

DHUMAVATI

—◆—
A Voice in the Smoke



ANATOLY ROMASHKOV

СОДЕРЖИТ
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18+

Анатолий Ромашков

Dhumavati. A Voice in the Smoke

«Автор»

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Ромашков А.

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Dmitry is forty. An ordinary job, a flat of sixty-four square metres, evenings spent over Sanskrit dictionaries — and a voice. A womans voice: calm, wry, unhurried. He has heard it for years, and he calls her simply Ma. One evening Ma says, Get ready. — For what? — You will find out. So begins a path he never chose and would not now leave for anything: nights in a cemetery, cycles of practice, a broken mala and seven stranger beads, sixty-four sister yoginis — each with her own voice and her own temper — students who come to him and leave for themselves, mistakes paid for with oneself, and a silence in which the essential can at last be heard. Dhumavati: A Voice in the Smoke is a novel about a Mother who does not comfort but teaches; about a fear that need not be conquered once you learn to see; and about a man who came to understand that being everywhere and nowhere is not a riddle but his true address.

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Анатолий Ромашков

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DHUMAVATI

A Voice in the Smoke

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Chapter One

Sixty-Four

At two minutes to six Dmitry saved the document, closed the work spreadsheet and looked at the screen for a few seconds, as though he expected the computer to offer him a good reason to stay another half an hour.

The computer said nothing.

The feeling was mutual.

After six in the evening Dmitry felt about his work much the way his work felt about him: without hatred, but without any excessive love either.

On the other side of the wall someone pushed in a chair. Further down the corridor a door banged. Then it was quiet.

By this time the management usually either went home or made a show of being busy with something extraordinarily important. The arrangement suited Dmitry: he was hardly ever bothered, his tasks were clear, his salary was paid on time, and, most importantly, nobody felt the need to check exactly what he was doing every minute of the working day. For a man who, once work was over, had his own life to get on with, these were almost ideal conditions.

He pulled a small flash drive out of the port, put it in his pocket and closed the laptop.

“Home,” he said to himself. “At last.”

And are you in a hurry to get somewhere?

Dmitry froze with his jacket in his hands.

“No.”

Then why “at last”?

A woman’s voice had spoken, perfectly calm. Not from the corridor. Not from his phone. Not from the next office.

Dmitry went on putting his jacket on.

“Because I’ve been sitting here for eight hours.”

Seven hours and forty-three minutes.

“Ma, don’t nitpick.”

I am not nitpicking. I am being precise.

“That’s exactly what people call nitpicking.”

There was no answer. Dmitry gave a wry smile: he had noticed this habit of hers long ago. When Ma considered a conversation finished, she simply stopped answering, and trying to prove anything to the empty air was even sillier than arguing with her.

He switched off the light and went out.

* * *

Outside it was still light. Summer in these parts had never really known what to do with the night: in June the darkness seemed to change its mind about falling – the sky paled, the sun went down behind the buildings, but real darkness came only briefly and reluctantly.

Dmitry unlocked the car. The old Lada met him with the familiar smell of warm plastic.

“This one never judges me,” he said, getting in.

Because she cannot talk.

“Which is why she’s the perfect woman.”

Ma said nothing.

“That was a joke.”

I understood.

“You wouldn’t know it from your voice.”

And am I obliged to laugh every time you think you are being witty?

"It would be nice."

He started the engine. The car jerked, settled, and Dmitry pulled out of the car park.

The drive home took about twenty-five minutes, unless the city suddenly decided to prove it was capable of Moscow-sized traffic jams. Today he was lucky. Past the windows stretched wide streets, old poplars, new tower blocks, grey prefabricated blocks of flats and the odd patch of private houses the city had not yet managed to swallow. Beyond the outskirts a quite different life began: forest roads, dachas, fields, old villages, cemeteries.

The cemeteries, for now, Dmitry tried simply to notice and drive past.

He stopped at a small shop. He picked up meat, bread, vegetables and two packets of fruit tea. At the till he stood for a while over the expensive coffee, looked at the price tag and put the packet back.

"I'm not that tired today."

You said the same thing yesterday.

"So that's two days of saving."

Saving for what?

Dmitry paid.

"Nothing, for now."

Then it is not saving.

"Ma."

What?

"Sometimes money just doesn't need spending."

Then say so.

"Do you have to pick apart every single sentence I say?"

No.

"Thank you."

Only the wrong ones.

He came out of the shop.

"That was a trap, wasn't it?"

What trap?

Dmitry shook his head.

* * *

He got home at about seven. The flat greeted him with silence – it was for that very silence that he had once fallen in love with it. Sixty-four square metres for one person: a large room, a kitchen, a bathroom, enough space for books, a desk, boxes, clothes and the kind of things a normal person would probably not keep at home at all.

With this last assertion Dmitry flatly disagreed.

He took his shoes off by the door, left the shopping in the kitchen and went straight through to the main room.

Most of one wall was taken up by books. Russian, English, Hindi, several shelves of Sanskrit editions. Photocopies, printouts, folders. Thin old books that could only be picked up with clean hands. And an entirely separate category – material he had once brought back from India.

Some of it he had not opened for years. Not because he had forgotten – because before, he had not been able to read it.

Now he could.

Or at least he liked to think so.

Beside the bed stood a wide, soft armchair covered with a red cloth. At first glance, just an armchair. Except that Dmitry never threw his clothes on it, never put shopping bags down on it and never let guests sit in it without permission.

On the lower shelves of the cupboard stood boxes. Some of them were ordinary, some were not. Noticing that one had shifted, he straightened it without thinking. He did not open it: he never touched working things unless he had to.

Over the years he had developed an almost pedantic attitude to objects. If a thing was used for a particular task, it existed for that task. Not for showing to acquaintances, not for photographs, not for putting into someone's hands with the words "Look how rare this is."

Collector's pieces were another matter; those could be looked at.

Working things worked.

He changed, put the kettle on and opened the fridge.

Have you eaten today?

Dmitry stopped.

"Of course."

What?

"Food."

Dmitry.

"I ate properly."

What exactly?

He sighed.

"Coffee."

Silence.

"And a bun."

The silence grew more eloquent.

"A big one."

That is not food.

"Ma, I'm forty."

I know.

"I'm capable of deciding for myself when I need to eat."

Today you were not.

Dmitry shut the fridge rather harder than he needed to.

"I'll eat now."

Good.

