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Three Years

Chapter I

IT WAS DARK, BUT HERE AND THERE lights were showing in some of the houses, and a pale moon was beginning to rise from behind the barracks at the end of the street. Laptev was sitting on a bench by the gates, waiting for the service at the Church of St Peter and St Paul to end. He was counting on the fact that Yuliya Sergeyevna would be coming past him on her way home from the service, when he would be able to say something to her and perhaps spend the rest of the evening with her.

He had been sitting there for about an hour and a half already, conjuring up in his imagination his Moscow apartment, his Moscow friends, his servant Pyotr and his writing desk; he looked with a sense of bewilderment at the dark, motionless trees, and he thought it strange he was no longer living in his dacha in Sokolniki,* but in a provincial town, in a house, past which, every morning and evening, a large herd of cattle was driven to the sound of horns, raising clouds of dust. He remembered the long conversations they used to have in Moscow, in which not so long ago he himself had taken part – discussing whether it was possible to live without love, whether passionate love was a psychosis, or whether, in the end, there was no such thing as love but only physical attraction between the sexes – and so on in similar vein. As he sat there remembering all this, he thought ruefully that, if he were now to be asked what love was, he wouldn't know what to say.

The service ended, and people started coming out of the church. Laptev looked anxiously at the dark figures. The bishop had already been driven by in his carriage; the bells had stopped ringing; one after the other the red and green lights on the bell-tower had gone out – they were illuminations to celebrate a church

festival – and the people kept walking past, without hurrying, stopping to talk under the windows. And then, finally, Laptev heard a familiar voice, and his heart began to beat strongly – but then, realizing Yuliya Sergeevna wasn't alone, but with two other ladies, he was overcome by despair.

“This is awful, so awful!” he whispered to himself, feeling jealous. “So awful!”

At the corner, by the turning into the alleyway, she stopped to say goodbye to the two ladies, glancing at Laptev as she did so.

“I was just on my way to your house,” he said, “to talk to your father. Is he at home?”

“Probably,” she replied, “he won't have gone to the club yet.”

The alleyway was lined with gardens, the lime trees along the fences casting their broad shadows in the moonlight, so that the fences and gates on one side of the road were immersed in total darkness, from which came the sound of women talking, muffled laughter and someone strumming on a balalaika. There was the smell of lime trees and hay. Laptev found the smell and the invisible whispers irritating. He was suddenly overcome by a desperate desire to embrace his companion, shower her face, arms and shoulders with kisses, start sobbing, fall at her feet and tell her how long he had been waiting for her. There was a faint, barely perceptible smell of incense on her, and this reminded him of the time when he too had believed in God, gone to evening service and dreamt about chaste, poetic love. And because this young woman didn't love him, he now felt that the possibility of that happiness he had then dreamt about had gone for ever.

She began to talk in a concerned tone about the health of his sister, Nina Fyodorovna. A couple of months ago his sister had had an operation to remove a tumour, and everyone was now waiting to see if it had returned.

“I went to see her this morning,” said Yuliya Sergeevna, “and I felt that over the past week she has not so much lost weight, as become pale.”

“Yes, you’re right,” agreed Laptev, “there’s been no recurrence so far, but I notice that she’s getting weaker and weaker and fading away in front of my eyes with every day that passes. I can’t understand what’s wrong with her.”

“Heavens, she used to be such a healthy, buxom and rosy-cheeked woman!” Yuliya Sergeevna said, after a pause of a moment or so. “Everyone here used to call her the ‘Moscow girl’. I always remember her laugh! On feast days she used to go around dressed as a simple peasant woman, something that really suited her.”

Doctor Sergei Borisych was at home – plump, red-faced, wearing a long frock-coat down to below his knees, he was walking up and down in his study, humming softly to himself. His grey side whiskers looked bedraggled, and his hair uncombed, as if he had just got out of bed. And his study, with its cushions on the divans, its piles of old documents heaped in the corners and the large, dirty-looking poodle under the table, gave the same general impression of dishevelment.

“Monsieur Laptev would like to see you,” his daughter said as she came into the room.

