

Yulia Marfutova

The Sky a Hundred Years Ago

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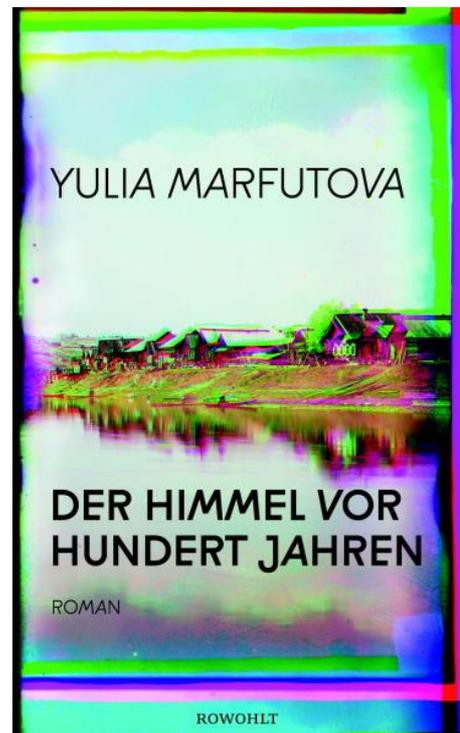
A Russian village around 1918. The revolution has already taken place, the civil war is well underway, but the villagers are not yet aware of the historic events. The declining tsardom is vast, information flows slowly, but even in a place like this, time does not stand still: the village elder, Ilya, for example, recently started making his weather forecasts with the help of glass tube that he cherishes like life itself. Old Pyotr, on the other hand, prefers to heed the nearby river and its spirits. But for the time being, the fronts are not yet hardened.

It so happens that Inna Nikolaevna, Ilya's wife, is just as superstitious as Pyotr. When she drops a knife in the kitchen, a stranger appears in the village. The young man, who is much too young, is not wearing any boots, but a shabby officer's uniform, and when pressed, he recounts a different story every time. The villagers eye him suspiciously, hassle him, after a while not just with questions – and yet not even young Annushka can find out why he came to the village. And above all: why he stays.

Whether she is writing about the weather, wisdom or fish – Yulia Marfutova makes voices audible that you don't forget in a hurry. In *The Sky a Hundred Years Ago*, ideas and ideologies, village and world, past and present, humour and reason all come together.

Yulia Marfutova, born in 1988 in Moscow, studied German and history in Berlin and completed her doctorate in Münster. She was awarded, among others, a working scholarship from the Berliner Senat and the GWK Förderpreis für Literatur. She held a scholarship from the Literaturforum im Brecht Haus and from the Jürgen Ponto Stiftung, and was selected for an authors' workshop at the Berliner Festspiele and at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. Yulia Marfutova lives in Boston. *The Sky a Hundred Years Ago* is her first novel.

- “Powerful. An entirely unique voice. A world as described by Chekhov and yet narrated like a fast-paced, rough and ready film from Berlin-Mitte.” Florian Illies
- Past times – up close and in glorious colour: A timeless story and an outstanding debut.
- English sample translation available.



YULIA MARFUTOVA

THE SKY A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

I

They come from all over the region, they all come just to question Ilya. Will the weather hold, Ilya? Will it rain soon, Ilya? Will it be a good harvest, Ilya? Shall we bring in the hay?

Ilya, Ilya!

And Ilya, the white-bearded, Ilya, the wrinkled, Ilya, the half-blind, brings his face up close to the small glass tube, stops with his nose just a waft away from the glass, examines the mercury inside for a long time and says, more to himself than to their pricked up ears, mhm. And the murmuring begins: What, what did Ilya say? And the puzzling begins: What, what does 'mhm' mean? And they all carry it back to their villages, Ilya said such and such. And Ilya has still proved to be right. Every child knows that.

The small glass tube. Rising air pressure means good weather, falling air pressure means bad. But the main thing is that the tube has a name that is melodious, because it sounds foreign. Greek, Ilya says. Nobody, not even Ilya, has ever been to Greece. People here don't travel.

No-one can remember how Ilya got hold of the tube. It must have been a very long time ago. At a time when exotic goods were offered for sale by travelling salesmen, when strangers still used to come to this sap green region that is, by the way fertile – a stopover, a wrong turn, but still. It must have been around this time that Ilya (or the Ilya father or the Ilya grandfather) had purchased this magic tube, this magic wand, to which all the pilgrim paths from the surrounding area lead.

The people here do not travel, but they come to the tube.

