My uncle,' said Seryozha, 'is the boss of the home repairs company.'

Spiridonov had indeed provided Alexandra not only with a good supply of firewood but also with enough potatoes and pickled tomatoes to last the winter. He knew how to mend everything: from kettles and electric irons to taps and chair legs. And he had even handled the negotiations with a furrier over repairs to her squirrel-fur coat.

After sitting down, Spiridonov glanced now and again at Vera. Tall, fair-haired and rosy-cheeked, she looked very like him. Sometimes he expressed regret that she did not look more like Marusya. But deep down he was happy to recognize in his daughter some of the physical traits of his brothers and sisters.

Like more than a few of his contemporaries, Stepan Fyodorovich Spiridonov had followed a path that only a few decades earlier would have seemed astonishing.

Chief engineer – and then director – of the Stalgres power station, Spiridonov had, thirty years ago, been grazing goats on the outskirts of a small factory settlement near Naro-Fominsk. Today, with the Germans now moving south from Kharkov towards the Volga, he had been thinking about the course of his life, who he had been and who he had become. He had a reputation for coming up with bold ideas. He had several new inventions and innovations to his credit, and his name had even been mentioned in an important electrical engineering manual. He was in charge of a major power station. Some said he

was a poor administrator – and there had indeed been times when he'd spent all day on the shop floor, leaving his secretary to deal with the endless telephone calls. Once he had even made a formal request to be transferred from administrative work, but he had felt relieved when the people's commissar refused this request; there was much that he found interesting and enjoyable even in administrative work. He was not afraid of responsibility; he enjoyed the tension that went with being in charge of things. The workers admired him, though he was sometimes severe and quick-tempered. He liked to eat and drink well. He liked going to restaurants and he kept a large secret cache of two- and three-rouble notes – his 'subcutaneous store', as he called it. He let himself go if he had a free evening during one of his trips to Moscow – and some of what he got up to also had to be kept secret from his family. Nevertheless, he loved his wife and took pride in her being so well educated – and there was nothing he would not have done for her, for his daughter and for all his extended family.

Sitting beside Spiridonov was Sofya Osipovna, the head of a hospital surgery department. She was middle-aged and she had broad shoulders, red fleshy cheeks and the two bars of a major on her collar tabs. She frowned a lot and had an abrupt manner of speech. According to Vera, who worked in the same hospital, the other members of staff were afraid of her – not only the nurses and orderlies but even the other doctors. She had been a surgeon since before the war. Her character may have influenced her choice of profession, but her profession had, in turn, left a certain imprint on her character.

She had taken part, as a doctor, in expeditions organized by the Academy of Sciences; she had been to Kamchatka and Kirghizia and had spent two whole years in the Pamir Mountains. Occasional words of Kazakh and Kirghiz had become a part of her everyday speech. After a while, Vera and Seryozha came to adopt one or two of these words. Instead of 'good', they would say '*jakhshi*'; instead of 'all right' – '*hop*'.

She loved music and poetry. Returning from a twenty-four-hour shift, she would lie down on the sofa and tell Seryozha to recite Pushkin and Mayakovsky. Sometimes she would quietly sing Gilda's aria from *Rigoletto*, half-closing her eyes and gesturing with one hand as if she were a conductor. Her face would take on such a strange look that Vera would have to run out into the kitchen, her cheeks swollen with laughter.

She also loved card games. She would play a couple of rounds of blackjack with Spiridonov, but really she preferred to play something

simpler, 'just for fun', with Vera and Seryozha. Sometimes, though, she would feel suddenly agitated; she would throw down her cards and say, 'No, I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight. I'd do better to go back to the hospital.'

On the other side of Sofya Osipovna was Tamara Berozkina. Her husband was a Red Army commander, but she had heard nothing from or about him since the war began. She dressed with the particular care of someone ashamed of their poverty. She was thin; she had sad, beautiful eyes and her delicate face looked pale and exhausted. She seemed the kind of person simply unable to cope with life's cruelties.

She and her husband had lived close to the frontier. On the first day of the war their house had caught fire; she had rushed outside in her dressing gown and slippers, holding in her arms her little daughter Luba, who had measles. Her son Slava had run along beside her, clutching her gown.

With her sick little Luba and her barefoot boy, she had been put on a truck – and so her long months of sorrows and homelessness had begun. She had ended up in Stalingrad, where she at last managed to find some kind of shelter for herself and her two children. The military recruitment office had helped, allocating her a dress and each of her children a pair of shoes. She had sewed and darned for the wives of important officials. In the offices of the city soviet, she got to know Marusya, who was a senior inspector for the education section – and through her she met Alexandra Vladimirovna.

Alexandra had given Tamara her own coat and boots and insisted that Marusya find little Slava a place in a children's home, where he would be sure to receive regular meals.

To the other side of Tamara was Andreyev. He was sixty-five, but there was barely a hint of grey in his thick black hair. His long thin face looked somehow sullen and surly.

Putting her hand on Tamara's shoulder, Alexandra said thoughtfully, 'It seems we too may soon be forced out of our homes, made to drink from the same bitter cup as you. Who'd have thought it – as far east as this!' Then she thumped her hand on the table and went on, 'And if that's how things turn out, then you must come with us. We can all go to Ludmila's, in Kazan. Our fate will be your fate.'

'Thank you,' said Tamara, 'but that will be a terrible burden for you.'

'Nonsense,' Alexandra replied firmly. 'Now is no time to be thinking of comfort.'

Marusya whispered to her husband, 'May God forgive me, but Máma truly does live in a world beyond time and space. Ludmila only has two tiny rooms in Kazan.'

'What do you expect?' Spiridonov replied genially. 'Look at the way we've all invaded her own apartment and made ourselves at home in it. She's even given you her own bed – and I haven't heard you voice any objection to *that*.'

Spiridonov admired his mother-in-law for her total lack of pragmatic self-interest. For the main part she spent her free time with people she liked but who were unlikely ever to be of any help to her; more often it was *they* who needed *her* help. This impressed Spiridonov; it was not that he made a habit of seeking out people in high places, but he understood that friends could be of practical value and he was not above, at least now and again, cultivating someone likely to be of use to him. Alexandra, on the other hand, was blind to such considerations.

Spiridonov had more than once visited Alexandra in her workplace. He enjoyed watching her sure, confident movements and the deftness with which she managed complex chemical apparatus for the volumetric analysis of gases and liquids. Having a natural gift for anything practical, he would get angry when Seryozha appeared unable to change a burnt-out fuse or Vera was slow and clumsy with her sewing and darning. Not only was he a good carpenter and metalworker, not only did he know how to build a Russian stove – but he also liked to invent more unusual things. Once he dreamed up a little gadget that allowed him, without getting up from his armchair, to light and extinguish the candles on their New Year tree. He also installed such an unusual and interesting doorbell that an engineer from the Tractor Factory came round specially to examine the mechanism and replicate it. But Spiridonov had never been handed anything on a plate. He had had to work hard to reach his present position, and he had no time for bunglers and idlers.

