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ASCENSION

by Maxim Yakovlev

Victor Kutepov, captain of the regional RUBOP¹ department, couldn't quench his irritation. Everything annoyed him, particularly the fact that he didn't feel anything. There was nothing inside except an obligation – like a duty at work – to be at the village church for liturgy, and only because he too, somehow, was an Orthodox Christian. His own lack of feeling, and even this boundless vexation, was maddening, wrapping itself around everything in sight.

He stood, as usual, to the right of the analogion, near a large painted crucifix behind which the monotonous village choir tortured him with their singing and squabbling between verses. They'd begun more or less tolerably, until old Varvara had lured Tanya and Vera away onto her own dreary track, leading them into such winding modulations and painful endings that, dear God, it seemed time to carry the saints out.² She was in a particular fit today, and Tanya tried to pull the whole thing her own way but without success. The priest came out to scold them without his usual reserve, but old Varvara only replied that she didn't have "enough spirit" today, to which Father Sergei didn't know how to respond, and didn't approach them again.

The captain looked at the iconostasis. The old movie screen of the Soviet village club had once hung here. Straining at the screen from a darkness that reeked of their children's clothes, they were awe-struck at the sight of Kashei the Immortal, or Fantomas, right in front of them. Their hearts beat faster for 'our' soldiers – reverent silence seized the walls when the pilots of the First Flying Squadron were commemorated, and how they jumped up from the benches yelling with delight when the winged Chapayev³ appeared, and Alexander Nevsky. And the hussars, the cowboys! What seas of blood

¹ RUBOP: Russian regional police dealing with organized crime.

² Carry the icons out. In old Russia there was a custom to carry the icons out of the room when something was going on that was opposed to the Orthodox way of life.

³ Winged Chapayev: A Russian general at the time of the 1917 Revolution

streamed here, what quantities of corpses and bodies piled up in this very hall! What infernos of fire and dust! The burning desert! The storms! And an ocean of Indian love!⁴ ... He remembered how they had sobbed over Gavrosh and Mukhtar,⁵ how the dying Romeo and Juliet blurred through their misty eyes, and “The Generals of the Sand Pits”...thousands of children’s tears shining from the darkness. There had been other tears, too, from boisterous laughter and sometimes colicky stomach-aches... they’d roared at the comedies until the old cracked windows quivered and droned...

Why are they here now? People with crippled lives, villagers grown old from those little boys and girls. What are they looking at? At the Savior? At the Mother of God? At the royal doors? What do they want here? To listen to this wretched singing? And then what? To stand in the acrid smoke of an overworked censer? They’re praying, are they?

Here’s old Varvara, living alone, fond of giving advice and gossip. Caught by her once, you’ll not get away. After church she drags herself home, then sets out to the neighbors, telling who sang today and how Father Sergei scolded them. And Tanya and Vera, inseparable as two willows in a pond. Their husbands used to beat them when they got drunk, but they’ve both died. The two women watch soap operas together and sing hooligan folk songs at weddings. Their grandchildren will soon come for the summer and they’ll be running after them to the concrete discos... Or take Vlasikha there – treating her old man and her son-in-law like trained circus animals. They stand behind her, not daring to stir. She drives a jeep and used to smoke like a chimney, but now it seems she’s quit. Even rough-necks keep a distance... she’s crazy.

There’s Anatoly in the corner – killed his wife three years ago, not on purpose, they say... when he gets drunk he goes to her grave “to die.” Almost froze to death this winter, they started looking for him just in time. Who else? Katerina in pants. She’s got a drug addict husband... gave birth by another man, and now she’s brought a tubercular niece to live with her who she treats with goat’s milk. Looks like she’s pregnant again. There’s Uncle Pasha, who came to visit his mother after his prison term and stayed for good. After he left his wife and married a local woman, his son came with some friends and almost beat him to death....

4 Sub-titled Indian melodramas and love stories were popular in the Soviet Union.

5 Gavrosh and Mukhtar: Two Russian children’s movies: Gavrosh, the story of a young boy during the French revolution, and Mukhtar, a dog that served with his master on the Russian front.

Take whoever you will: this one’s ill, that one’s crazy, the third worn out by some torment... Cripples, that’s what they are... old women snuffing out candle ends. They’ll rearrange the candles, then go home and start washing people’s bones⁶ until the next service when they come back again to make their bows.