No-one asks how old are you, Ilya? What a stupid question. How is anyone supposed to know? No-one, not even Ilya, could say how old Ilya is. Not even the Ilya parents, if they were still alive. When people have children, they have better things to do than to head straight into town. Usually they wait a year or two, sometimes longer. The best thing to do is to wait for the birth of a second child, but even then, you don't head straight into town. Sometimes another child is born during this time. The Ilya parents won't have hurried, the Ilya-father would at some point and rather unwillingly, have set off for the town, that is not especially far, but also not very close if you have to walk there. The official will have barely looked at him. Name? Place of birth? Date of birth? And the Ilya-father will have scratched his head in embarrassment, not at all used to interaction with so-called people in authority. Uh, yes, mhm. And the official will have asked: Well, what is your name? And the Ilya-father will have said: Ilya. And the official will have said: Good, good, so let's call your son Ilya too. Ilya Ilyitch. And then he won't have asked any more questions, will have filled out the rest himself and placed a sweeping signature underneath. And the date of birth will have been identical to the date of issue. And the Ilya-father will have carefully brought the document back to the village, shown it to his astonished wife and kept it somewhere, where it will have been quickly forgotten, because such a piece of paper is actually of no use at all.

Of course, the Ilya-father couldn't read. Ilya probably can't read either, but you would think that he might be able to.

And anyway, birthdays are not that important, at least not as important as the saint's day, which the church commemorates. Ilya and Ilya-father, when he was still alive, celebrated the saint's day together. On this day the village ovens give off an aroma that really makes your mouth water. And of course, there is singing, even if the notes are a bit off-key. *Kak na Ilyiny imeniny ispekli my karawaj, wot takoj wyschiny, wot takoj schiriny* etc. The lyrics are supported by arm movements.

The fact that nobody knows exactly how old Ilya is does not mean that there are no opinions. Irka, for example, says that he is roughly, well, something like, well, definitely not older than the great weeping willow. Although others claim that Ilya already had a white beard way back before the embankment was strengthened. That was many, many harvests ago.

Not all of them come to Ilya. Pyotr, who also has a white beard, a bush, a curly one, does not think much of him, and even less of the little tube. If someone just begins to purse their lips to make the first sound of the name of the tube, Pyotr goes red in the face and spits, as loudly as possible, and a slimy lump lands sometimes on, sometimes next to, the feet of the person who had wanted to say the word. The adults are sensible; at most, in a moment of greatest carelessness, they might let the first letter slip out, but never more than the first letter. But the children are fascinated by the connection between the word and Pyotr's saliva. They jump around him and call out: little tube! Little tubelittletubelittletube. And Pyotr spits and spitsspitsspits. These brats, these stupid brats that never leave you alone. And what is almost worse: they're damn fast, they know how to jump aside so the lumps of slime don't hit them.

The adults flock to Ilya, the children plague Pyotr. And one year, many hundreds of versts away, a man found out how to influence the saliva production of dogs. His name is said to be Ivan. Ivan, Ivanyusha, a name like from a fairytale. But nothing more is known of this Ivan. The news - washed up from afar, flotsam on the most winding paths - was immediately forgotten again because no-one was waiting for it. People here own dogs that are more important.

Every morning, after the first, but before the second cock-crow – Pyotr says that is the best time – he leaves the house, goes down the big road, then left, left again and then cuts across country to the riverbank. Moistens a finger with his tongue, holds it in the air. Lies down on his stomach in the grass, his face level with the water. Watches the current. Straightens up, not without moaning, the gout in his bones, and says to his wife when he returns to the farm: Mhm.

Pyotr says the river is more reliable than any tube. Pyotr says he's had a white beard for so long, and the river has been meandering through the landscape for even longer. Measured by the length and whiteness of his beard, Pyotr is the second oldest in the village.

The river, always just called 'the river' in the village, controls the area by splitting the country in two shores for many days travel, then branching out and branching off, mouthing in foreign names, shrinking to a small river or a trickle in some places, only to elsewhere grow again to an impressive width. It cannot help but keep branching out, carving out a path with its branches that is said to reach as far as the Barents Sea. Unimaginable vastness.

In some areas the river washes boat planks ashore - little pieces of decomposed, splintered pieces of wood. Occasionally there is rust-coated iron. Even more rarely other things – linen, for example.

But the river has never washed anything onto this bank. When Pyotr sets off between the first and second cock-crow, he only finds what you always find. When he stands and looks down: clumps of earth, beetles, pebbles, earth, water and his own feet. When he squints, his own nose. When he lies on his stomach and looks straight ahead or looks up: the blue-grey of the water with the slightly lighter blue-grey of the sky. On the horizon, the water adheres almost seamlessly to the sky, just a few trees and bushes in between. Sometimes threads of rain.