'Well, comrade Lieutenant,' he asked the bright-eyed young man to his left, 'will you keep Stalingrad safe from the Germans?'

As a young commander, Kovalyov was contemptuous of civilians. 'Our task is very simple,' he replied condescendingly. 'When we receive the order to fight, we will fight.'

'You received that order on the very first day of the war,' said Spiridonov, with amusement.

Kovalyov took this personally. 'It's easy enough to talk when you're safe in the rear,' he said. 'But on the front line, with mortar bombs

exploding all around you and Stukas up above, you think differently. Isn't that so, Tolya?

'Precisely,' said Tolya, with little conviction.

'Well, let me say one thing,' said Spiridonov, raising his voice. 'The Germans will never get past the Don. Our defences there are impregnable.'

'You seem to be forgetting a great deal,' Seryozha exclaimed in a thin, squeaky voice. 'Don't you remember a year ago? How everyone kept saying, "The Germans will stop when they reach the old border. They won't get any further than that!"'

'Attention! Attention!' shouted Vera. 'Air-raid alert!' And she gestured towards the kitchen door.

Zhenya came into the room, carrying a large, pale blue dish. Tamara, looking prettier for being a little flushed, was walking beside her, hurriedly adjusting the white towel thrown over the pie.

'The edge is a little burnt,' Zhenya declared. 'I got distracted.'

'It's all right,' said Vera. 'I'll eat the burnt bits.'

'Why's the girl always so greedy?' said Marusya, looking pointedly at her husband. All Vera's failings – she believed – came wholly from him.

'And I say again that they won't cross the Don,' Spiridonov declared vehemently. 'The Don will be the end of them.' Brandishing a long knife, he got to his feet. The weightiest mealtime responsibilities – dividing a watermelon, slicing up a pie – were always entrusted to him. Afraid of making the pie crumble, of failing to justify his family's trust, he said, 'But shouldn't it be left to cool down a little?'

'What do *you* think?' asked Seryozha, looking at Mostovskoy. 'Will the Germans get across the Don?'

Mostovskoy did not answer.

'They'll cross the Don soon enough. They've already taken all of Ukraine and half of Russia,' Andreyev said grimly.

'So your opinion,' said Mostovskoy, 'is that the war's lost?'

'It's not a matter of opinions,' said Andreyev. 'I'm just saying what I've seen. Opinions are for people smarter than me.'

'And what makes you think the Don will be the end of the Germans?' asked Seryozha, addressing Spiridonov in the same squeaky voice as before. 'They've crossed the Berezina and they've crossed the Dnieper. Now they're heading for the Don and the Volga. Which river's really going to be the end of them? The Irtysh? The Amu-Darya?'⁴²

Alexandra looked at her grandson thoughtfully. Usually he was shy and silent. She thought it must be the presence of the two young lieutenants that had stirred him up. What she didn't know was that Seryozha had drunk some of Kovalyov's moonshine. He was no longer thinking clearly. To himself he now seemed uncommonly clear-headed and intelligent, but he was not certain that his many gifts were being fully appreciated.

Vera leaned over towards him and asked, 'Seryozha, are you drunk?'

'Not in the least,' he answered crossly.

'Let me explain, my friend,' said Mostovskoy, turning to Seryozha. Everyone fell silent, listening eagerly. 'I'm sure you all remember Stalin's remarks about the giant Antaeus. Each time his feet touched the ground he grew stronger. Well, what we see today is an anti-Antaeus. He imagines he's a giant and a warrior, but he isn't really. When this false warrior advances over land that is not his, each step makes him not stronger but weaker. The earth does not lend him strength; on the contrary, a hostile land saps his strength until in the end he collapses. Such is the difference between the true Antaeus and today's vulgar pseudo-Antaeus, who has sprung up overnight like some fungus or mould. And our Soviet regime is a powerful force. And we have the Party, a Party whose will calmly and rationally unites and organizes the might of the people.'

Seryozha was looking at Mostovskoy intently, his eyes dark and gleaming. Mostovskoy smiled and patted him on the head.

Marusya got to her feet, raised her glass and said, 'Comrades! Here's to our Red Army!'

Everyone turned towards Tolya and Kovalyov, all wanting to clink glasses with them and to wish them health and success.

Next came the ceremony of slicing the pie. Splendid and ruddy, this pie evoked both joy and sorrow. It conjured up a more peaceful past that, like all pasts, now seemed to embody nothing but good.

Spiridonov said to his wife, 'Marusya, remember when we were both students? Swaddling clothes hanging up to dry, little Vera screaming loud enough to bring the house down, and you and me handing round slices of pie to our guests. And great cracks in the window frames, and a cold draught coming up through the floor.'

'How could I not remember?' Marusya replied with a smile.

Also turning to Marusya, Alexandra said slowly and thoughtfully, 'And I used to bake pies in Siberia. You and Ludmila were living with Grandad, and Zhenya wasn't yet born. What didn't we live through then! Crossing

the Yenisey in spring, while the ice was breaking up. Being pulled on a sledge by reindeer, through a howling blizzard. It was so cold the window panes burst. We stored our milk and our water in solid form. And the nights lasted for ever and ever. I used to bake cranberry and lingonberry pies. I used to bake pies filled with Siberian salmon ... Our comrades would come and join us. Heavens, how long ago that all seems.'

'Pheasant pie is delicious. We used to eat it in the Issyk-Kul valley,' said Sofya Osipovna.

'Jakhshi, jakhshi!' said Seryozha and Vera in one voice.

'Seems I'm the only one here with no pies to recall,' said Mostovskoy. 'I either ate in student canteens or in restaurants in foreign cities. And then, after the Revolution, it was canteens or houses of recreation.'⁴³ After a moment, he went on, 'No, I lie. One Easter during my time in prison we were given a slice of *kulich*. And then, for lunch, there was an excellent *kasha* and mushroom pie. It wasn't exactly home cooking, but believe me, it's still a joy to recall!'

'Dear God!' said Marusya. 'Does Hitler really want to take everything from us? Our lives, our homes, our loved ones, even our memories?'

'Let's all agree not to say another word about the war today!' said Zhenya. 'Let's just talk about pies!'

At that moment little Luba walked up to her mother, pointed at Sofya and announced triumphantly, 'Máma, look what a big sugar lump that auntie's given me!' Unclenching her fist, she exhibited a cube of sugar, moistened by the warmth of her pale yet dirty hand. 'See,' she went on in a loud whisper. 'We mustn't go yet. Maybe there'll be more!'

Everyone was looking at Luba. Luba turned to her mother and saw her embarrassment. Realizing she had betrayed their secret poverty, she buried her head in her mother's lap and burst into tears.

Sofya stroked Luba's head and sighed loudly.

After this, something changed. It was clearly impossible to make the evening into a last merry supper, with no mention of today's or tomorrow's troubles.

The conversation returned to the matters on everyone's mind: the Red Army's long retreat, the reasons for its repeated defeats, the possibility that even moving to Kazan might not be enough, that they might all have to move again – to Siberia or the Urals.

'And what if the Japanese invade through Siberia?' asked Zhenya.