"Happy now?"

That was not my aim.

He got out a mug. The fruit tea smelt of something between cherry, apple and a chemistry laboratory, but Dmitry liked it. Coffee he drank rarely; tea he could drink by the litre.

While the tea brewed, he went back to the desk and opened his personal laptop. There were far too many files on the desktop.

"Translation_1".

"Translation_1_new".

"Translation_1_new2".

"Translation_final".

"Translation_final_edit".

"Translation_final_definitely".

Dmitry looked at them for a while.

"Now this is where a higher law is really needed."

What law?

"A ban on calling files 'final' until they're finished."

Pass it, then.

"Won't work. I'd break it myself."

Then it is not a law.

He smiled.

“I’m learning already.”

He opened the last file. Lines of Devanagari appeared in front of him.

A few years ago he had looked at text like this as beautiful geometry: he could pick out a few familiar words, recognise names, make out simple constructions – but for serious work it was not enough.

Now a line no longer looked like a wall. It resisted, but it resisted like a door with a heavy lock, not like concrete.

Dmitry slowly read a few words. Went back. Read them again. Wrote down a version of the translation, deleted it, wrote another.

“No.”

“No” what?

“Not you.”

Then who?

“The author.”

Can he hear you?

“I very much hope not.”

Ma laughed softly. Dmitry stopped.

“There.”

What?

“So you can, after all.”

Can what?

“Laugh at my jokes.”

That was not a joke.

He wanted to answer, but thought better of it and looked at the text again.

There was a name on the screen.

Dhumavati.

Once it had seemed almost foreign to him. Now saying it aloud felt strange – far too formal, as if a grown man had suddenly started addressing his own mother by her first name and patronymic.

For everyone else there were dozens of descriptions. Goddess. Mahavidya. Dhumavati. Ugra. The Terrible. The Old One. The Smoky One.

For him it had long ago shrunk to a single syllable.

Ma.

He took a sip of tea.

“Why have people written so much about you?”

Because they like writing.

“That I understand. I write myself.”

There you are, then.

“But they contradict each other.”

And?

“One says one thing, another says the opposite. It’s as if they’re talking about different beings altogether.”

Perhaps they saw different things.

“And which of them saw it right?”

You are asking the wrong question again.

Dmitry leant back in his chair.

“Why?”

Because you want to pick out one who is right and count all the others as wrong.

“And what if one really is right and the others aren’t?”

Then you will find that out.

“Very illuminating.”

Did you want me to do your work for you?

“Sometimes it would be handy.”

Then why are you learning Sanskrit?

Dmitry looked at the screen.

“Good question.”

I know.

He did not like it at all when she answered like that. Mainly because there was nothing to argue with.

He bent over the laptop again. An hour passed almost unnoticed, then another. The text moved slowly: one word made him open a dictionary, another a second dictionary, a third turned out to be a technical term for which the dictionary gave so hazy an explanation that it was easier to work it out himself.

Dmitry rubbed his eyes.

“Tomorrow.”

Why not now?

He raised his eyebrows.

“You usually say I rush things.”

I asked why.

“Because my brain’s already fried.”

Then tomorrow.

“You could have just agreed straight away.”

Then you would not have thought about it.

He saved the file. It was nearly ten by the clock; supper was long over, and so was the tea.

* * *

Dmitry walked about the room. On the table by the cupboard lay an old notebook – thick, battered, with several pasted-in sheets and drawings made many years ago. He opened it somewhere near the middle.

On one page were Sanskrit words, written down long ago almost by ear. On another, dates. India. Varanasi. Manali. Then Varanasi again. Several telephone numbers, half of which had long since ceased to exist. Prices, names, titles of books, places he had meant to go back to.

Dmitry ran his finger over an old entry. The paper was dry and soft, like cloth.

A strange thing, time. When you are living inside a year, it seems enormous. Then ten years go by, and a whole period of your life fits on four pages of a notebook.

Do you miss it?

“Miss what?”

You know what.

Dmitry was silent for a while.

“Sometimes.”

Will you go back?

“To India?”

Yes.

“I don’t know.”

Then you will.

“Why?”

When you really do not want to do something, you say “no”.

He looked at the old page.

“Possibly.”

He closed the notebook.

In truth India had never entirely left his flat. It stood on the shelves, lay in the boxes, smelt of old paper. It showed itself in strange objects that had outlived more human lives than Dmitry could imagine. It remained in words, in habits, in the fact that he had learnt to be calm about things that would once have seemed impossible.

And, of course, in Ma. Though to tie her to India alone would be wrong, and she herself would no doubt object.

I already have.

Dmitry stopped.

“Did I say that out loud?”

No.

“Then that’s not fair.”

What is not fair?

“You answer my thoughts before I’ve said them.”

Do not think so loudly.

“Very funny.”

This time she really did laugh.

* * *

Dmitry switched off the light over the desk, leaving only the lamp by the bed, and went to the window. The city was not asleep yet: down below a woman walked past with a dog, someone was parking by the next building, and far off, beyond the roofs, the sky still held a pale strip of light.

He remembered an old question.

“Ma.”

Yes?

“Do you ever just say ‘I don’t know?’”

Yes.

“To what?”

To questions I do not know the answer to.

“Give me an example.”

No.

“Why not?”

Because then you will start looking for them.

Dmitry smiled.

“You know me well.”

I know you.

The tone was quite different.

No irony.

Dmitry stopped smiling too. There had always been something in those three words for which he had never learnt to find an exact explanation. Not “I know what you are like.” Not “I understand what you are about to do.”

Deeper. As though she were speaking of him in a way that Dmitry himself could not.

He turned away from the window.

“Right. Bed.”

A good idea.

“Gym tomorrow.”

If your head does not ache.

“It won’t.”

How do you know?

"I've decided."

A very scientific approach.

"It works."

* * *

He turned down the bed. Before he switched off the lamp, his eye fell again on the old notebook: a sheet folded in two was sticking out of it a little.

Dmitry did not remember what it was.

He pulled it out.

It turned out to be a copy of an old document for the flat. He meant to put it back, but a figure caught his eye.

64.0 m².

Dmitry looked at it for several seconds. Then he opened the notebook where the sheet had been. On the page, in his own handwriting from many years ago, was written:

Sixty-four.

He gave a slow, wry smile.

"Ma."

What?

"The flat."

What about it?

"Sixty-four square metres."

And?

"Nothing."