In some areas, the areas that appear on maps, that have managed to become precise lines and strokes, shading and dots with the most meticulous inscriptions, that have not just become a green surface with an undulating blue line because of the sheer lack of interest of the land surveyors and their clients - in such areas the flotsam is collected, the flotsam is hand-picked and reintroduced to the goods traffic. A part of the small pieces of wood, the iron, the linen is stuffed into large sacks and flogged at markets with quite a bit of haggling. A flourishing business. Apparently, there are people who are able to make use of that stuff, even people who are prepared to pay for it. But only in far away marketplaces. Those who live just a few steps away from the river only sell.

The most worthless things are the most valuable. These are the so-called treasures. They are not sold in sacks, but individually, in caskets, taken to larger towns, which really means the smaller cities of the Oblast. In this century in the really big cities, the rich citizens don't collect rarities and curiosities anymore, certainly not the unsaleable pickings from what is left of ships.

Sometimes, not very often, the villages are still given a chance. You travel along the river until you reach the place which the big ships can't reach, so far, but not quite as far as Pyotr's riverbank.

And the residents flock to the marketplace, even if it's not actually market day, to admire the stranger as much as his treasures. A hat is placed on the ground. Jingling. People don't buy anything. They just pay to see the treasures.

It is said that the river also brought the little tube with one of its ships. It could not have been otherwise, here in this area everything ultimately has something to do with the river; everything has to do with everything and everyone with everyone. The old people in the village say it's lucky that Pyotr has never thought about it. How it would annoy him, this connection between the river and the little tube, this underhandedness, which means he is already behind and always will be, the mere thought that from this perspective, it is the river, his river, that makes him spit.

II

One spring after the village's favourite dog died, wretchedly and deafeningly yelping, perishing from spoiled meat, in the second spring after the snowmelt, a single wrong step that broke old Petrovna's leg and hip, three springs after someone came from who knows where, so wiry and peaky, little more than a child, stayed one night and then disappeared with four chickens, the topic of conversation just won't die down.

While the river, like all rivers, flows, while Ilya and Pyotr say mhm, even if they mean different things, one day a knife slips from the Ilya-wife's hand and falls to the ground. It is a kitchen knife, wooden handle, already a little bit blunt from all the shredding and slicing, makes a loud noise when it hits the ground and scatters chunks of food on the floor.

You know what they say: if a knife falls, then a man will enter the house. If a spoon falls, a woman comes. And if a fork falls, a woman comes too, because spoons and forks are feminine, knives on the other hand are masculine, at least on this bank of the river.

The Ilya-wife, Inna is her name, Inna Nikolaevna, a patronym considerably chosen with dignity after her father's name (a Tsar's name), not like some of the others in the village who just allow themselves to be called Irka or Mashka or some other -ka, so this Inna Nikolaevna does not immediately rush to her husband. Of course not, after all, he is busy, very busy studying the small tube, this must be respected. But she too is busy. Quickly picks up the knife, not even wiping it on her skirt, immediately carries on cutting. Hygiene is only something for people you have never seen before. Not for the home.

Only in the evening does she announce: Ilya, we will have a visitor. Soon. A man.

Really? What kind of a man? asks Ilya, who wonders what sort of male visitor his wife is expecting.

I don't know, Inna Nikolaevna says, just a man. I dropped a knife. You know what that means.

But knowing and wanting to know are two very different things.

That, Ilya says, doesn't mean anything. At most it means that you're all thumbs.

He says to his wife, who does not contradict him, because she doesn't know where to start. And hopes for a bowl full to the brim of Shchi, a dish, not much more than a splutter that can be swallowed without chewing when you are as hungry as he is. If a knife was being used, there must be some dinner. He thinks and says as if to appease her: Innochka, little pigeon. He says this very tenderly.

But 'Innochka, little pigeon' remains sitting at the table, motionless, her lips pursed, there, they have already become quite colourless, and doubts, well, her husband's sanity. For Inna Nikolaevna is a determined and secret Pyotrist: she is deeply suspicious of her husband's small tube studies, deeply suspicious of the whole Ilyanismus, this rampant nonsense. She prefers to stick to the river, you're on the safe side there at least.

Oh, come on now! Innochka, little pigeon.

The pot is full to the brim, but Inna Nikolaevna slowly shakes her head. Says: I am sorry, there is no soup.

Oh!

You know: the harvest, the times, all this and that.