Tamara looked at Luba, whose head was lying in her lap. Hiding her disfigured, work-worn hands in Luba's curly hair, she said quietly, 'Is this really the end?'

Spiridonov spoke of ‘former people’⁴⁴ who, rather than planning to leave, were keenly awaiting the Germans.

‘Yes,’ said Sofya. ‘I’ve met that sort too. There was a doctor yesterday who told me quite straightforwardly that he and his wife had already made up their minds. They’re going to stay in Stalingrad, no matter what.’

‘Yesterday I met some actors I know from Leningrad,’ said Zhenya. ‘I couldn’t believe it. They wanted me to go to Kislovodsk with them. “Germans or not,” they said, “Kislovodsk is a good place to be.”’

‘What of it?’ said Seryozha, ‘What’s more surprising is how often we all get it wrong. People we think rock solid turn out to be pathetic wimps. But I’ve heard about one boy who was quite desperate to go to flying school. The authorities kept refusing him because of his social origin, but in the end they gave in. He graduated and they say he died the death of a hero. Like Gastello!’⁴⁵

‘Look at the young ones,’ Alexandra Vladimirovna said quietly to Sofya. ‘Tolya’s a real man now. When he came to visit us before the war he was still a child, but now he’s our defender. His voice, his mannerisms, even his eyes – everything about him is different.’

‘Have you noticed how his friend can’t keep his eyes off our Zhenya?’ Sofya replied in her low voice.

‘And Tolya even drinks like a man now. Last summer, though, when he and Ludmila were staying with us, he went out for a walk – and it started to rain. Ludmila snatched a raincoat and a pair of galoshes and went down to the Volga to look for him: “He’ll fall ill, the boy’s very susceptible to tonsillitis ...”’

Meanwhile, at the other end of the table, the young ones were arguing.

‘The army’s fleeing in panic,’ said Seryozha.

‘Not in the least,’ Kovalyov replied angrily. ‘Since Kastornoye we’ve fought every day.’

‘Well, how come you’ve retreated so fast?’

‘If you’d seen combat, you wouldn’t ask.’

‘But why do our men keep surrendering?’

‘Why do you think? But as for our own regiment, it’s certainly done its fair share of fighting.’

‘Some of the wounded I’ve seen in hospital,’ said Vera, ‘are saying it’s like the first months of the war all over again.’

‘The worst part,’ said Kovalyov, his irritation fading, ‘is crossing the rivers. Day and night, the bombing never stops. You certainly want to move fast then. My mate was killed. I was wounded in the shoulder,

bleeding like a stuck pig. At night the sky's all lit up with flares – and it rains bombs.'

'Soon it'll be the same here,' said Vera. 'I'm scared stiff.'

'You really don't need to be scared,' said Spiridonov. 'We're a long way from the front line and they say our anti-aircraft defences are very strong indeed. As strong as around Moscow. Maybe one or two planes will get through, but not more than that!'

'Oh yes,' laughed Kovalyov, 'we know your one or two planes. If the Fritzes want to set us alight, they certainly will. Isn't that so, Tolya?'

'But no bombers have got through yet,' Spiridonov replied. 'Our anti-aircraft guns can put up a wall of fire.'

'Wait till the Fritzes set their minds to it. If rivers don't stop their ground forces, they certainly won't stop their planes. First their bombers will give you a good dusting, then you'll be seeing their tanks.'

'I see,' said Spiridonov.

Kovalyov had more experience of the war, and was more sure of himself, than anyone else in the room. Every now and then he would give a little smile, conscious of the ignorance and naiveté of his listeners.

He reminded Vera of the lieutenants in her hospital. They would glance mockingly at the nurses while arguing furiously about matters comprehensible to them alone. Yet he was also similar to young boys she had known from school clubs before the war, boys who had come round to play cards or who had wanted to borrow – just for an evening, leaving as security a difficult-to-obtain school textbook – her copy of *King Solomon's Mines* or *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.⁴⁶

'I think this may be the end,' said Sofya, pushing her plate away. 'Evil is stronger than good.'

There was a general silence.

'Time to put up the blackout curtains,' said Marusya. And, pressing her fists against her temples, as if to deaden some pain, she muttered, 'War, war, war ...'

'Time, I think, for another glass,' said Spiridonov.

'No, Stepan!' said Marusya. 'Not after the dessert!'

Kovalyov unhooked his water bottle from his belt. 'I'd been meaning to keep some for the road. Better, though, to share it with good people like yourselves! Well, Tolya, all the best. I won't stay the night. I'll be off in a moment.'

He poured out what was left of his yellowish vodka, sharing it between Tolya, Spiridonov and himself. 'All gone,' he said to Seryozha, shaking the empty bottle in front of him and making the stopper rattle.

Kovalyov staggered a few steps, then said to Zhenya, 'I'm as good as dead. Get it? People can talk all they like, but in five days I'll be back at the front. Get it? But that doesn't frighten me, I'll be killed anyway. I won't live to see an end to the war. Get it? Twenty years. Call it a lifetime. Understand?'

He was looking her straight in the face, with greedy, beseeching eyes. And she understood: he wanted her love. His days were numbered. Tears came to her eyes – she understood only too clearly.

Spiridonov put an arm around Kovalyov's shoulders, as if to accompany him on his way. Spiridonov had drunk too much, and Marusya was looking at him with pain and fury. His one glass too many seemed to have upset her as much as all the war's tragedies.

Standing in the doorway, Kovalyov burst out in sudden rage, 'What makes men surrender, I've heard people ask. Words, words, words ... Fritz is still over 200 kilometres away, but people here are already packing their things. Before the front reaches Stalingrad, bureaucrats will be eating pies in Tashkent. Do you know what it's like at the front? Lie down for a few hours – and you wake to find Fritz has advanced a hundred kilometres during the night. War's one thing – words are another. I've seen bureau-rats take fright at a puff of wind. But soldiers get taken prisoner and die – and then bureau-rats in Tashkent point the finger at them. And believe me, I know those finger-pointers. If they were encircled, you wouldn't catch them marching 500 kilometres, half-starved, to break through the German front. They'd be collaborators, they'd be *polizei!* They'd have fattened up nicely. But us soldiers have souls – and we know what it takes to keep fighting! Truth, that's what I care about. I want the truth, and I want it straight!'

Kovalyov's words were spoken somewhat at random, but there was nothing to stop any of his listeners from taking them personally. Kovalyov may well have hoped that one of them would answer him back. Then he'd have really let rip. He might have produced a weapon.

But everyone sensed that something had snapped, or broken free, deep inside Kovalyov. They knew he would be unable to control whatever this thing was. They all kept silent and avoided his eyes. His face had gone pale, with patches of skin that looked grey and dirty.

He slammed the door behind him and let out a long volley of curses as he went down the stairs.

'And there I was,' said Vera, 'thinking I'd be getting a day off from the hospital. He's shell-shocked. They're all shell-shocked.'

'There's no shell shock that shocks like the truth,' said Andreyev. He sounded so sad that everyone turned to look at him.