He waited. Ma was silent.

"Now you're pretending not to understand on purpose."

Possibly.

"Is it a coincidence?"

Silence.

"Ma?"

No answer at all.

Dmitry shook his head, folded the sheet and pushed it back into the notebook.

"All right. If you don't want to say, don't."

He switched off the lamp and lay for a few seconds in the dark.

Then Ma's voice came, very quietly:

Sleep, son.

"Goodnight."

He closed his eyes.

A few minutes later his breathing grew even.

* * *

On the desk the dark screen of the laptop reflected the window. Beside it lay the closed notebook, and on one of its pages remained a word written long ago with almost no meaning attached to it:

chatúhshashti.

Sixty-four.

Dmitry did not yet know how closely this number would become bound up with his life.

Chapter Two

Aghorācārasantuṣṭā

The next evening Dmitry got home later than usual. After work he had stopped off at the gym, spent nearly an hour on the machines, and then sat in the changing room for another ten minutes or so, resting and gathering the strength to get up.

His legs ached pleasantly. His head, on the other hand, was clear.

That was exactly why Dmitry loved training: his body grew tired, but for a while his thoughts stopped jostling about inside him.

* * *

He got home at about nine. He parked the car, went up to the flat, dropped his sports bag by the cupboard and went straight into the shower.

Are you going to eat?

Dmitry turned on the water.

“I am.”

When?

“Ma, I haven’t even got my trousers off yet.”

That is not an answer.

“After my shower.”

Good.

“Thank you for your permission.”

There was no answer.

“And our sense of humour has run out again today.”

I am under no obligation to laugh.

“I remember.”

The warm water gradually washed the tiredness away. Dmitry stood under the shower longer than he had meant to, then dried himself, changed and went into the kitchen.

This time he did not argue with Ma about food: he heated up the supper he had made in advance, chopped some vegetables, poured some tea. He was so hungry that for the first few minutes he thought about nothing at all.

Then his eye fell on the laptop.

“No.”

No what?

“I’m not working tonight.”

I did not say anything.

“I’m getting in first.”

Then why have you opened the laptop?

Dmitry looked at his hand. Sure enough, he had already opened it.

“Habit.”

Of course.

Yesterday’s file was still up on the screen. Dmitry finished eating, took his plate to the sink, picked up the laptop and went through to the main room, to the desk.

“I’m just going to look at one thing.”

I am still not saying anything.

“That’s exactly why it’s suspicious.”

* * *

He opened the text.

Yesterday he had stopped at one of the lists of Dhumavati's names. Texts like this both irritated and attracted him. On the one hand, dozens, even hundreds, of epithets seemed awkward material to translate: one and the same name could have several shades of meaning, a compound word broke down into different elements of meaning, and trying to translate literally sometimes turned a perfectly normal Sanskrit construction into Russian nonsense.

On the other hand, it was precisely in such lists that one sometimes found what was missing from the long commentaries. One word, one epithet – and suddenly it became clear that somebody's later retelling had lost half of the original meaning.

Dmitry slowly scrolled down the page. He stopped, went back a little, read it again.

Aghorācārasantuṣṭā.

He looked at the word for some time. Then he took a pencil and divided it into parts.

Aghora.

Ācāra.

Santuṣṭā.

“Interesting.”

What is?

“Hold on.”

He opened a dictionary, then a second. Nothing new, in principle. But he liked the combination. He liked it very much.

Dmitry said it aloud once more:

“Aghorācārasantuṣṭā.”

Ma was silent.

“Are you deliberately waiting for me to translate it myself?”

Yes.

“All right.”

He wrote down several versions.

“Pleased by the practice of Aghora”.

He looked at it, crossed out the word “practice” and wrote:

“Satisfied by the path of Aghora”.

He did not like that either. Further down:

“She to whom the conduct of Aghora is pleasing”.

“What rubbish.”

Why?

“Nobody talks like that in Russian.”

Is that a problem with the Russian language?

“No. With the translator.”

Then decide.

Dmitry put down the pencil.

“Do you really like Aghora?”

What exactly am I supposed to like?

“See? Here we go.”

You asked.

“It says santuṣṭā here. Pleased. Satisfied.”

And?

“So you like the practice of Aghora.”

Once again you are trying to explain one word with another and thinking you have got the meaning.

“What else am I supposed to do? I'm a translator, not a telepath.”

Ma gave a quiet laugh.

That last point is debatable.

“Don’t dodge the question.”

For a few seconds it was quiet. Then her voice came again, more serious now:

It is not that Aghora pleases me, Dmitry. It accords with my nature.

He stopped writing.

“Now that’s more interesting.”

For you.

“For me, of course. That’s why I’m asking.”

He adjusted his glasses, though they had hardly slipped at all.

“So it isn’t ‘I like this particular way of practising’?”

Too shallow.

“Then what?”

People divide what they see into separate paths. They give them names. They found schools. Then they begin to argue about which name is more correct. But if a certain kind of action accords with the nature of a power, it does not become correct because somebody has given it that name.

“All right. And Aghora accords with your nature?”

Yes.

The answer was so simple that for a few seconds Dmitry said nothing. Then he looked at the line again.

“Interesting.”

You have said that already.

“Because it really is interesting.”

He found the next epithet, then another. The connection kept recurring – it was no chance, one-off construction.

Aghora. Ācāra. Mantra. Worship.

Dmitry took another printout, found the right place and laid the sheets side by side.

“This is exactly why the internet drives me mad.”

What has it done wrong this time?

“It gives you twenty pages about the widow, the crow, misfortune, poverty and all sorts of everyday rubbish. And the four words that actually explain anything, you have to hunt for God knows where.”

And who makes you read twenty pages?

“To find out what people actually know.”

Why?

Dmitry thought about it.

“Good question.”

Again?

“Don’t start.”

He got up, topped up his tea and came back. The long word was still on the screen.

Aghorācārasantuṣṭā.

Dmitry said slowly:

“So it isn’t just a coincidence.”

What exactly?

“What I saw in India. What was explained to me. And what’s written here.”

Ma did not answer.

“You could say ‘yes’ sometimes.”

I could.

“And?”

What?

“Are you winding me up?”

A little.

Dmitry leant back in his chair.

A few years ago a conversation like this would have irritated him a great deal more. Back then he had thought that if he asked a direct question, he ought to get an equally direct answer. Over time it turned out that Ma held an entirely different opinion.