Mhm. And bread? Is there at least bread in the house?

There is.

And what else?

Nothing, nothing at all.

Only what Inna Nikolaevna is willing to give him. And today that is just bread. And not even milk to dip it in.

All evening Inna Nikolaevna thinks: in a moment, in a moment he will come. And with every sound she thinks: isn't that? Isn't that him? And that night she stays at attention, her ears strained, so that she cannot sleep.

Ilya, who does not say what he thinks, rolls onto his left side, his legs slightly bent, and already he snores so loudly that Inna Nikolaevna can only listen for the door in the intervals.

And so the next day.

And the day after.

And the day that follows.

And the day that comes after.

While nothing happens, something else happens. Or at least almost happens. A fantasy, the most shimmering variety of fantasy. The neighbours to the left of the rear field, those, they want a new floor. Not the mixture of straw and clay and dried cow dung that everyone here has, but suddenly a real floor, did you ever hear such a thing? They think they're better than us.

People whisper. People gossip. People gossip viciously. And Inna Nikolaevna joins in. But one afternoon, when she can't bear it any longer, when even the floor is not enough distraction, she goes to Pyotr, sits next to him on the old bench in the yard and says: I dropped a knife the other day.

And? asks Pyotr, a mischievous look in his eye: who has come? A secret admirer maybe?

Oh, says Inna Nikolaevna. And then nothing for a long time. With the tip of her foot she draws meandering lines that constantly cross each other, with little lumps of earth on the side.

I simply don't understand! No one has come. No one since Sunday, except Ilya, and he doesn't count.

Not even ...?

He is sick.

Not even ...?

Seems he took a different route.

...

Not even?

No.

...

And then suddenly Pyotr says: that is probably your Ilya's influence!

How do you mean? Inna Nikolaevna asks and has already decided that today, too, there will be nothing but bread for dinner.

The little tube. That simply can't go well in the long run. It can't go well for the whole village.

There's a reason for the old saying: where you show spirits the door, they won't go in.

Says Pyotr and crosses himself hastily and Inna Nikolaevna follows suit.

[...]

IV

Well, you can rely on omens after all, you just have to be patient.

She sees him for the first time when she's busy in the stable. While Inna Nikolaevna's hands are busy, her head is busy too, thoughts here and there. She takes a step to the right, then another, then another, and suddenly steps on something soft that lies covered by straw, lies completely hidden and sleeping, and this soft thing is him. And he lets out a long scream – Inna Nikolaevna is as heavy as an ox – while Inna Nikolaevna is much too excited to scream. She gasps violently for air, and when she is able to speak again, she says – so then she says, she actually says: beautiful! You finally made it.

He's wearing a uniform like Inna Nikolaevna has never seen before, a uniform that commands her respect, which in all its filthy shabbiness impresses her. And in turn, Inna Nikolaevna apparently has something that inspires respect in him; maybe it is the gaze following the scream that so quickly becomes steady, maybe it is the hands that resolutely go to the hips; maybe it is just the pain following the kick. In any case, he answers: Yes. Admittedly, a bit stretched out: Yesss. And Inna Nikolaevna says: Good, well come on in then. And leaves him no time to wonder what sort of woman he has encountered, who is only briefly shocked, is not at all surprised that she stumbled across him, there in the stable near her house. This is how the people in the village talk about their first encounter. There are as many versions as there are villagers.

The house smells like all old houses, a bit musty, although it is lived in. It is warm outside, but the cold is still hanging in the beams, for the time being you still put your coat back on after taking it off outside, you still use the stove more for heating than for cooking. The ceiling is low. The windows are small; during the other seasons it is more important not to let the indoor air out than to let the outdoor air and the light in.

When you go inside: in one corner, the stove, that is the kitchen. That is also Annushka's bedroom. She sleeps on the stove, where it is cosy and warm: the best sleeping place in the house. In the other corner, diagonally opposite, between two windows: the icon, The Blessed Virgin Mary, the child in her arms, a radiant halo above her head. The Virgin Mary is standing, her head slightly inclined, on a sloping wooden board, which increases the inclination of her head. She has her gaze fixed on the entrance, has her gaze firmly fixed on him when he appears behind Inna Nikolaevna. The colour is slightly peeling off The Virgin Mary.