He began humming more loudly and, turning into the drawing room, shook Laptev’s hand and asked: “Well, anything new?”

It was dark in the drawing room. Without sitting down, and keeping his hat in his hands, Laptev started apologizing for disturbing him. As he asked him what needed to be done to help his sister sleep better and why she was getting so terribly thin, he had an uncomfortable feeling that he may well have asked these very same questions during his visit earlier that morning.

“Tell me,” he asked, “should we not call in a specialist in internal diseases from Moscow? What do you think?”

The doctor sighed, shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands in some vague gesture.

He had clearly been offended. He was an extraordinarily petulant, sceptical doctor, who always thought that people didn’t believe him, or acknowledge him, or show him sufficient respect – that the general public exploited him and that his colleagues

were hostile towards him. He constantly mocked himself, saying that fools like him had been created only so that the public could ride roughshod over them.

Yuliya Sergeevna lit the lamp. The church service had tired her, and this was evident from her pale, languorous face and lethargic walk. She wanted a rest. She sat down on the couch, placed her hands on her knees and fell deep in thought. Laptev knew he wasn't a good-looking man, and now he had a particular physical awareness of this. He was rather short and thin, with ruddy cheeks and already markedly thinning hair, so that the top of his head felt cold. His facial expression had none of that elegant simplicity which can make even coarse, unattractive faces seem sympathetic; he was awkward in the company of women, talking too much and putting on airs. And now he almost despised himself for this. To stop Yuliya Sergeevna from feeling bored in his company he needed to say something. But what exactly? About his sister's illness again?

And he started talking about medicine, the sort of thing that people usually say, in praise of hygiene. He said he had long wanted to set up a hostel in Moscow, and that he'd already obtained an estimate for the work. According to his plan, a workman would be able to go into the hostel in the evening and, for a fee of five or six copecks, be given a bowl of hot cabbage soup with a piece of bread, a bed with a blanket and somewhere to dry his clothes and boots.

Yuliya Sergeevna usually stayed silent in his presence, and in some strange way, perhaps with the instinct of someone in love, he was able to guess her thoughts and intentions. And now he realized that the fact she hadn't gone back to her room to change and have some tea after the service meant she was planning to visit someone later on that evening.

"But then I'm in no rush with the hostel," he continued in an annoyed tone, cross with himself already, turning to the doctor. The doctor looked at him with a dull, uncomprehending stare, clearly having no idea why he should need to start talking about

medicine and hygiene. "And I very probably won't be making use of the estimate any time soon. I'm afraid our hostel will fall in the hands of our sanctimonious Moscow do-gooders and well-meaning ladies, who will destroy any initiative."

Yuliya Sergeevna stood up and held out her hand.

"Forgive me," she said, "I have to go. My very best regards to your sister, please."

The doctor began humming to himself again.

Yuliya Sergeevna left, and, after a moment's pause, Laptev said goodbye to the doctor and went home. When someone is dissatisfied and feels unhappy, how banal all that beautiful nature, all those lime trees, shadows and clouds can seem – all so self-satisfied and uncaring! "Look at that naive, provincial moon – those feeble, pathetic clouds!" thought Laptev. He was ashamed of himself for having talked about medicine and hostels in that way, horrified at the thought that tomorrow he'd be just as useless, and that he'd try to see her and talk to her again, and once again become convinced how much of a stranger he was to her. And the day after tomorrow – the same thing again. What was the point of it all? And when, and how, would it all come to an end?

Once back home, he went in to see his sister. Nina Fyodorovna still looked strong and gave the impression of being a well-built, robust woman, but her marked pallor made her appear like a corpse – especially when, as now, she was lying on her back with her eyes closed. Her elder daughter, Sasha, about ten years old, was sitting next to her, reading her something from a schoolbook.

"Alyosha's here," the sick woman said quietly, to herself.

Sasha and her uncle had come to a tacit agreement: they took it in turns to read. Sasha closed her book and, without saying a word, quietly left the room; Laptev took a historical novel down from the chest of drawers and, finding the right page, sat down and started to read out loud.