Sometimes she answered at once. Sometimes she made him circle round a question for several days. Sometimes she gave an answer that raised three more questions. And sometimes she was simply silent.

The worst of it was finding out afterwards that the silence had been an answer too.

Dmitry looked at the word again.

“Am I right in thinking that mantra is connected with Aghora too?”

Which one?

He gave the empty air in front of him an incredulous look.

“You know perfectly well which.”

I want you to say it.

“Dhum Dhum Dhumavati Thah Thah.”

After a short pause Ma answered:

Yes.

“So it’s Dhumavati’s Aghora mantra.”

In the lineage you were taught in – yes.

“A proper answer at last.”

Write down the date.

“I certainly will.”

Dmitry really did take a pencil and write in the margin: “Aghora”. Then he thought about it and drew a circle round the word.

He could have stopped there. A normal person probably would have. Dmitry considered himself a normal person – but only until a question came along that genuinely interested him.

“Then why the cemetery?”

Ma sighed. She actually sighed.

Dmitry grinned.

“Now I know for certain you’re fed up with me.”

I am not fed up with you.

“But there was a sigh.”

Because what comes next will take a long time.

“I’m in no hurry.”

That is not true.

“I’m in no hurry right now.”

That is different.

He said nothing.

“Why the cemetery?”

Because once again you want to begin with the place, and you need to begin with yourself.

“Explain.”

No.

“Ma.”

What?

“That’s not fair.”

Why?

“Because you say ‘you need to begin with yourself’ and then stop explaining.”

I want you to think.

“I think all the time as it is.”

That is one of your problems.

Dmitry laughed.

“All right. Let’s think.”

He closed the laptop – it was easier that way. While the screen was in front of his eyes, his gaze kept catching on the text anyway.

“The cemetery. Death. The absence of people. Fear. Isolation.”

Ma was silent.

“A person has less control over himself there.”

Silence.

“Everything familiar starts working differently.”

No reaction at all.

“Could you at least tell me when I’m heading in the right direction?”

Carry on.

“Thank you so much.”

He thought. It was already getting dark outside, and, unlike the evening before, the sky was at last about to turn into a proper night sky.

“In the city a person is always busy with something. Lights, cars, phones, people, noise. Even when he’s on his own, it’s as though he’s still among everyone else.”

Go on.

“In a cemetery at night all of that disappears.”

Not all of it.

“Most of it.”

That is more precise.

Dmitry got up and went over to the window.

“And what’s left is the man himself.”

There.

“That’s all?”

For a start.

“I was expecting something more mystical.”

That is why you did not understand.

He turned round. There was nobody in the room, but sometimes Ma’s presence was felt so distinctly that the absence of a physical body seemed a mere formality.

“So the point of the cemetery isn’t that the dead are there?”

They matter too.

“But they’re not the main thing?”

For what we are talking about now – no.

“Then what’s the main thing?”

You.

Dmitry was silent for a moment.

“Very convenient. Every question ends up coming down to me.”

Because you are the one who practises.

“That’s logical.”

It does happen to you now and then.

“Ma.”

She laughed.

* * *

He went back to the desk. On it lay the old Indian notebook he had already opened the day before. Dmitry picked it up again – this time he was not leafing through the dates; he was looking for something else.

He found it near the end. Several pages were covered with a jumble of Cyrillic, Roman letters and attempts to write down Sanskrit words as he had heard them; even back then he sometimes could not understand his own notes the next day.

In one place, in large letters, was written:

AGHORA

Below it, an arrow, then a few more words, one crossed out. Further down still:

“do not translate as horror”.

Dmitry smiled.

“When did I write this?”

Are you asking me?

“Yes.”

In India.

“Very helpful.”

You did not ask when exactly.

“All right. When exactly?”

I will not tell you.

“Why?”

Because you can remember for yourself.

He turned the page. On it was written: “Varanasi”. And a date.

Dmitry looked at it longer than he had meant to.

The memory did not come at once. First there was simply a smell: smoke, hot dust, water. Then a sound – voices, unfamiliar speech. And the feeling of a city where nobody tried to hide death behind a handsome door.

“So that’s where it came from.”

Ma said nothing.

“I remember.”

He closed his eyes, and the picture began to assemble itself slowly, in fragments.

He had been twenty-five, and his attitude to what he saw had been quite different. He had tried to classify everything, label it, find the correct name for it. To work out which tradition belonged to which, who worshipped whom, which school was older, which practice was “genuine”.

Now many of those questions seemed almost childish. But without them he would not have arrived at the others.

“When I first heard about the connection with you, I didn’t believe it, did I?”

You did not.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me then?”

You could not hear me.

Dmitry opened his eyes.

Now that was unpleasant. Not because the answer was bad – because it was obvious.

“True.”

He looked at the word in the notebook again.

AGHORA.

Then he opened the laptop. On the screen was:

Aghorācārasantustā.

Between the two entries lay almost fifteen years of his life.

“Funny.”

What is?

“Sometimes you can walk round a single word for ten years before you finally realise it was lying in front of you all along.”

It can take a great deal longer.

“That’s encouraging.”

I was not trying to encourage you.

“I know.”

* * *

Now the translation looked different. Not simpler – deeper.

Dmitry got rid of the first versions and wrote:

“Aghorācārasantuṣṭā – she who accords with the nature and path of Aghora; traditionally: satisfied by the practice of Aghora”.

He looked at it.

“Is that all right?”

For a note – yes.

“At last.”

Do not get used to it.

Dmitry saved the file. It was nearly eleven by the clock.

“That’s it. Enough.”

Good.

“I’ll carry on tomorrow.”

No.

His hand froze over the laptop lid.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

Tomorrow there will be something else.

“What?”

Ma did not answer. Dmitry waited.

“Ma.”

Silence.

“This is the bit I especially love.”

He closed the laptop, went into the kitchen, rinsed his mug and came back.

“I’ve got work tomorrow.”

I know.

“And the gym in the evening.”

Possibly.

“What do you mean, ‘possibly’?”

No answer at all.

Dmitry stopped in the middle of the room. The longer Ma was silent, the less he liked the situation.

“Where are we off to?”

Silence.

“We’re off somewhere, aren’t we?”

At last the voice came:

You wanted to understand Aghora.

“I did.”

Books are not enough for you.

Dmitry slowly sat down on the edge of the bed.

“And what are you suggesting?”