There is another corner in the room, that is Ilya's study, that's where he studies the little tube, he receives visitors there. And diagonally opposite is Inna Nikolaevna's corner, where the stranger is being taken to. Ilya is not home, nor is Annushka, and so Inna Nikolaevna is all alone with him. They sit down on a bench, Inna Nikolaevna offers him a drink. He drinks hastily, wipes his mouth with his sleeve, gets more to drink, wipes his mouth with his sleeve. They are silent for a while. Then Inna Nikolaevna says: you are shivering! She places a few more logs on the fire, good, well-dried wood, and they are silent for a while again.

Inna Nikolaevna crumples a corner of her apron in her hands.

He looks at the icon.

Inna Nikolaevna adds the second corner.

His gaze glides over the empty walls. Then lower: chests, benches, dusted with soot.

Inna Nikolaevna clears her throat.

He scratches his arm.

Inna Nikolaevna looks at him. From the side: encrusted earth on a scuffed collar, the neck covered in moles.

You must have had a long journey? She asks and scrunches up the apron a little more.

Hmhm.

Then you must be hungry, she says. And there is the bread already, thick slices have been cut off, are dunked in milk. He eats as hastily as he drank.

Only then does Inna Nikolaevna say: My name is Inna Nikolaevna. And he, whose mouth is full, pushes the bread into his cheeks and mumbles something into his food. A mixture of sounds,

somehow strange and beautiful to the ear, somehow smacking and melodic, somehow like this and yet different. It sounds a bit like Vadik, but Inna Nikolaevna is not quite sure. She tries out the name right away: Vadik. You'll stay the night, Vadik? We have another straw sack, Vadik. You can sleep on it, Vadik. I'll fetch it for you, Vadik. It's under the bench, Vadik. And she jumps up. She feels more comfortable somehow when she can keep busy.

Incidentally: Vadik, Vadim. She has always liked the name.

Vadim, the holy one, the venerable martyr whose head did not want to be separated from his body, so they said in church. Maybe the story isn't true, who can say what happened ages ago? God's servants are always drunk, so some caution is needed; they babble a lot, about beheadings and torture and swords, so you keep on coming back to them. But what's the point – quibbles, theological hair-splitting are not Inna Nikolaevna's thing, they never were.

She doesn't ask Vadik what he thinks of the venerable head of the venerable martyr.

V

... and already there has been talk of the stranger, already the babble of voices has increased, a murmur and a whisper at the market. He is said to be called Vadik, he is said to sleep on a straw sack, led into the house by Inna Nikolaevna. What on earth was she thinking, hospitableness aside?

They no longer only go to the market for the goods.

An officer, they say, not a simple soldier, they say. The uniform he wears has never been seen around here before. Richly decorated. But dirty too, the old women point out. Heads and scarves sway disapprovingly.

You are as thick as two short planks, the others say, what sort of officer is that supposed to be, say the others, whose own jacket doesn't fit, whose trousers hang loose around his much too thin legs, where you can see the hunger in his face.

And: he has no boots.

They say, he has been travelling a long time, completely exhausted by the vastness of the Empire, they say, even officers fall into the grass, even officers' feet don't wear anything there. They don't wear anything, not even boots.

And anyhow: who needs shoes in the village?

Hmm yes, they say. Truetrue, they say. Boots are only for city folk, are known to be for show-offs, are at most for, for – but even the lowest rank brings boots home when he returns from the front with nothing but silence.

Why else should anyone go to war?

Mr Officer. What in God's name is he doing here, of all places in the most remote, the most forgotten place in the entire Empire? Why did he not stay in Petrograd, in Moscow, in Minsk, where the officers usually live? The war against the Japanese is over; the men have left and returned home, and officers have never come to the village.

The war against the Germans, on the other hand, is not over, not for a long time, but it is far away. Those who returned home, who fled home, don't speak of the war. And of those who did not come home, did not run, stumble, they cannot speak. The word 'deserter' is not used here.

Another thing that speaks against Vadik: officers are older, officers have an entourage, officers are on horseback. Ride smoothly groomed steeds. They, the villagers, would be happy with a mule, but they are not officers.

Oh, they protest full-throatedly, his steed died in an accident, perished. So the poor man had to continue on foot, he got lost, so he continued along the river, on and on, and arrived in the village in a total state of exhaustion.

And anyway: Inna Nikolaevna, the dropped knife.

And anyway: God decreed it.

Andbesidesandbesides.

Andmoreoverandanyway.

But oh, the old ladies moan, oh, oh, they throw their hands up in despair, oh, oh, what is to become of it. An officer in a house with Annuschka, an officer in a house with Ilya, two bears in a cave. Don't you know what they'll say? says old Marfa Ivanovna.

And on her forehead: deep furrows.

And on neighbouring foreheads: furrows.