When Zhenya came back into the room, Mostovskoy asked, 'Have you heard anything from Krymov?'

'No,' she replied. 'But I know he's here in Stalingrad.'

'Oh, I forgot,' said Mostovskoy, looking perplexed. 'I forgot that you've separated. But it's my duty to report to you that he's a good man. I've known him a long time, since he was a boy.'

The moment their guests were gone, a sense of calm and peace returned to the Shaposhnikovs' apartment. Tolya volunteered to do the washing-up. The family's cups, saucers and teaspoons seemed sweet and dear to him – very different from the ones in the barracks. Vera laughed as she put an apron on him and tied a kerchief round his head.

'What a wonderful smell of home, of home and warmth, just like in peacetime,' said Tolya.

Marusya put her husband to bed and repeatedly checked his pulse. She was afraid his snoring might be a symptom of heart palpitations.

Looking into the kitchen, she said, 'Tolya, let someone else do the dishes. You should write your mother a letter. You need to take better care of those who love you.'

But Tolya didn't feel like writing to his mother. He was playing about like a mischievous child. First he called out to the cat, mimicking Marusya's voice. Then he got down on his hands and knees and pretended to headbutt the cat: 'Come on, come on, little ram! Let's see your horns!'

'If it weren't for the war,' Vera said dreamily, 'we'd be going to the beach tomorrow. We'd be taking a boat out, wouldn't we? But as it is, I haven't even felt like going for a swim. I haven't gone to the beach once.'

'If it weren't for the war,' said Tolya, 'I'd be going to the power station tomorrow, with Uncle Stepan. I really would like to see it, in spite of everything.'

Vera leaned over towards him and said very quietly, 'Tolya, there's something I want to tell you about.' But just then Alexandra Vladimirovna came in. Vera winked at Tolya and shook her head.

Alexandra began questioning Tolya: had he found military school difficult? Did he get out of breath if they had to march fast? Was he a good marksman? Were his boots the right size? Had he got photographs of his family? Had he got enough handkerchiefs, needles and thread? Had he got enough money? Was he getting regular letters from his mother? Did he ever have time to think about physics?

Tolya felt surrounded by the warmth of his family. This meant a lot to him, but it was as troubling as it was calming. It made the thought

of his imminent departure all the more painful; difficulties are easier to bear when your heart is hardened.

Then Zhenya came in too. She was wearing the blue dress she used to wear when she came to visit Ludmila and Viktor in their dacha. 'Let's have tea in the kitchen,' she said. 'Tolya will like that!'

Vera went out to fetch Seryozha. A moment later she came back and said, 'He's lying in bed crying, burying his face in the pillow.'

'Oh, Seryozha, Seryozha,' said Alexandra Vladimirovna. Saying, 'Leave this to me,' she went to speak to her grandson.

When they left the Shaposhnikovs, Mostovskoy invited Andreyev to go and have a look at the town with him.

‘Go out on the town with you?’ laughed Andreyev. ‘Two old fellows like us?’

‘For a quiet stroll,’ said Mostovskoy. ‘It’s a fine evening.’

‘All right,’ said Andreyev. ‘Why not? Tomorrow I don’t start till two.’

‘Is your work very tiring?’ asked Mostovskoy.

‘At times.’

Andreyev liked this small man, with his bald head and alert little eyes.

For a while they walked in silence. It was a beautiful summer evening. The Volga was barely visible in the twilight, but it made its presence felt everywhere; every street, every little lane, lived and breathed the Volga. All the hills and slopes, the orientation of the streets – everything was determined by the river’s curves and the steep cliffs of the west bank. And the monuments, the squares and parks, the giant factories, the little old houses on the outskirts, the tall new apartment blocks with blurred reflections of the summer moon in their windows – all had their eyes on the Volga, all were turned towards it.

On this warm summer evening, as the war raged not far away on the Don steppe, moving relentlessly east, everything in the city seemed strangely solemn and full of meaning: the loud tread of the patrols, the rumble of a nearby factory, the hoots of the Volga steamers, even the meek silence.

They sat down on an empty bench. Two young couples were sitting nearby. One of the young men, a soldier, got to his feet, walked over to Andreyev and Mostovskoy, his shoes squeaking on the gravel, took a quick look at them, went back again and said something in a low voice. There was the sound of girlish laughter. The two old men coughed in embarrassment.

‘The young,’ said Andreyev. He sounded both critical and admiring.

‘I’ve heard that there’s a factory where some of the workers are evacuees from Leningrad,’ said Mostovskoy. ‘I want to go and talk to them. I’m from Leningrad too.’

‘Yes, the Red October steelworks. That’s where I work. I don’t think there are that many of your evacuees. But come along anyway. Come and visit us.’

‘Were you in the revolutionary movement?’ asked Mostovskoy. ‘Back in the days of the tsars ...’

‘Not really,’ said Andreyev. ‘All I ever did was read leaflets and spend a couple of weeks in prison for taking part in a strike. And I spoke now and again to Alexandra Vladimirovna’s husband. I was a stoker on a steam tugboat and he was a student, getting a few months of practical experience. We used to go up on deck together and chat.’

Andreyev took out his tobacco pouch. There was a rustle of paper as they rolled their cigarettes. Mostovskoy’s lighter sent up a shower of sparks, but the wick obstinately refused to catch.

‘The old men are giving it their all,’ one of the young soldiers said loudly. ‘They’re trying to operate a Katyusha!’

There was more girlish laughter.

‘Damn it!’ said Mostovskoy. ‘I’ve forgotten my treasure. Alexandra Vladimirovna gave me a box of matches.’

‘But tell me – what do you really make of it all?’ said Andreyev. ‘Things are going badly, aren’t they? Say what you like about antis and Antaeuses – the Germans still keep advancing.’

‘Things are going badly,’ replied Mostovskoy, ‘but the Germans will still lose the war. I’m sure Hitler has more than a few enemies even in Germany. Germany too has its internationalists and its revolutionary workers.’

‘What makes you so sure?’ said Andreyev. ‘I’ve heard what some of our tank crew have to say – men who’ve taken their share of German prisoners. They say the Germans are all the same. Working class or not, it makes no difference.’

‘We truly are in trouble,’ Mostovskoy said quietly, ‘if an old worker like yourself thinks there’s no difference between the German government and the German working class.’

Andreyev turned towards Mostovskoy and said sharply, ‘I understand. You want the Soviet people to fight against Hitler. And you also want them to remember the words, “Workers of the World, Unite!”⁴⁷ But the only thing that matters today is who’s with us and who’s against us. Your thinking’s like the teachings of Christ. All very beautiful – but nobody actually lives by them. They just soak the whole earth with blood.’

‘Times change,’ said Mostovskoy. ‘Nikolay Shaposhnikov once taught you about Marx – and *he* learned from the books I’d written. And now it’s your turn to teach me.’