So what do they get here? This is church, “heaven on earth,” but who are they to stand in this heaven? Old Vlasikhas, Anatolys, and Katerinas?... Are they Christians? Do they believe? Do they rejoice? Maybe, in their own ways...somewhere invisibly in the dark... rejoicing in some tiny way, despite everything. Stumbling and hurting themselves, breaking their fingernails trying to climb up. Is it possible they’d even give their lives for Him? Old Varvara? And accept death and torture? And Uncle Pasha too? And Tanya with Vera? And Katerina? It’s all strange, because nothing’s clear to them, nothing’s been revealed. Someone hiccups, someone goes out ... No, they’re like everyone else. They’re just pretending... Where is heaven? It can’t be felt, hard as you try. Everyone stands through the service, everyone sins, and that’s all there is.

The time comes to chant the Creed, which the villagers sing together, strictly following the captain’s voice. These are Victor’s moments. He sings steadily and loudly, everyone behind him in their place, not sticking out or running ahead, like a flotilla behind its icebreaker. They’re a bit afraid. But today he stumbles in the middle of the Creed, mixing up the words, and later mispronounces the end of the “Our Father,” irritating himself even more. The service ends, and the people, pushing stupidly, rush to kiss the priest’s hand.

Outside, there’s a black “Volga”⁷ pulled up close to the church door, a few expensive foreign-made cars, and the newly-elected head of the region, surrounded by men who look like him. Victor circles the end of the car. The priest has been sent for, but he’s not come out yet. The head glances impatiently at the church porch and those with him also look hard in that direction. He finally comes, straightening the cross on his chest, moving toward the waiting group with a business-like air. Victor leans over to tell the driver to pull up, but he takes no notice. Why aggravate the situation? He crosses himself, bows towards the church and turns to the gate.

6 Washing people’s bones: gossiping.

7 Volga: a car produced in Russia. For a long time black Volgas were associated with regional officials and bureaucrats.

The regional head waves his arms, pointing, and the people who look like him do the same. “What did I say?” he exclaims. “What a landscape! Look at what a place I have here! What a sky! What space opens up! Look at my fields... And the grove! It’s Kuindzhi!⁸ And the church – sixteenth century!” He glances at the villagers, “and the people aren’t so bad....” “Yes,” his followers buzz in chorus, “You’re lucky, Vitaly Nikitich, it’s beautiful...”

The captain turns back. Father Sergei sees his face and makes a rush to stop him but it’s too late. Victor has already planted himself in front of the head, jabbing his chest with a finger as hard and stiff as a revolver barrel: “This church isn’t yours! The sky isn’t yours! The fields aren’t yours! The grove isn’t yours, and these people aren’t yours, you got that? The jacket isn’t yours, and the pants you have on aren’t yours! Nothing here is yours!.... The priest tears him away and pushes him off down the hill...across Uncle Pasha’s kitchen-garden to the bus stop. Victor walks on, muttering vileness at himself and all the bosses on earth.

Breakfast waits. He washes his face and sits at the table. His wife puts a plate of scrambled eggs and potatoes at his place.

“Get it out for me...,” he says.

She opens the fridge and takes out the bottle.

He sighs, pours a glassful out and drinks it down.

“Why did you leave at the Cherubimskaya?”⁹ he asks.

“I felt sick, she said, her forehead creased.

“Again?”

“It’s better now. I’ll get over it.”

He pokes at the eggs with his fork, he can’t eat. The scar on his cheek has reddened and swelled. He tells her what happened at the church door.

“What’s wrong with you, Papa?” she smiles, “Good Lord, you need a break.”

“What does a break have to do with it!”

“What did he say that made you so mad? We say: ‘my village, my house, my country’... Well? You need a break or you’ll go out of your mind with your bandits.”

Victor shoves the plate aside. “Alyona, we’ve been living together so many years but you still don’t feel me....”

“I wish Andryusha would come with Oxsana, We could go to the river this afternoon.”

⁸ Kuindzhi: a famous Russian painter.

⁹ The Cherubic Hymn sung during liturgy.

Victor stares through the window at nothing. There’s nothing to see.

“Let’s go to the river, Papa. Only let me clean up first.”

Victor stands for a minute undecided, then moves to the door.

“Will you be back for dinner?”

He jerks his head as the door shuts behind him.