Nina Fyodorovna was a native of Moscow. She and her two brothers had spent their early years in the family house on Pyatnitsky Street – they had been a merchant family. It had been

a long, boring childhood. Their father had been very strict, even birching her on a couple of occasions, while their mother had died after a long illness; the servants had been a dirty, coarse, hypocritical bunch; their house had been frequented by priests and monks, all of them also coarse and hypocritical: they would drink and stuff themselves with food and vulgarly start flattering their father, whom they disliked. The two boys had been fortunate enough to go to grammar school, whereas Nina had remained uneducated, all her life writing merely in scrawls, and reading only historical novels. About seventeen years ago, when she'd been twenty-two, she had first met the man who was to become her husband, a landowner named Panaurov, at their dacha in Khimki.* She had fallen in love with him, and had married him, secretly, against her father's wishes. Her father had looked on Panaurov – a handsome, rather too cocksure man, who whistled a lot and who liked to light his cigarettes from an icon lamp – as a total nonentity, and when, later on, his son-in-law had written to him to ask for a dowry, the old man had written back to his daughter to say he would be sending to her in the country some fur coats, some silver and various other things left after her mother's death, together with thirty thousand in cash, but without his parental blessing; later he had sent another twenty thousand. This money, together with the rest of the dowry, had been spent, and the estate sold – and Panaurov had moved with his family back into town, where he had taken on a job in local government. There he had started another family, giving rise to considerable gossip, since this illegitimate family lived quite openly as such.

Nina Fyodorovna adored her husband. And now, as she listened to the historical novel, she thought just how much she'd had to go through, how much she had suffered all this time, and that if anyone were to describe her life, what a pathetic figure she would cut. Since her tumour was in her breast, she was convinced she had fallen ill from love, and that it had been jealousy and tears that had made her so ill.

Suddenly Alexei Fyodorych closed the book and said:

“The end, thank God. We’ll start a new one tomorrow.”

Nina Fyodorovna laughed. She had always been easily amused, but now Laptev was starting to notice that her mind seemed to be going as a result of the illness, and that she laughed at the merest trifle, or even for no reason at all.

“Yuliya came to see me before dinner, when you weren’t here,” she said. “It seemed to me she doesn’t have much faith in her father. ‘All right,’ she says, ‘let my father treat you, but that doesn’t stop you writing, on the quiet, to some elderly monk asking him to pray for you.’ They’ve got to know some holy old man or other who lives near them. Yulochka left her umbrella here. Send it to her tomorrow,” she continued, after a moment’s pause. “No, if this is the end, then neither doctors nor holy men are going to be of any help.”

“Nina, why can’t you sleep at night?” Laptev asked, to change the conversation.

“Just can’t, that’s all. I simply lie there, thinking.”

“What do you think about, my dear?”

“About the children, about you... about my life. I’ve been through so much, you know, Alyosha. And when you start remembering... when you start... My God!” she laughed. “Not really funny, is it? You give birth to five children, and then bury three of them. You’re about to give birth, and my Grigory Nikolaich is with some other woman – there’s nobody to send for a midwife or peasant woman... you go into the hall or the kitchen for a servant, but all you can find are Jews, tradesmen, moneylenders standing there waiting for him to return. Enough to make one’s head spin... He didn’t love me, though he never said as much. I’ve calmed down now, and feel easier about things. But before, when I was a little younger, I used to find it all so hurtful... oh, so hurtful, my dear! Once – we were still in the country – I caught him in the garden with some woman, and I started walking... and I walked and walked, no idea where, and suddenly, God knows how, found myself standing on the church porch. I fell on my knees and called out, ‘Holy Mother of God!’ It was night, the moon was shining...”

Exhausted, she started gasping for breath; then, recovering a little, she took her brother's hand and carried on talking in a weak, soundless voice:

"You're so kind, Alyosha... so clever... You've become such a good man!"