Too sad and exhausted to argue, Mostovskoy slumped down; he could almost have been asleep. In his mind's eye he was picturing a scene from two decades earlier: a huge congress hall, countless eyes full of excitement and joy, hundreds of faces he loved, dear Russian faces, together with the faces of fellow Communists from all over the world – France, England, Japan, India, Belgium, Africa and America, Bulgaria, Germany, China, Italy, Hungary, Latvia – who were friends of the young Soviet Republic. This huge hall had fallen silent – as if the very heart of humanity had missed a beat – as Lenin raised one hand and, with clarity and assurance, told the Comintern conference, ‘Soon we will witness the foundation of an international Soviet Republic.’

Feeling a sudden surge of warmth and trust towards the man sitting beside him, Andreyev quietly lamented, ‘My son is fighting on the front line, but his wife just wants to go to the cinema with her girlfriends and have a good time. And she and my wife Varvara are at each other’s throats. It’s a sorry story.’

Mostovskoy's wife had died many years ago. Living alone had taught him the importance of being orderly. He kept his large room clean and tidy. Sheets of paper, journals and newspapers were stacked in neat piles on his desk and the books on his shelves were all in their assigned places. Mostovskoy usually did most of his work in the morning. During the last few years he had been lecturing on philosophy and political economy and writing entries for an encyclopedia and a dictionary of philosophy. His articles were mostly short but always required a lot of work and the correlation of many different sources. Each year he received several packages of books from his editors. He had already written about Heraclitus, Fichte and Schopenhauer. The beginning of the war had found him in the middle of an unusually long article about Kant. Mostovskoy usually signed his articles just with his initials: M. M. His editors kept trying to persuade him to use his full name, but Mostovskoy obstinately and crossly went on using his initials.

He did not know many people in Stalingrad. Now and again other teachers of philosophy and political economy would drop by for consultations. They were a little afraid of him; he was impatient, and unyielding in argument.

That spring Mostovskoy had contracted acute pneumonia. The doctors had thought this would be the end of him; he was an old man and he had not yet recovered from his months in besieged Leningrad. But Mostovskoy did recover. His doctor then drew up a careful programme detailing each step of the gradual transition he was to make from the sickbed back to his ordinary routine.

Mostovskoy read through the programme, put blue or red ticks against particular points – and then, during his third day of being up and about, took a cold shower and polished the parquet floor of his room.

He was determined and impassioned; he had no time for affability and good sense.

Sometimes he dreamed of the past and heard the voices of friends long dead. Or he might be giving a speech in a small hall in London.

Quick, alert eyes were watching him; he saw black ties, high starched collars and the bearded faces of friends.

Or he would wake in the middle of the night and be unable to get back to sleep. One after another, pictures and scenes came to mind: student meetings; arguments in the university park; the path to Bakunin's grave in Bern; the rectangular stone over Marx's grave; a steamer on Lake Geneva; Sevastopol and a winter storm on the Black Sea; a stifling railway carriage taking political prisoners to Siberia, the rhythmic knocking of the wheels, songs sung in unison, a guard banging a rifle butt against the door; the early Siberian twilight, snow squeaking beneath his feet, a distant yellow light in the window of his hut, the light he had walked back to through all the dark evenings of his six years of exile.

Those dark, difficult days were the days of his youth, days of unrelenting struggle in anticipation of the great future that was the purpose of his life on earth.

He remembered his never-ending labour, the many occasions during the first years of the Soviet Republic when he had worked through the night, his work for the Provincial Commissariat of Enlightenment and for the Army Political Enlightenment Committee, his contribution to the theory and practice of the Five Year Plans and the general electrification plan, his work for the State Centre for Scientific Research.

Sometimes he would let out a long sigh. Why was he sighing? What was he regretting? Or was this merely the sigh of a tired, sick heart struggling day and night to force the blood through his clogged, sclerotic arteries?

Sometimes he would go down to the Volga before dawn, then walk a long way along the deserted shore, beneath the steep cliffs. He would sit on the cold stones and observe the first stirrings of light. He liked to watch the grey night clouds swell with the rosy warmth of life while the hot smoke from the factories turned suddenly dull and ashen.

In the slant sunlight the black water would seem younger. The very tiniest of waves would creep timidly over the dense flat sand and every least grain would start to glitter.

Sometimes Mostovskoy remembered the Leningrad winter: mountains of snow and ice on the streets; the silence of death and the roar of death; a piece of bread on the table; sledges carrying water; sledges carrying firewood; sledges carrying corpses covered with white sheets; frozen paths down to the Neva; frost-covered apartment walls; his many journeys to factories and military units; the talks he gave to meetings of volunteer militia; a grey sky sliced by searchlights; dark windows with pink stains

that were the reflections of burning buildings; the howl of air-raid sirens; sandbags around the equestrian statue of Peter the Great; and, everywhere in the city, the living memory of the first beats of the Revolution's young heart: the Finland station, the deserted beauty of the Field of Mars, the Smolny Institute;⁴⁸ and – over and above all this – the pale, deathly faces and living, suffering eyes of children and the patient heroism of women, workers and soldiers. And his heart would be overwhelmed by a burden that was heavier, a pain more extreme, than he felt it could bear. 'Why, why did I ever leave?' he would ask in anguish.

Mostovskoy wanted to write a book about his life. He already had a clear idea of its basic structure: childhood; his village; his father, who had been a sexton; the school he had attended as a small boy; the political underground; the years of Soviet construction.

He did not like to correspond with those of his old friends whose letters were mainly about illnesses, sanatoriums, blood pressure and loss of memory.

Mostovskoy knew one thing for sure: never in Russian history had events succeeded one another with such dizzying speed as during the last twenty-five years. Never had life's various strata been so comprehensively rearranged. Everything had, of course, always been changing and flowing. Even before the Revolution it had been impossible for one man to step into the same river twice – but in those days the river had flowed very slowly, its banks had never looked any different and Heraclitus' revelation had seemed strange and obscure.⁴⁹

Was there anyone at all in Soviet Russia who would feel surprised by the revelation that had so struck the Greek philosopher? This truth had moved from the realm of philosophical speculation to that of common experience; it was now equally obvious to full members of the Academy of Sciences, to factory and collective-farm workers and to children still at school.

Mostovskoy had thought a great deal about all this. Precipitate, indomitable movement! There was no escaping it. Movement was everywhere: in the almost geological transformation of the landscape; in the vast campaign that had brought literacy to the entire country; in the new cities appearing all over the map; in the new districts of cities, in the new streets and buildings, in the ever-growing number of new inhabitants of these buildings. This movement had mercilessly plunged once-famous names into obscurity and at the same time – from remote and misty villages, from the vast spaces of Siberia – it had called up hundreds of new names now celebrated throughout the country.