Past Elias’ Graveyard where they used to pick wild strawberries with his mother, and from there to the Zubovsky Woods where he and other young guys used to squeeze girls in dark stuffy dugouts. The forest is piled with fallen trees after last year’s storm, the bare roots splayed like fingers. There won’t be any mushrooms here. The Kamenka has almost dried up, but there are still canoes and tents, and he remembers how as kids they hunted crawfish and lit fires on its banks, scaring each other with horrible ghost stories about people who had drowned...

The heaviness still lies on his soul, but it isn’t pressing so hard now. He climbs to the graveyard and lies on his back between the two small hills of his mother and father, his eyes closed. If he dies now he won’t get to paradise for sure, and that means he’ll never see his mother or father... never, never... They’d wait for him in vain, forever... They might even be looking at him now, crying. But people don’t cry in paradise, they rejoice. Does that mean they’re watching him and rejoicing? No, it’s absurd, inhuman...

“Help me. I’m all alone.”

The two small hills are silent. It’s cool in the hollow and he feels the damp grass under his shoulder-blades, the rounded earth. Above him – blue sky and a singing lark. Suddenly, he wants to be home with Alyona. It’s quiet there, and clean, with everything in its place. Can this be all he needs? Is he so simple that just his wife’s touch, her look and voice...? Can God really be in this? No, of course not. God must be in something different, quite different. A non-believer could have these feelings just as well.

“Lord, if we believe and pray, where are You? If I could feel You, just a bit. There must be a difference between them and us! I’m not asking for signs and angels, but I want to know, to feel just once, what it’s like when You’re with us... where are You?” He waits, but nothing happens.

On his feet to the spring below. Tiny rivulets intersect the rocky ground, filling a depression that empties into a thicket of willows. On the wooden landing, Victor unbuttons his shirt to scoop up the water and cool his face burning with blood and sun; to pour the water over his arms and chest, to drink until his throat is icy. He bends until, behind him, he feels, rather than

hears, a plea, then a laugh. Alyona is watching him from the slope above the birch grove, her hands at her side. The wind on the hilltop rocks the birch, but not a fold of her dress stirs. Her light, lonely figure is framed by the hillside. "This is my wife," he says tentatively, straining to see her. The words spoken aloud make his soul contract. "Why doesn't she smile, or screw up her eyes, like usual? Something must have happened."

"Alyon, it's you?"

He scrambles towards her, his soul full of mute premonition. She's looking into him, lightly and attentively as one usually looks into oneself.

"What is it?"

"I've been looking for you."

"Why should you be looking...?" He sighs, understanding that nothing fearful has happened, and that now they'll go home to dinner. The apprehension melts away.

"Let's go." She pulls him after her, clutching his heavy fingers.

"Why did you laugh?"

"I called, but you didn't hear."

They come to a fork in the road with a field of ploughed green rows, and beyond the ravine, the kitchen-gardens and their orange-roofed house. They turn into Kolova Field. "We're going to the hill." Victor is stunned, afraid for her, but her look forbids his saying either the obvious or the needless, anything...

The day their first and last baby died – an early, tiny thing without a grave or even a photo – he'd found his wife here at dusk, clutching the grass under the trembling sky, her empty eyes staring at the clouds. She'd beat him off, wouldn't leave from here, so he brought warm coats, blankets, some spirits, a plastic table-cloth. The neighbors gave him some pills and they'd spent the night here in the rain. Since then troubles had poured down on her: fever, the hospital, complications, an infection, an operation. Then some other woman's disease, two more operations and the verdict: no more children. He couldn't look at the hill, he wanted to blow it up. For a long time, their souls had pitched about aimlessly, then somehow the tragedy had let go and the Lord sent them a nephew to raise; with Andryusha they'd knit together again.

They reach the hilltop. A cloth on the grass, a bottle of wine, *piroshki*, a salad. She turns, trembling,

"I've lost my nerve."

"Alyona, why? We can have a memorial meal at home. Why here? It's been so long." He presses her close, his arms straining to keep the sorrow at bay.

"Don't, Alyon... Don't. "

"No, no, Papa, it isn't that!"

"Vitya, I'm... We're going to..."

The ground slips under his feet. He sees neither fields, nor roofs, nor sky – only light streaming across the hill.

"Do you understand?" she whispers somewhere inside his chest.

"Yes," he wants to cry, but there's nothing to do it with. Something in his throat won't even let him nod.

"Do you understand?" the wind whispers to him.

"Do you understand?"

"Do you understand?" ... †

Translated by Inna Belova and Mother Nectaria McLees