Others have other concerns. They shout: Nonsense – officer? He's an imposter, a scoundrel, a rotter who's fled from Siberia! A rotter who belongs in Siberia! The best proof: honest people don't wear clothes like his, not such elegantly decorated attire. Honest people wear coarse fabrics, you only have to look down at yourself, touch the fabric on your own skin, then everything is clear.

And again, they shout: an Old Believer, a Raskolnik! Look at the way he makes a sign of the cross! Two fingers. Instead of three. And they demonstrate: two fingers, yes, just so, only two. Those shouting out have never been to Siberia. Those shouting out have never met an Old Believer. Those shouting out (most of them) have not met Vadik either. They haven't even been to the other side of the river, where the people are different from those here. They are said to have ragged beards, to be rough fellows whose wild chants are blown across by the wind whenever it feels like it. The chants come across to this shore quietly, shaken somehow, scattered, the sounds all mixed up.

They say that over on the other side, there is whole pack of wolves per person, so they say, even if they have never been over there, never ever, why should one?

They say that over there the grasses are obscurely high, the earth more inhospitable. They say the sky is hung higher over there – or was it lower? One or the other. They say, over there is there; here is here. That can be said without a doubt. And some people know that the wolf packs are bigger there, the wolves hungrier there. No, you really don't have to go to the other side to be fully informed.

To be clear: those who live by the river cannot necessarily swim. Those who live by the river don't necessarily own a boat. Those who live by the river just live by the river.

This does not mean that you don't have your sources, don't make your enquiries, don't question some customers; after all, living by the river is not like living under a rock.

Three have returned home from the last war, from the war against the Japanese. They were asked, and mutually declared: Japan is a distant land that lies far behind the river and can go and get stuffed.

Nothing else. Otherwise they just cursed and drank and beat their wives and children, until they died, one by one, from diseases they brought with them and from local alcohol, that's the way it is here. But at least they managed to kick the bucket in time to avoid having to go to the next war: it was really close in the case of the third one, he couldn't have requested one day more to die at home in his own village.

Three also returned home from the current front line. They asked them questions but didn't learn much. One of them collapsed from exhaustion right behind the village limits without ever coming back to his senses. One died of fever. And one was unharmed, except for his nose, which was missing from his face. And he barely spoke any more – although the nose isn't the organ responsible for speaking.

The nose-less one is called Lev, he's the son of old Sergey. Because he doesn't speak any more, you often forget that he's even still there, as if being mute were synonymous with invisibility, as if it were a stupid mistake of fate not to simply let him die.

Lev, they ask, the uniform, Vadik's uniform? Lev, they ask, can you trust someone who just walks into the village? Lev, they ask, Lev, say something, Lev, you were there.

But Lev just sways his head in a way that could mean everything and is silent and closes his ears to the world, that is so terribly talkative. And then his contours finally dissolve, fade slowly and irreversibly, soon disappear completely, as if they never existed. Only the parents sometimes remember him, but after all, they are his parents. It would be impossible to expect others to have such a memory.

[...]

XXIII

[...]

Meanwhile, Vadik has also conveyed his ideas to the grandfather. And that on the market square, in front of the open mouths of the village. Each time they sound a bit different, each time new words are added for which a rhyme must first be found. Today for example: classify, classification, class, class struggle.

They have deep respect for complicated words like these, but they also have more important things to do than to listen carefully, very carefully. The fields, the animals. Only Varvara always seems to have time. She not only listens when she has to, not only when there is no other choice. Incidentally: they can only wonder at how many words a seemingly inconspicuous piece of paper can contain. Not that Vadik needs the piece of paper. He becomes more fiery with each rendition, but also somehow more confused. Marfa Ivanovna says he reminds her of the preachers and prophets that used to pass through the villages, only he doesn't have as long a beard as they did. Grandmother's response: oh really. She has never heard of prophets that are supposed to bend over small tubes.

And Vadik does bend, every morning, noon and evening he helps Grandfather, assists and philosophises and assists, philosophising and philosophises assisting. And more and more often he too says: mhm.

He is quick to learn.

The current is quite dangerous in some places, thinks Anna. The men by the river, they won't, they can't have come just to fish. After all, fish can be found everywhere where there is water, nothing special and especially not worth the trip. Were the men really the last ones to see Pyotr spit, did one thing really lead to another, did they really – Even more unbelievable things have happened before.

But what was it exactly that the man with the clean fingernails meant when he was talking to Grandfather on the other side of the wall, Anna asks herself. Do the men by the river come with ideas, or do they, conversely, flee from them? And are they really and truly the same ideas that Vadik is talking about, or different ones? What is connected with what, and what does Pyotr's disappearance have to do with the connections? If only they knew.