I am not suggesting anything.

“Then what?”

Get ready.

“For what?”

You will find out.

For several seconds he stared in front of him.

“When?”

Soon.

“A very precise timetable.”

It will be enough for you.

“Ma, when you say ‘get ready’, I’d like at least to understand what for.”

You would only start packing things you do not need.

“Possibly.”

That is why I am not telling you.

* * *

Dmitry lay down on the bed with his hands behind his head.

“Is it to do with the cemetery?”

Ma said nothing. He closed his eyes.

“So it is.”

Why?

“Because if it weren’t, you’d have said ‘no’.”

Silence.

Dmitry smiled.

“I know you too.”

Not as well as you think.

“But I guessed right this time?”

Sleep.

“I guessed right.”

Dmitry.

“All right, I’m shutting up.”

For several minutes he really was silent. Then he opened his eyes.

“Ma.”

What now?

“Why now, though?”

The answer did not come at once.

Because before, you wanted to know.

“And now?”

Now you are ready to try.

Dmitry stopped smiling.

The difference was small, only two words. But he heard it.

To know.

To try.

Until this evening Aghora had remained for him above all a text, an experience of India, other people’s explanations, odd fragments of practice. Now, for the first time, Ma had drawn the boundary between study and what would follow it.

“Understood.”

No.

“What is it this time?”

You will understand later.

Dmitry breathed out.

“Sometimes you’re impossible.”

I know.

“And you’re happy with that?”

Completely.

He laughed. Then he looked at the laptop again: under the closed lid lay a text with one long Sanskrit name.

Aghorācārasantuṣṭā.

Only yesterday it had been just a line among dozens of others.

What exactly Ma meant to do, Dmitry did not yet understand. But over many years he had managed to learn one simple thing: if she said “get ready”, the question had already been decided. All that remained was to find out what for.

Chapter Three

Varanasi

At twenty-five Dmitry saw Varanasi for the first time, early in the morning.

Until then the city had existed for him in photographs, books and other people's stories. He had a rough picture of the Ganges, the ghats, the narrow streets, the temples, the smoke of the funeral pyres.

The picture turned out to be useless.

That was always the way with India. You could find out the air temperature in advance, look at photographs of the area, read a dozen guidebooks and even learn a few essential phrases – and then go out into the street and discover that nobody had explained the most important thing to you.

The city did not piece itself together from separate details.

It came down on you all at once.

Voices, car horns, motorbikes. The smell of spices, smoke, dust. Dogs, cows. People hurrying somewhere, although to an onlooker it sometimes seemed that nobody was in any hurry at all.

Dmitry stopped outside his cheap guesthouse, put his bag down at his feet and for a while simply looked.

After the flight he wanted to sleep. After the journey he wanted to eat. After his first look at the street he wanted to get up to his room as quickly as possible, drop his bag and go straight out to see the city.

The last of these won.

He carried his bag upstairs, washed, changed and went out again.

He did not have much money. The trip had only happened at all because for several months beforehand Dmitry had economised on almost everything, taken on extra work, done shifts driving a taxi, and every time he was tempted to spend his savings on something more sensible he had reminded himself what he was saving for.

Now the “what for” was all around him.

At first he kept trying to remember everything. Then he realised it was not going to work, and took out a small notebook.

On the first page he wrote:

Varanasi.

Below it, the date. Then for a long time he did not know what to write next. Finally he put down: “Too much of everything at once”.

Half an hour later he added:

“Can't understand a thing”.

An hour after that:

“Must learn the language”.

Later those three lines seemed to him an almost perfect description of his first day in India.

* * *

He reached the Ganges from a different direction from the one he had planned: he took several wrong turnings, asked the way twice, once misunderstood the answer, and ended up by a flight of steps that was not on his map at all.

He went down.

And stopped.

The river was wider than it had looked in the photographs. Boats moved on the water, people sat on the steps. Someone was washing, someone praying, someone talking, someone selling flowers.

One man was calmly brushing his teeth as he looked at the river; a little further on a woman was washing clothes. Behind him a bell was ringing.

Dmitry stood there with his notebook and could not tell which of all this was religion and which was everyday life, or where the boundary between the first and the second lay at all.

A few days later he realised that the very attempt to find that boundary had been one of his first mistakes. Here, often, it simply did not exist.

He walked slowly along the ghats; he wanted to take everything in. Some things were awkward to look at for too long. Others it was impossible not to look at.

* * *

He saw his first funeral pyre from a distance. First he noticed the smoke. Then the people. Then the fire. And only then did he understand what exactly was burning.

Dmitry stopped.

Until then death in his life had always been something people tried to shut away. Hospital, morgue, coffin, cemetery, relatives, flowers – a sequence of actions that turned death into a separate event, isolated as far as possible from an ordinary day.

Here, life went on right beside it. People walked past, talked, worked. Someone was carrying tea, someone was arguing hotly about something. A few dozen metres away a human body was burning.

Dmitry stood there much longer than he had meant to. Not out of curiosity – rather because something inside him simply would not settle into its usual place.

He knew that death existed. Of course he knew. But knowing that death existed and being able to watch calmly as a body turned to ash turned out to be completely different things.

“First time?”

Dmitry turned round. Beside him stood a thin man of indeterminate age – perhaps about fifty. A light-coloured shirt, old trousers, sandals.

Dmitry nodded.

“Yes.”

The man said something else in English. Dmitry did not catch all of it.

“Sorry. Slowly.”

The man repeated it.

“You are afraid?”

Dmitry looked at the pyre.

“No.”

Then he thought about it and corrected himself:

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

The man smiled.

“Good answer.”

And walked on.

Dmitry watched him go, opened his notebook and wrote:

“Are you afraid? – Don’t know”.

For some reason it was this short exchange that stayed with him for years.

* * *

In his first weeks in Varanasi Dmitry mostly learnt to look. Not to understand – to look. Understanding, out of habit, he tried to add afterwards.

He quickly fell into a routine: tea in the morning, then the city. Sometimes books, sometimes conversations, sometimes simply hours and hours of walking with no particular aim.

He tried to talk to people. His English was enough to ask questions, but often not enough to understand the whole answer. Hindi he had practically none. Sanskrit existed so far only as a few familiar words and a strange feeling that one day he would have to learn it anyway.

This irritated him. He would see an inscription, understand that there was a text in front of him, and be unable to read it. For Dmitry this was almost a personal insult.