Journals published ten years ago seemed like ancient yellowed papyri, so momentous were the events of the last decade. People's living conditions had been transformed. Soviet Russia had advanced a hundred years. With its vast landmass and forests the new country had leaped into the future, changing everything that had seemed most unchangeable: its agriculture, its roads, the beds of its rivers. Thousands of inns, taverns and cabaret venues had disappeared – as had parish schools, institutes for the daughters of the nobility, monastery lands, private estates, stock exchanges and the grand mansions of wealthy capitalists. Scattered and annihilated by the Revolution, whole classes of people had disappeared: not only the exploiters but also those who enabled them to exploit; people whose misdeeds had been castigated in popular songs but whose position had seemed unassailable; people whose characteristics had been described by the greatest of Russian writers: landlords, merchants, factory owners, stockbrokers, cavalry officers, moneylenders, chamberlains, police chiefs and police sergeants. Senators had disappeared – as had full state councillors, privy councillors and collegiate assessors – the whole of that complex and cumbersome world of Russian officialdom, divided into no fewer than seventeen different ranks. Organ grinders, footmen and butlers had disappeared. Concepts and words had disappeared: Lady, Sir, Your Grace, Your Excellency, and the like.

Workers and peasants had become the masters of life. A whole new panoply of professions had been born: industrial and agricultural planners, peasant scientists, beekeeper scientists, cattle breeders, vegetable growers, kolkhoz engineers, radio operators, tractor drivers, electricians. Russia had attained an unprecedented level of literacy and general enlightenment, a sudden leap whose power can be compared only with that of some cosmic force; if there were an electromagnetic equivalent for Russia's cultural explosion in 1917, astronomers in other galaxies would have registered the birth of a new star, a star growing ever brighter. The common people, the 'fourth estate' of workers and peasants, put their strength, their honest directness and all their unique abilities at the service of the state – they became field marshals, generals, the fathers of giant cities, important Party officials at every level, the directors of mines, factories and agricultural projects. The hundreds of new industrial enterprises brought out new and unexpected abilities in people. Pilots, flight mechanics, air navigators, radio operators, drivers of cars and trucks, geologists, industrial synthetic chemists, electro-chemists,

photo-chemists, thermo-chemists, specialists in the applications of high-voltage electricity, automobile- and aircraft-engineers – these were the protagonists of the new Soviet society.

Even now, in this darkest period of the war, Mostovskoy could see the might of the Soviet state. He knew it was many times greater than the strength of the old Russia; he understood the strength that its millions of working people now drew from their faith, literacy, knowledge and love for the Soviet motherland.

He believed in victory. And he had only one wish: to forget his age and join in the fighting, to take part in the struggle for the freedom and dignity of the people.

Agrippina Petrovna, the brisk, alert old woman who washed Mostovskoy's clothes, prepared his morning tea and brought him his meals from the Party canteen, could see how shaken he was by the way the war was going.

Often, when she came round in the morning, she found his bed as she had made it the day before. Mostovskoy would be sitting by the window in his armchair, a full ashtray on the sill beside him.

Agrippina Petrovna had known better days: before the Revolution her late husband had owned a Volga ferry. In the evening, she usually had a glass of moonshine in her room. Not wanting to dilute its effect, she didn't eat anything with it. Then she would go out and sit on a bench in the yard. Her companions would be sober, but she herself would be feeling pleasantly tipsy and she would chatter away animatedly. Usually she covered her mouth with the hem of her shawl and tried not to breathe over the others: Markovna, the severe concierge, and Anna Spiridonovna, the cobbler's widow. Agrippina did not like gossip, but her need for conversation – especially when she'd had a drink – was overwhelming.

'Well, my friends,' she said, brushing the dust off the bench with her apron before she sat down. 'There was a time when it seemed to old women like us that the Communists were closing churches.' She turned towards the open ground-floor windows and continued in a loud voice, 'This accursed Hitler is truly the Antichrist. Truly Hitler is the Antichrist – and may no good ever come to him, in this world or in the next. I've heard tell that the Metropolitan bishop is celebrating the liturgy in Saratov and that prayers are now being said in every one of the churches. Yes, the churches are packed. And it's not only the old – it's young and old alike. Everyone has risen up against Hitler, everyone has arisen as one against this accursed Antichrist.' Then she went on more quietly, 'Yes, my girls, our beloved Soviet authorities are leaving us. People in our building are packing their belongings. They're going to the market and buying suitcases. They're sewing bags and sacks. As for my dear Mostovskoy, he looks ashen. Today he's been to see that

old woman he knows, to arrange to be evacuated. He hasn't even had his lunch.'

'What's he got to worry about? He's old, and he's got no family.'

'What do you mean? Really, what on earth do you mean? If anyone needs to leave, it's Mostovskoy. The Germans will make mincemeat of a man like him. He's rushing about like crazy, trying to work out what to do. Today he's been out and about all day long. After all, he's a Party member, an Old Bolshevik from Leningrad. Yes, he's in a bad way now. Stays up all night. Smokes like a chimney ... A pension of 1,500 roubles and a pass to the Party dining room. An apartment that's warm and dry. A trip to the Caucasus every summer. The man's done well for himself. No wonder he doesn't want to be liquidated by Hitler!'

It turned dark. The women went on talking – about this, that and everything. Markovna glanced up at the windows above her and said, 'I can see light again in the window of that whore on the second floor. Let's hope she's not signalling to the Germans.'

In a loud and intimidating bass, Markovna bellowed, 'Hey! You on the second floor! In a moment we'll shoot!'

The old women got up from their bench. Agrippina went back to her room.

Spiridonovna and Markovna lingered a little, to discuss Agrippina.

'She's been drinking again,' said Spiridonovna. 'You can smell it on her breath. But where does she get the money?'

'What do you think? She steals it from Mostovskoy,' Markovna replied. 'God knows how much she steals! If the Germans weren't coming, she could buy back the fine house she lost after the Revolution.' In sudden fright she went on, 'Lord, Lord, what have we done? Why this German Satan? What sins, Lord, are you punishing us for?'

Tolya was leaving on the evening train. He was tense and anxious, as if he had only just realized what lay in store for him. He wanted to appear nonchalant, but he could see that he was not fooling his grandmother, who was looking very distressed indeed. This upset him.

‘Have you written to your family?’ she asked.

‘Heavens above!’ he said crossly. ‘What do you want from me? I’ve been writing to my mother almost every day. I didn’t today, but I will tomorrow.’

‘I’m sorry, please don’t be angry with me,’ Alexandra Vladimirovna said quickly.

This infuriated Tolya still more.

‘What’s got into you? Why are you talking to me as if you think I’m some lunatic?’

Now it was Alexandra’s turn to feel angry.

‘Please calm down,’ she said brusquely. ‘Get a grip on yourself.’

Half an hour before he was due to leave, Tolya called out, ‘Seryozha, come here a moment!’

And he took from his knapsack an exercise book wrapped in newspaper.

‘Here – these are my notes, summaries of what I’ve read, a few ideas of my own. I once drew up a plan for my life up to the age of sixty. I’d resolved to devote myself to science, to work every day, every hour. So ... You understand ... If I ... In a word, keep this in memory of me. So, there we are ... That’s all.’

For some time they just stood there and looked at each other, shaken, unable to speak. Tolya squeezed Seryozha’s hand so tightly that his fingers went white.

There was no one else at home – only Seryozha and Alexandra Vladimirovna. Tolya said his goodbyes hurriedly, afraid of giving way to his feelings. ‘I don’t want Seryozha to come to the station with me. I don’t like being seen off.’