At midnight Laptev said goodbye to her and left, taking with him the umbrella Yuliya had forgotten. Despite the late hour, the servants, male and female, were in the dining room drinking tea. What chaos! Still awake, the children were also in the dining room. They were talking quietly, in an undertone, not noticing that the lamp was guttering and would soon be going out. All these people, large and small, were troubled by a whole range of unfavourable omens, and were all feeling miserable: the mirror in the hall was broken, the samovar droned away to itself the whole time – and it was droning now, as if on purpose. When Nina Fyodorovna was getting dressed, a mouse, so they said, had leapt out of her shoe. The children were already aware of the significance of these dreadful portents. The elder daughter, Sasha, a thin little girl, was sitting motionless at the table, looking scared and sad, while the younger, Lida, a plump, fair-haired little girl of about seven, was standing next to her sister, staring mistrustfully at the light.

Laptev went down to his low-ceilinged rooms on the lower floor; they were stuffy, smelling constantly of geraniums. Panaurov, Nina Fyodorovna's husband, was sitting in his drawing room, reading a newspaper. Laptev nodded to him and sat down opposite him. They both sat there in silence. They quite often used to sit there like that for whole evenings, unconcerned by the silence.

The two girls came down to say goodnight. Silently and unhurriedly, Panaurov made the sign of the cross over them, and offered them his hand to be kissed; they curtsied and then went over to Laptev, who also had to make the sign of the cross over them and offer his hand to be kissed. This little ceremony, with the kissing and the curtsy, took place every evening.

When the girls had gone, Panaurov put his newspaper down and said: "This blasted town is so boring! I must confess, my

dear fellow," he added with a sigh, "I'm so pleased you've finally found something to entertain you."

"What are you talking about?" Laptev asked.

"Not so long ago I saw you coming out of Doctor Belavin's house. I trust you hadn't been there just to see the father."

"Of course I had," Laptev said, turning red.

"Well, of course. By the way, you wouldn't be able to find another such old fossil in a million years. Such a filthy, talentless, clumsy idiot – hard to imagine! You Muscovites only see provincial life, with its landscapes and Anton Goremykas,* as being, so to speak, of poetic interest, but I can assure you, my friend, there's nothing poetical about it – simply barbarity, meanness and vileness, that's all. Take, for example, your local high priests of science, your so-called intelligentsia. Just imagine – here, in this town, you've got twenty-eight doctors who have all earned themselves a fortune, all with their own houses, while the general population continue to live in the most appalling conditions. Nina, for example, needed an operation, nothing very major, but we had to call in a surgeon from Moscow – no one here would take it on. Just imagine! They don't know or understand a thing – they're not interested in anything. Just ask them, for example, about cancer – what it is, and how it starts."

And Panaurov began to elucidate the nature of cancer. He was a specialist in all the sciences, able to talk on any topic from a scientific point of view. But he used to explain things in his own particular way. He had his own idiosyncratic theories on the circulation of the blood, or on chemistry, or astronomy. He spoke slowly, softly and with conviction, each time pronouncing the phrase "just imagine" with a special plea in his voice, screwing up his eyes, sighing languidly and smiling condescendingly, like some emperor, evidently very pleased with himself and quite forgetting the fact he was already fifty years old.

"I feel like something to eat," Laptev said. "I would really fancy something spicy."

"Why not? That's easily arranged."

A little while later Laptev and his brother-in-law were sitting upstairs in the dining room having supper. Laptev had a glass of vodka, and then moved on to wine. For his part Panaurov had nothing to drink. He never drank or gambled – despite this, however, he had managed to spend all his and his wife’s money and accumulate a mass of debts. To get through so much money in such a short space of time required some special talent – something different from mere sensual cravings. Panaurov loved good food, fine crockery and table linen, music over dinner, speeches, sycophantic waiters, whom he would casually tip ten, sometimes as much as twenty-five roubles each; he loved participating in all subscriptions and lotteries; would send female acquaintances bouquets on their name days; would buy cups, glass holders, cufflinks, cravats, canes, perfumes, cigarette holders, pipes, little dogs, parrots, Japanese articles, antiques; he wore silk nightshirts; he had an ebony bed with mother-of-pearl inlay, a real Bukhara dressing gown, and so on; and his daily expenses relating to all this came to, as he himself put it, a “heap” of money.