[...]

XXVII

Inna Nikolaevna hasn't dropped a knife today. And yet they are here. The men from the river. So they really do exist. Inna Nikolaevna has to mumble this to herself several times, a little bewildered, a little upset, that they don't exist only in reports about the other side of the river. That it is possible that slightly blurred dots, until a moment ago still merged with the line of the horizon, suddenly and in all seriousness stand before you in flesh and blood and are a head taller than you in the process. That they are sitting in her own kitchen before dawn and their stomachs growl so loudly that she wants to cover her ears.

But what did she expect?

Ilya said that he didn't need to question the small tube, that anyone who wanted to know could have known, why not her? Moreover, it was she, Inna Nikolaevna, who had been the first to think practically, who had been the first to prophesy, for all to hear: they will come with empty bellies, with greedy eyes. Apparently, you can voice such down-to-earth, such clear-sighted concerns and yet not understand that a possibility can become a reality. One with weather-beaten faces and torn trousers at that. Yes, yes, it works – it is not that hard to hope, to believe what you want to believe, as long as no one bothers you in the process.

Ilya, as cool as a cucumber, at least from the outside, says to the reality: how about a drink?

They burst out laughing. The samogon pleases the reality even more than the food that Inna Nikolaevna reluctantly hands out.

The reality, Ilya notes with some regret, doesn't start snoring nearly as quickly as the one with the clean fingernails, the one with the belly, the devil with the firm stride. The reality has a high tolerance level. If they carry on at this pace, the supplies will soon all be depleted.

And then?

What you learn about the reality on the first day, what you need to learn: it doesn't tolerate resistance, no question, not even the slightest request. Inna Nikolaevna still says the name anyway: Pyotr.

What? The old man?

Then the reality laughs again. Guffawing loudly. That is answer enough. Who then wants to ask: why. This reality needs no reason. That's why it is the reality.

One reality has protruding bones, the other is missing a finger, the left thumb to be precise, and also a few teeth. One reality has a low voice, the other has not said a word yet, just smacked his lips and wolfed down the food. Burped too. One reality said: we are staying here now! Slammed his fist down on the table.

None of the realities asked what their host thought of their unannounced moving in. What do they care what people think, what will such a village have to say. Entirely different things matter here. Not anyone's opinion, not petty sensitivities. Much more important things are at stake here, bigger, more significant, how best to put this? It is about renewal, about dreams, about a turn around and reorganisation and redirection, about something revolutionary and – yes – also about revolution. About a new world with new people and new animals and new houses and new stables and even new fields, on which new grain will grow. In a word: about the future.

The future? Wait a moment? Ears are pricked. Is this the same future that Vadik speaks of?

Who is Vadik?

Clearly reality has not heard of Vadik yet, nor of Ilyanism. It does make you wonder what this reality actually knows, if it does not even know the most basic, the most obvious things. Of the kind that every child must have picked up from parents and grandparents, and if not from them, then from the neighbours. Could it be that reality knows nothing about small the study of small tubes?

Another sip. Quick.

It turns out that the reality is not interested in long discussions about intricate complex matters; it is more informed about facts. Especially those that are entirely special and created: by it, not by others. And preferably here, now, immediately, on the spot.

The reality really does not allow any misunderstandings to arise. Proclaims that the future, which, as we know, is to come later, urgently depends on the distillery skills, the fields and the village's stables. So, please! Hand it over. Everyone has to contribute.

Even if they starve to death in the process?

But of course. The reality explains that such trivialities cannot be taken into consideration now.

Then it goes on to lead by good example.

So: another sip.

Best, best of all, the reality knows its way around the reality of its stomach. Because Inna Nikolaevna knows best, best of all about her increasingly depleted stocks, and because she has not dropped a knife, she spits into the reality's cups and plates. With pleasure. When no one is looking – apart from Anna, but she doesn't count, she'll soon be spitting into them herself.

Does Inna Nikolaevna not understand that it is all happening for the future, all for the sake of the big dream? Yes. Yesyes. It is just that the question is slowly arising in her, who will prove to be the greediest here: the brand-new reality or the old devil, the one with the clean fingernails?

Wait and see.

Wait.

For a reality that simply doesn't want to start snoring, that demands more and more, that somehow makes the walls come closer together, so that you no longer know where to go, it's become so confined in here all of a sudden; this reality now says: first there needs to be a clear-up.

Of what?

Well, with the old folks.