And in the corridor, he said to his grandmother, getting the words out as fast as he could, 'I shouldn't have come. I've been living a different life, away from everyone I love. I'd grown a hard shell. And now that shell's just melted away. If I'd known it would be like this, I wouldn't have come. That's why I haven't written to Máma today.'

Alexandra held her palms to Tolya's large flushed ears and, drawing him close, pushed his cap to one side and gave him a long kiss on the forehead. He went very still, remembering the sense of happy peace he had known long ago in her arms.

And now that his grandmother was old and weak and he was a strong young soldier, his strength and his helplessness had got suddenly confused. He pressed his whole body against her, called her his *bábushka*, his *babúsyá*, his darling *babúlya* and then rushed towards the door, head bowed.

Vera was still in the hospital. She was on night shift. After the evening round, she made her way out of the ward.

The corridor was lit by a blue lamp. Vera opened the window and stood there, leaning her elbows on the sill.

From the third floor there was a good view of the city. The river was white and gleaming. The blacked-out windows of buildings gave off a faint, grey-blue light, the colour of mica. There was no kindness, no warmth, no life in this icy blue – a light reflected first from the dead face of the moon and then from the dust-covered windows and the cold night-time water. It was a fragile, uncertain light. You had only to turn your head a little and it would disappear; once again the windows and the Volga would be a lifeless black.

Over on the east bank Vera could see a vehicle with lit headlamps. High in the sky above her, the beams from two searchlights had crossed; it was as if someone with a pair of pale blue scissors was shearing the curly clouds. Down below, in the garden, she could hear quiet voices and see little red lights; some of the patients from the convalescent ward must have slipped out through the kitchen door to enjoy a secret smoke. The wind off the Volga brought with it the freshness of the water, a clean cool smell that sometimes got the better of the heavy smell of the hospital but sometimes yielded to it, making it seem as if not only the hospital but also the moon and the river smelled of ether and carbolic acid, and that it was not clouds scudding across the sky but dusty balls of cotton wool.

From the isolation ward, where three patients were dying, came muffled groans.

Vera knew this monotonous groan of the dying, of those who could no longer ask for anything – neither food, nor water, nor even morphine.

The door of the ward opened; two men were bringing out a stretcher. First came Nikiforov, short and pockmarked; at the other end of the stretcher was Shulepin, who was tall and thin. Because of Nikiforov, Shulepin had to take unnaturally short steps.

Without turning round, Nikiforov said, 'Slow down a bit, you're pushing me.'

Lying on the stretcher was a body covered in a blanket.

It seemed as if the dead man had pulled the blanket over his head himself, so as not to see these walls, these wards and corridors where he had suffered so cruelly.

'Who is it?' asked Vera. 'Sokolov?'

'No, it's the new one,' replied Shulepin.

For a moment Vera imagined she was an important doctor, with the rank of general, who had just flown in from Moscow. The chief surgeon would lead her into the room for the dying and say, 'This one's a goner.' 'No, you're wrong,' she would reply. 'Prepare him to be operated on straightaway. I'll carry out the operation myself.'

From the commanders' ward on the second floor came the sound of laughter and quiet singing:

Tanya, Tatyana, Tanyusha,
Remember that glorious May?
I know we shall never forget –
Such joys can't be taken away.

She recognized the voice of Captain Sitnikov, wounded in the left hand. The military prosecutor had made inquiries, but there turned out to be nothing untoward about this wound – a splinter from a German mortar bomb was indeed found in it.⁵⁰ Then someone else quietly joined in, probably Kvasyuk, the quartermaster lieutenant with a broken leg. He had been driving a small truck full of watermelons for the canteen and a three-ton ammunition truck had crashed straight into him.

Sitnikov had pestered Vera day after day, begging her to bring him some alcohol from the pharmacy. 'Even if it's only fifty grams,'⁵¹ he had kept saying. 'How can you say no to a soldier?'

Vera had steadfastly said no – but since Sitnikov and Kvasyuk had become friends, she had smelt alcohol on their breath several times. Evidently one of the pharmacy duty nurses had proved more compassionate.

Here, standing by the window, she sensed two different worlds with apparently no points of contact between them. There was a fresh, cool world unlike anything else, a world of stars, moonlit water and ethereal pale blue light that appeared and disappeared in the windows,

a world born from heroic romances and night-time dreams, a world without which she felt life was not worth living. And there was another world right beside her, advancing on her from all sides, entering her nostrils, rustling her white medicine-impregnated gown – a world of groans, coarse tobacco and clomping boots. This more prosaic world was everywhere – in the tedious registration forms she kept having to fill in, in tetchy remarks by doctors, in the bowls of millet she ate day after day, in the hospital commissar’s dull lectures, in the dust of the streets and the howls of the air-raid siren, in her mother’s moralizing, in conversations about shop prices, in the endless queues, in her quarrels with Seryozha, and in family discussions of the merits and faults of friends and relatives. She could sense this world’s presence in her rubber-soled shoes and in her father’s old coat, now re-tailored to fit her.

Behind her, Vera heard the quiet click of crutches. Her elbows on the sill, she lifted her head to look up at the sky. She was forcing herself to look at the clouds, at the stars, at the play of moonlight on windows – but all she was really aware of was the sound of crutches, coming towards her out of the dark corridor. Only one pair of hospital crutches sounded like this.

‘What is it you’re dreaming about?’ came the voice of a young man.

‘Is it you, Viktorov? I didn’t hear you coming.’

And then she laughed, amused by her own little pretence, by her own unnatural voice.

‘What is it?’ he asked again, starting to laugh too. Whether she was feeling cheerful or sad, he wanted to show his meek readiness to join in her feelings – simply because they were hers.

‘It’s nothing,’ said Vera. ‘Nothing at all. I heard you perfectly. I knew you were coming. I wasn’t really lost in a dream, only pretending.’

But here too she was only playing at telling the truth. She felt these words would help love’s cause, that they would show Viktorov how strange and unusual she was, how unlike any other woman. But learning this game of love was impossible – and anyway it was unnecessary. Impossible, because it was too complex and difficult; unnecessary, because her love was growing within her all the time, like it or not.

‘No!’ Vera exclaimed, once Viktorov had duly told her how extraordinary she was. ‘I couldn’t be more ordinary. I’m dull and boring. There are tens of thousands of women in the city just like me.’

Viktorov had been brought to the hospital two weeks earlier. Some Messerschmitts had shot him down over the steppe and he had been wounded in the leg by an explosive bullet. A truck had happened to

pass by and had picked him up in the middle of nowhere. His clothes and his long fair hair were full of burs, thorns and bits of dry grass and wormwood. He had lain there on his stretcher, his head turned to one side on his long thin neck. His pale face looked dirty and dusty, his mouth was open and there was a strange, touching look in his eyes – a mixture of childish fear and the anguish of the old.

Vera had remembered how, when she was little, she once saw a young turkey that had just been clubbed. Its thin neck was curved back, its beak was open and its eyes were starting to glaze over. Bits of grass and straw were stuck to its ruffled feathers.