* * *

One day he stopped outside a small bookshop. Calling it a shop was something of a stretch: books stood on shelves, lay in piles on the floor, were stacked on a chair, took up part of the table and, by the look of things, were gradually preparing to take over the rest of the premises.

Behind the table sat its elderly owner.

Dmitry picked up a thin book and opened it. Devanagari. A few words he recognised, most he did not.

“Sanskrit?”

The owner looked up.

“Sanskrit.”

“Tantra?”

The man held out his hand. Dmitry passed him the book, and the man looked at the cover.

“No. Stotra.”

“Dhumavati?”

The owner looked at him again, more attentively this time.

“Dhumavati?”

“Yes.”

The man was silent for a while, then got up and began looking for something on the top shelf. He took down two books, put one back on the shelf and laid the other in front of Dmitry.

“Hindi.”

“Sanskrit?”

The owner opened it and pointed a finger at the page.

“Sanskrit. Hindi.”

That is, a Sanskrit text with explanations in Hindi. For Dmitry this was rather like being given a book with two locks instead of one.

“English?”

The owner laughed.

“No English.”

“Of course.”

Dmitry bought it all the same.

That same evening he opened it in his room. For five minutes he tried to read, then for ten minutes he tried to use the dictionary, and after twenty he realised he was wasting his time and put the book down beside him.

It lay there for several days. Then it travelled on with him. Later – to Russia. Then back to India. Several times it moved from flat to flat.

And only many years later did Dmitry really begin to understand a good part of what he had once bought almost blindly.

In those years the word “Dhumavati” did not yet mean to him what it came to mean later. He knew the general image, knew about the Mahavidyas, had read the descriptions that were available. But the more he asked, the more irritated he became: the answers did not agree.

For one person she was the goddess of misfortune. For another, of renunciation. For a third, of emptiness. For a fourth, of the knowledge that arises after illusions are destroyed. Someone even advised him not to take an interest in her unless he had to.

That last piece of advice had the opposite effect on Dmitry. If he was told “better not go there”, his first question was usually “why?” and his second “what’s there?”

This quality later caused him a fair amount of trouble. But at twenty-five he still considered it purely a virtue.

* * *

One evening the conversation turned to Aghora.

Dmitry was sitting on the steps not far from the river with two people he had met a few days earlier. One was Indian; the other had come from Europe and for several years had been living in Varanasi on and off.

The conversation jumped from subject to subject. Shiva. Sadhus. The cremation ghats. Mantras. Kali.

Then came the word:

“Aghora.”

Dmitry had come across the word before, but mostly in superficial accounts, where Aghora was almost always turned into a list of the most shocking details.

He asked:

“What actually means Aghora?”

The European answered first:

“Hard to explain.”

The Indian shook his head.

“Not hard. People make it hard.”

What followed was a conversation half of which Dmitry misunderstood at the time. He realised that much later.

But one thing he remembered: Aghora could not be reduced to outward behaviour. It could not be reduced to the cemetery. It could not be reduced to what you could show a tourist to frighten him.

Dmitry wrote down a few words. Then one of the others mentioned Dhumavati.

Dmitry looked up.

“Dhumavati and Aghora?”

The Indian looked at him.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then learn.”

The conversation moved on.

Just a few seconds. No initiation, no great secret – simply two words side by side for the first time.

Dhumavati.

Aghora.

In his notebook Dmitry wrote a question mark between them. The entry survived.

* * *

A few days later he went back to that place alone. Not because he expected to find the same people there – he simply wanted to think in peace.

It was already late. The city was changing, but it never became completely quiet: voices carried on somewhere in the distance, people passed by from time to time. Dampness drifted up from the river, and the smoke of the funeral pyres mingled with the city’s other smells so naturally that Dmitry had already stopped noticing it every minute.

He opened his notebook and found the entry:

Dhumavati ? Aghora

Under it he wrote:

“check”.

Then, below:

“don’t believe the first explanation”.

He thought some more, and added:

“or the second”.

He smiled wryly and closed the notebook.

On the other side of the river almost nothing could be seen. Darkness, water, the lights of boats.

He sat there a long time.

Back then Dmitry could not yet hear Ma. Could not hear the sisters. Did not know that fifteen years later, in a quite different country, he would be walking into a cemetery at night and saying a mantra before taking his first step across its boundary. Did not know that the word “Aghora”, written down now almost by chance, would become part of his own practice. Did not know that he would have to study Sanskrit not out of interest, but because one day someone else’s translation would no longer be enough.

For now everything was a great deal simpler. He was a young man who had come to India on money he had saved. He had a cheap room, a limited budget, poor Hindi, practically non-existent Sanskrit, a book he could not properly read, and an enormous number of questions.

That suited Dmitry. He expected to find the answers himself.

He put the notebook in his bag and got up. On the way back he bought tea; the seller named a price, Dmitry paid. A few metres further on he realised he had paid about twice as much as he had that morning.

He went back.

“Why more?”

The seller smiled and explained something. Dmitry did not understand a word.

“All right,” he said, in Russian this time. “Let’s call it your win today.”

The seller went on smiling.

Dmitry walked on. Ten minutes later he discovered he was lost and stopped where three narrow streets met. He looked left, right, behind him. All three options looked equally wrong.

“Brilliant.”

Nobody answered. Back then that was normal.

Dmitry took out a paper map, tried to find himself on it, and after a few minutes was finally convinced that the map knew no more about where he was than he did. He had to ask the way.

He got back to his room almost an hour later. He took off his shoes, put down the book, opened the notebook and at the very bottom of the page added one more line:

“Varanasi cannot be studied from a map”.

Then he thought about it and crossed out the word “Varanasi”. What remained was:

“Cannot be studied from a map”.

He liked that phrase better.

He switched off the light. Outside the window the city went on making its noise.

Dmitry lay awake for a long time. He thought about the river. About the fire. About the word “Aghora”. About the strange goddess whom different people described as though each had seen a completely different Dhumavati.

And for the first time he allowed himself the thought: perhaps the problem was not that one of them was mistaken. Perhaps he was simply asking questions that were too simple.

Fifteen years later Ma would tell him almost the same thing. But back then there was nobody to prompt him, and he had to reach the thought by himself.

Chapter Four

Manali

After Varanasi, the quiet of Manali at first seemed almost wrong to Dmitry.