Which ones?

With all of them of course!

The longer the reality sits there, the more comfortable it makes itself, the more talkative it becomes. Without understanding what can't be understood about the matter: first there has to be a very thorough clear-up before you can make a start on your dreams. So, with all the old folk. With all the old folk. Does that include Pyotr? Whose skin was covered with wrinkles, that, like the annual rings of a tree, no one saw reason to count. Who went to the river, which has rushed through the same riverbed since ancient times, and held his finger in the wind, this antediluvian child.

Inna Nikolaevna doesn't ask the question, nor any other. Better not to think of the fact that she too is old, Ilya too – oh. Yes, oh. If only the Blessed Virgin Mary were here, in one had the cross, the other raised in a protective gesture, but she had had to be taken down.

She is old, the Virgin Mary, as old as the entire human race. Do the Virgin Mary's joints hurt? Just as hers do, when the weather crawls maliciously into her body. Do the Virgin Mary's temples hurt lately too?

Oh, Inna Nikolaevna.

She doesn't ask this question out loud either.

[...]

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Doesn't the reality also speak of the future? The same one that Vadik likes to speak of? Anna asks and reaps a shoulder shrug. Not even that: just the mere suggestion of a twitch.

Vadik is not particularly eager to cross paths with the new reality. Not that he would admit it. He has never been as silent as he is now.

Do you know, Anna says and pulls her legs up close, you have been more fun. Do you know, Anna says, but Vadik is not even listening. He is lost in thoughts that he doesn't share with anyone.

You didn't tell anyone else about this place? Why? Vadik asks. Flicks away from his leg a mosquito that was just about attach itself, assessing the landscape.

Now it is Anna who shrugs her shoulders. She doesn't do it to annoy him. She really doesn't know.

And anyway, she remembers, before she could think about it any more, anyway, she has to leave, preferably right now. Before anyone notices that she is missing, before anyone gets any ideas. Her grandparents probably need her. But (and she doesn't say this out loud) she is also curious about the reality, just as curious as she is about the future. Even if she doesn't know exactly what she is supposed to think about all the stuff people talk about. Sometimes she believes everything, sometimes nothing. One more reason to take to her heels, to take a closer look at the matter.

The reality has not always been a reality, but – yes, even these times will have existed – son and brother, farmer and soldier. Incidentally, the reality answer to the names Mitya and Kostya. Some people almost look disappointed, these names are so common. Mitya and Kostya, these names

exist in the village too. It stands to reason that Mitya and Kostya come from a village like theirs, which has more fleas than people. They scratch themselves in the same way as the people here in the village.

It also stands to reason that Mitya and Kostya have a surname that is simple through and through. One like, yes, like Ivanovich. Probably – no, enough of the similarities. They prefer to call the reality the reality, it suits them much better than Mitya and Kostya maybe-Ivanovich. The reality does not even notice that Vadik hasn't shown himself today – how could it, it doesn't know him. Hardly anyone notices, because everyone is so busy with the reality and even more with their conversations about the reality. You can't possibly notice everything.

Ilya, the short-sighted one, holds his face up close to the small tube – or perhaps it is the other way around and he holds the small tube up to his face, it is hard to tell – and with his nose presses a greasy mark on it. Does the small tube whisper something to him that he shares with no-one? Great weight on his shoulders.

The reality, who knows better than to wonder about the not-knowing-better of the ordinary people, quickly makes the most important thing clear. Firstly, the old times are over, however they may have been. Secondly, from now on the reality will rule, it alone, nobody else. The reality has explained that to other villages too.

Any other questions? Better not.

Luckily people here are used to being cautious with doubts. There has been a long custom of complying with things, taciturn and steely. They are experienced in only posing a question when no-one can hear them. But this does not mean that you are happy to hand over your supplies. In times like these, some people become Ilyanists. No wonder, after all, Ilya always has a suitable mumble, a calming muffled 'mhm' ready. Ilya says that he has seen the mercury performing strange movements for some moons now. Ilya says that you shouldn't clench your fists as long as the silver in the small tube is rising like this. Ilya says, look here. He just doesn't say what the coming moons will bring. He doesn't say whether the mercury can stop rising so alarmingly; he also doesn't say what he will do if it does.

Everyone knows that Inna Nikolaevna didn't have time to milk the cow, to hide the chickens in the stable.

And in the meantime, even the very last person has understood that it probably wasn't the river spirit that took Pyotr. They have finally understood. Even the most naïve Pyotrists no longer expect to see Pyotr again.

One more dead person that wasn't buried.