Over supper he kept sighing and shaking his head.

“Yes, everything on this earth comes to an end,” he said quietly, screwing up his dark eyes. “Fall in love, and you start suffering – fall out of love, and she’ll be unfaithful to you, because there isn’t a woman in the world who’s not unfaithful: you’ll suffer, fall into despair and you yourself will be unfaithful. But the time will come when all this will be just a memory, and you will coldly rationalize everything and look on it all as a load of trivial nonsense...”

And Laptev, tired and a little inebriated, looked at his handsome head, his black, clipped beard, and thought he understood just why it was women were so attracted to this pampered, self-assured and physically charming man.

After supper Panaurov didn’t stay at home, but went to his other apartment. Laptev saw him off. Panaurov was the only one in the entire town to go around in a top hat, and the sight of his elegant, dandyish figure wearing a top hat and orange gloves, walking

alongside the grey fences, the pathetic little three-windowed houses and the clumps of nettles always presented a strange and rather melancholy sight.

When he'd said goodbye, Laptev slowly went back home. The moon was shining so brightly he could make out every blade of grass, and he felt as if the moonlight were caressing his uncovered head – as if someone were lightly brushing along his hair with a feather.

“I'm in love!” he said out loud, and he suddenly had the urge to start running and catch up with Panaurov, to embrace him, to forgive him, to shower him with money, and then run off somewhere into the fields, the wood, and then keep on running without looking back.

Once back home, he saw the umbrella Yuliya Sergeyevna had left behind lying on a chair. He grabbed hold of it and passionately kissed it. It was a silk umbrella, no longer new, with a piece of old elastic tied round it; the handle was made of cheap bone. Laptev put the umbrella up, and it seemed as if he were surrounded by an aura of happiness.

He sat down, made himself comfortable and, still holding on to the umbrella, began to write to one of his Moscow friends.

My dear, dear Kostya, I've got some news for you: I'm in love again! I say *again* because six years ago I was in love with a Moscow actress, with whom I never even managed to become acquainted, and for the last eighteen months I have been living with a certain no longer young and not very attractive “person”, someone you know well. Oh, my dear fellow, how unlucky I've been in love! I've never been successful as far as women are concerned, and, if I do say that *again*, it's only because I find it so sad and painful to admit to myself that my entire youth has passed me by without my really loving anyone – and that it's only now, at the age of thirty-four, that I am genuinely in love for the first time in my life. So, let me say it once more: I'm in love *again*.

If only you knew what she was like! You wouldn't call her beautiful – her face is too broad, and she is too thin, but she has such a wonderfully kind expression, and such a smile! Whenever she talks, her voice sings and resonates. She never says anything to me, and I hardly know her, but when I'm next to her I can feel the presence of an unusually rare individual, bursting with intelligence and high ideals. She's religious, and you can't imagine how much that moves me and raises her in my estimation. On this I'm prepared to argue with you for as long as you like. You're right – have it your way, if you want – but I love it when she prays in church. She's from the provinces, but she went to school in Moscow, loves our Moscow, dresses as Muscovite women do, and for that I love her, I love her, I love her... I can picture you frowning and getting up to give me a long lecture on the nature of love – whom one should and whom one shouldn't love, etc. etc. But, dear Kostya, before I fell in love, I myself knew exactly what love was.

My sister thanks you for your good wishes. She often remembers how she once took Kostya Kochevoy to preparatory class. She still calls you "poor Kostya", as she still has memories of you as a little orphaned boy. And so, poor little orphan, I'm in love. This must all be a secret for the time being, so don't say anything *there* to the certain "person" you know. That, I think, will sort itself out of its own accord – or it will, as the servant in Tolstoy says, "turn out proper"*...

When he'd finished the letter, Laptev went to bed. His eyes closed from tiredness, but he couldn't get to sleep, for some reason, probably because of the noise outside. The herd of cows was driven past and the horns were blown, and then, a little later, the bells started ringing for early-morning mass. Now it was a cart creaking past, now the voice of some peasant woman shouting something on her way to market – and, the whole time, the sparrows chirping away.

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