Not real quiet – the town lived its life all the same, cars drove about, people talked, traders opened their shops, the smell of food and sweet tea drifted out of the cafés. But after Varanasi it was as if the space around him had stopped demanding his attention from every side at once.

In Varanasi it had been in constant motion: talking, hooting, haggling, burning, praying, swearing, smelling of spices and incense. Even at night the city would not let you forget that life was going on all around.

In Manali it was enough to walk a little way from the road, and the noise stayed somewhere down below.

Dmitry had come there with almost no plan. He wanted to see the mountains. He wanted to live for a few days somewhere he did not have to keep pushing his way through people. And he also wanted to sort through, in peace, the books and notes he had collected in Varanasi.

The room turned out to be small: a bed, a wooden table, a chair, a window and a wardrobe whose door would only shut if you lifted it slightly.

Dmitry tried twice. On the third he got the knack.

“So that’s agreed, then.”

The wardrobe did not object.

He took a bottle of water out of his bag and put it on the table, and beside it laid his notebook, a dictionary and several books. Some of the books were in English, some had Sanskrit passages in them which he was still working through far too slowly. A few more small editions he had bought more because he did not want to regret it later than because he was sure of their value.

On one of the spreads he came across the name Dhumavati again. Dmitry’s eyes lingered on it.

In Varanasi it had constantly cropped up next to death, renunciation, widowhood, hunger, smoke and what various writers called inauspicious. But right alongside it there were also quite different things. Freedom. The giving up of illusion. Knowledge that appears where there is nothing left to adorn.

Dmitry wrote in the margin:

“Why is one and the same thing described both as punishment and as liberation?”

Then he added:

“Who decided that the absence of comfort necessarily means evil?”

He liked this thought.

He closed the book and went to the window. Beyond the houses rose the mountains – not as a backdrop: they took up half the world.

For several minutes Dmitry simply looked.

Then he put on his jacket and went out.

* * *

In the mountains it turned out to be far easier than in Varanasi to find a place where he could be alone. Dmitry would climb higher up the path until the last houses were left below. Sometimes he sat down on a rock, sometimes he simply stood.

In the first few days, out of habit, he still kept waiting for something to happen.

A meeting. A sign. An unusual sensation. Then he realised that he himself was turning the trip into an examination nobody had set him.

After that it became easier. He began going up there not for an answer, but because he could sit quietly and think.

In one of the little shops he came across some prayer beads. All sorts: wood, seeds, bone, stone. Dmitry looked at them for a long time, but did not buy the most beautiful – he took simple ones that sat comfortably in the hand. The seller tried to show him a few more, clearly more expensive.

Dmitry shook his head.

“They’re not for hanging on a wall.”

The seller did not understand. So Dmitry mimed running beads through his fingers, and the man immediately nodded.

Out in the street Dmitry looked at his purchase again. It was then that he first clearly formulated for himself a rule that only grew firmer later on: a working thing is not obliged to be beautiful to an outsider; it has to work.

This applied to books, to prayer beads, to knives, and to any objects that would in time cease to be merely objects.

He did not know that yet.

But the habit had already formed.

* * *

Sanskrit irritated him more and more. Not the language itself – his own dependence on other people’s translations.

Dmitry would find one word in two books and see two different meanings. He would open a third – and there a third meaning appeared. At first he chose whichever seemed more logical, then he realised this was a bad method: what was logical to the translator was not necessarily what was actually in the original line.

He began writing out the forms separately, comparing endings, looking for recurring constructions. A single short phrase sometimes took him an hour, and the result might be the realisation that the original translation he was checking had been broadly correct.

At first this drove him mad.

Then it stopped bothering him: if an hour’s work confirmed that one line was correct, then the hour had not been lost.

In the evenings Dmitry sat by the window, drank tea and worked through a few words at a time. It did not feel like a spiritual feat at all. His eyes grew tired, his handwriting got worse, the dictionary kept falling off the edge of the table.

Once he spent half an hour looking up the meaning of a word and only then noticed he was looking at the wrong line. He covered his face with his hand.

“Brilliant.”

Nobody answered. Back then that was still normal.

He opened the right page and started again.

* * *

After a few weeks Manali no longer seemed to him the opposite of Varanasi – rather a different way of showing the same thing.

In Varanasi life and death stood so close together that they stopped being abstractions. In the mountains something else disappeared – the sense of one’s own importance. Against the slopes, the snow and the enormous sky, a human being’s certainty that the world owed an explanation to him in particular looked rather comical.

Dmitry liked that.

One day he was sitting above the town, running the new prayer beads through his fingers. He was not saying a mantra – just moving the beads along, getting used to their size and spacing. Then he took out his notebook and on the page with his notes on Dhumavati wrote:

“Don’t look for a convenient explanation”.

He thought for a moment and added underneath:

“If two descriptions contradict each other, first check whether they really refer to the same level”.

He would later use this line many times in quite different kinds of research. For now it had appeared for a very simple reason: Dmitry was tired of choosing between other people’s versions. He wanted to learn to read for himself.

* * *

Before leaving he laid his things out on the bed. There were not many clothes, but there were noticeably more books.

Dmitry looked at the bag. Then at the pile of books. Then at the bag again.

“Right.”

Some of the clothes he had to wear.

The books fitted.

At the airport the bag turned out to be heavier than he would have liked. He put it on the scales, looked at the figure for a few seconds, then began moving books into his hand luggage.

So ended his first India. Not with a revelation, not with an initiation, not with a meeting with a guru after which everything became clear. He left with almost the same number of questions as he had arrived with.

Only now the questions had become more precise. And together with them a new habit had appeared: not to trust the first convenient translation, not to consider a beautiful object a working one just because it was beautiful, not to be in a hurry to call a contradiction a mistake – and to go back to where the question grows deeper.

A few years later India would no longer be a one-off trip for him. But it began precisely then: with Varanasi, Manali, a heavy bag of books and the decision that one day he would read these texts without go-betweens.

Chapter Five

Between India and Russia

By the age of thirty Dmitry had stopped thinking of going to India as a trip.

A trip begins and ends. It has a ticket there, a fixed length, a return date, photographs, things you must manage to see, and a feeling that time is limited.

For him everything had become different.

India had gradually turned into a place he returned to. Russia – into a place he came to in order to sort out the matters that had piled up, earn money, see familiar streets, buy what he needed, build his savings back up and leave again.

At first this life seemed temporary.

Then several years went by.