As they got ready to put Viktorov on the operating table, he had looked at Vera. Then he had seen his soiled underwear and looked away. And Vera, who had seen hundreds of naked male bodies, had felt embarrassed; tears of pity and shame had come to her eyes.

It wasn't the first time convalescent patients had made a play for her. Some had even tried to embrace her in the corridor. One political instructor had declared his love for her in a letter and asked her to marry him. When he was being discharged, he had asked her to give him a photograph.

Senior Sergeant Viktorov had never tried to talk to her, though she had often sensed him looking when she went into the ward. It was she who had started their first conversation: 'Your unit's not far away. Why don't any of your comrades come to visit you?'

'I'd just been transferred to another regiment. And I hardly know anyone any longer in my old regiment. They're all new.'

'Does that frighten you?'

He was slow to respond. She understood that he was suppressing the wish to reply the way pilots usually reply to questions like this from a young woman. Looking very serious, he said, 'Yes.'

They were both embarrassed. Both wanted the relationship between them to be special, not just something fleeting and shallow. And for both it was as if a bell had rung out, solemnly proclaiming that their wish was being realized.

Viktorov turned out to have been born in Stalingrad. At one time he had worked as a metal fitter. Spiridonov had often visited his workshop and had made his presence felt there.

But the two of them had no shared acquaintances. Viktorov lived six kilometres from Stalgres and had always gone straight home from work, not joining any sports teams or staying for any of the films shown in the club.

‘I don’t like sport,’ he said. ‘I like to read.’

Vera noticed that he liked the same books as Seryozha – books she didn’t find very interesting.

‘What I like best are historical novels. But it was difficult to get hold of them – there were only a few in the club library. I used to go into the city on Sundays and order from Moscow.’

The other patients liked Viktorov. Vera once overheard a commissar say, ‘He’s a good lad, someone you can rely on.’

She blushed, like a mother hearing people praise her son.

He smoked a lot. She would bring him cigarettes and loose tobacco. And soon afterwards the whole ward would be full of smoke.

On one arm he had a tattoo of an anchor and a length of cable. ‘That’s from when I was at factory school,’ he said. ‘I was quite wild. Once I was almost expelled.’

She liked his modesty. He never boasted. If he mentioned his combat experience, what he spoke about was always his comrades, his plane, the engine, the weather, the flying conditions – anything but himself. But he preferred to talk about life before the war. When the conversation did turn to the war, he usually said nothing at all – though he probably had a great deal to say. And certainly a lot more than Sitnikov, the munitions supply officer who was the ward’s chief orator.

Viktorov was thin, with narrow shoulders, small eyes and a large, wide nose. Vera was fully aware that he was not handsome – but since she liked him, she saw this as not a fault but a virtue. No one but her, she believed, could understand just how special he was. His smile, his gestures and movements, the way he looked at his watch or rolled a cigarette – everything about him was special.

When Vera was twelve, she had planned to marry her cousin Tolya, and at the age of fifteen she had fallen in love with the Komsomol⁵² organizer; the two of them had gone to the cinema and the beach together. She had thought there was nothing she didn’t know about love and romance and she had listened with a condescending smile to talk about such matters at home. When she was in her last year at school, girls in her class had said things like, ‘One should marry a man ten years older than oneself, a man who’s found his place in the world.’

Life could hardly have turned out more differently.

The corridor window became their meeting place. Often, if she had a free moment, she needed only go there and think about Viktorov – and she would hear the sound of his crutches, as if she had sent him a telegram.

Sometimes, though, when he was looking thoughtfully out of the window and she was standing beside him, looking at him in silence, he would suddenly turn round and say, 'What?'

'What is it?' she would ask in bewilderment.

They often talked about the war, but sometimes it was their more casual, childish words that mattered the most.

'Senior Sergeant – I like that!' she would say. 'How senior can you be when you're only twenty!'

*

That night, after she'd pretended not to hear him coming, they went on standing side by side, their shoulders touching. They were talking all the time, though neither was really listening. More important than any words was the way he would go very still, waiting for her to touch him again, if her shoulder moved away from him. Trustingly, she would move closer. Sensing this apparently chance contact, he would look sideways at her neck, at her ear, at her cheek and at a lock of her hair.

In the blue light, Viktorov's face appeared dark and sad. Vera looked at him with a presentiment of tragedy. 'I don't understand. At first I thought I just felt sorry for you, because you'd been wounded. But now it's myself I'm starting to pity.'

He wanted to put his arms around her. He wondered if this was what she wanted too, if she was waiting patiently for him to stop being so hesitant. And then he just said, 'Why? What do you mean?'

'I don't know,' she said. And she looked up at him, the way a child looks at an adult.

Choking with emotion, he leaned towards her. His crutches fell to the floor and he let out a little cry. He hadn't actually put any weight on his wounded leg; he had simply been afraid he might do.

'What's the matter? Are you feeling dizzy?'

'Yes,' he said. 'My head's spinning.' And he put his arms around her shoulders.

'Hang on to the windowsill. Let me pick up your crutches.'

'No,' he replied. 'Let's stay like this.' And they went on embracing. To Viktorov it felt as if, rather than Vera supporting him because he was clumsy and helpless, it was he who was defending Vera, protecting her from a huge and hostile night sky.

Soon he would be fully recovered and he would be back in his Yak⁵³ again, patrolling the sky over Stalgres and the hospital. He could hear

the roar of his engine – in his mind he was already pursuing a Junkers. Once again, he experienced that desire so difficult for anyone but a pilot to understand – the desire to get close to an enemy who may be your death. Ahead of him he could see the lilac flicker of tracer bullets and a cruel pale face – the face of a German gunner and radio operator – that he had once glimpsed during a dogfight over Chuguev.

He pulled open his hospital gown and wrapped it around Vera. She pressed herself against him.

For a few moments he stood there in silence, looking down at the floor, sensing her warm breath and the pressure of her breast against his chest. He would be happy, he felt, to stand there on one leg for the next year, holding this young woman in a dark and empty corridor.

‘That’s enough,’ she said suddenly. ‘Let me pick up your crutches.’

She helped Viktorov to sit down on the windowsill. ‘Why?’ she asked. ‘Why does it all have to be like this? Everything could have been so good. My cousin’s just left for the front. And the surgeon says you’re healing unusually quickly. You’ll be discharged in ten days.’

‘Never mind,’ he replied, with the insouciance of a young man choosing not to think about love’s future. ‘Come what may, what we have now is good.’ And then, with a little smile, he added, ‘You know ... I mean ... You know why I’m getting better so quickly? It’s because I love you.’

Later that night, lying on a little white-painted wooden bench in the duty room, Vera thought and thought.

Was it possible, in this vast four-storey building full of groans, blood and suffering, for newborn love to survive?

She remembered the stretcher and the body covered with a blanket. She was gripped by a sharp, heart-rending pity for a man whose name she did not know and whose face she had forgotten, a man whom the orderlies had already taken out to be buried. This feeling was so powerful that she cried out and folded her legs up towards her, as if to fend off a blow.

But she knew now that this joyless world was dearer to her than the heavenly palaces of her childish dreams.