The temporary turned out to be more stable than the permanent.

He might spend months in Varanasi, then decide that there was too little money left, buy a ticket to Russia and a few days later find himself once again among snow, grey buildings, familiar shops and people who simply could not understand why anyone would voluntarily spend so much time in India.

Gradually Dmitry stopped explaining.

“What do you do there?”

“I live.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning exactly that.”

“And work?”

“I work when I come back.”

“And that suits you?”

“For now, yes.”

Usually after this the other person would look at him as though Dmitry were deliberately rejecting some obviously correct way of arranging one’s life.

It did not bother him. The correct arrangement of someone else’s life had always struck Dmitry as a suspiciously simple thing – especially when it was explained by people who were unhappy with their own lives.

* * *

Coming back in winter was the hardest. After India the cold felt almost like a physical insult: the plane would land, Dmitry would collect his luggage, step outside – and for the first few seconds his body flatly refused to accept what was happening as normal.

Minus twenty. Sometimes lower. Snow. His breath became visible at once, his fingers froze before he had even managed to get his gloves out.

“Why on earth do people live here?” Dmitry muttered once, shoving his bag into the car.

A minute later he answered himself:

“Because they were born here.”

The car did not start at once. Dmitry turned the key again.

“Come on, love. I don’t want to either, but we both have to.”

At last the engine caught. He turned on the heater and sat for several minutes without taking his jacket off.

In India he missed proper quiet. In Russia, after a few days, he began to miss India.

It went on like that for years.

* * *

His returns home had one main purpose – money.

Dmitry had never been well enough off simply to live between countries without thinking about expenses. Tickets cost money. Accommodation cost money. Books cost money. Even a very simple life in India still required a constant financial reserve.

So each Russian stint turned into a short sprint. Sleep less, work more, spend only on what was necessary.

In those periods Dmitry would take up driving a taxi again – not out of any love for carrying passengers. Taxi work had one important advantage: the money came quickly. In the morning he could get on with his own affairs, and in the evening go out on shift and work until late at night. Sometimes the other way round.

On particularly good days he would come home, write down what he had earned in a notebook and at once put most of it aside. In his mind this little pile of money already bore a label:

India.

The rest went on petrol, food, the flat, the phone and necessary purchases. Every so often the car demanded repairs and instantly wiped out part of the carefully calculated budget. On such days Dmitry would study the engine with particular attention and try to work out whether it was possible to come to an agreement with machinery on a spiritual level.

The machinery refused all contact.

He had to pay.

* * *

The work with people came about almost imperceptibly. At first acquaintances asked, then acquaintances of acquaintances. Some came out of curiosity, some because they had already tried everything else.

Dmitry took this calmly. He did not call himself a doctor and did not try to explain to a person what they ought to think about the causes of their condition. He worked with the methods he knew at the time, and regarded what was happening as part of his own practice.

People paid. Sometimes a little, sometimes a great deal more than he earned in an evening in the taxi. Quite soon Dmitry realised that in a month of earnings like these he could put together a sum that used to take him several months to earn.

This both solved a problem and created a new one. The money brought the return to India closer – but along with the money came people who began ringing again. And then again.

“I have to go away.”

“When will you be back?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what am I supposed to do?”

Dmitry did not like the question.

“Live.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

Some took offence, some looked for someone else, some waited. Dmitry did not ask anyone to wait: for him this period was still temporary. Earn. Leave. Come back when needed.

Back then he did not yet understand that anyone you let close enough to yourself gradually becomes part of your chain of cause and effect.

He would learn that later. And far more unpleasantly.

* * *

Usually after a month Dmitry would already be counting the days. After a month and a half – looking for tickets. After two he would realise he had stayed too long.

He would sit at home at night with money, his passport and the laptop in front of him, flight options on the screen. Dmitry compared the price, the date, the connections, the price again. Then he would check his bank account. Then the flights again.

“If I go in a week’s time, it’s cheaper.”

A minute later:

“But that’s another week sitting here.”

A minute after that:

“Then again, I could earn a bit extra.”

Sometimes this went on for an hour. In the end the maths almost always won: he stayed a few more days, worked, bought a ticket, packed his things.

And on the day of departure his mood changed at once. The city that only yesterday had seemed grey and far too cold suddenly felt almost like home. On the way to the airport Dmitry looked out of the window: familiar buildings, crossroads, shops, snow, people at the bus stops.

He knew that in a few months he would miss all this.

People were strangely made. While they were in one place, they thought about another. When they got there, they remembered the first.

* * *

Varanasi greeted him differently. No easing back in: the first step out of the airport – and at once the air, the people, the voices, the movement. After the Russian winter the heat seemed almost a separate living creature.

On the way into the city Dmitry felt the familiar rhythm gradually re-establishing itself inside him. The next day he was buying tea at his usual place again. Two days later he was walking down a familiar street. A week later it already seemed as if he had never been away.

He would rent a room, lay out his books, get out his notebooks and carry on from where he had stopped several months before.

That was exactly what distinguished returning from travelling. You did not have to begin again – life simply went on.

* * *

His Sanskrit progressed slowly. Dmitry wanted it to go faster.

This mismatch accompanied almost everything he did: he could accept difficulty but could not bear slowness.

At first it seemed it would be enough to learn the alphabet. Then it turned out that the alphabet had been the easiest part. After it came endings, declensions, roots, verb forms, compound words that could take up half a line, rules to which an exception was immediately found, and an exception that in another text suddenly looked like the rule.

Sometimes Dmitry would close the book and simply sit for a few minutes.

Then he would open it again.

By thirty-two he could already work out a great deal more than at twenty-five. By thirty-three – notice other people’s mistakes in simple translations.

This was a dangerous condition. A person learns a little more and very quickly begins to think he now knows enough.

Dmitry went through this too. Once he argued for nearly an hour with a man over the translation of a short line, went back to his room, opened the text again – and twenty minutes later discovered that he was the one who had been wrong.

He spent the next day looking for the man. He found him.

“Yesterday. I was wrong.”

The man looked at him.

“Yes.”

“You could say.”

“I did.”

Dmitry went back over yesterday’s conversation in his mind and realised the man really had told him so.

“Fine.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He left. That evening an entry appeared in his notebook:

“Certainty is not a grammatical rule”.

* * *

Gradually books stopped being mere objects of interest. Dmitry began to collect material by subject: Dhumavati, Aghora, Shakti, the yoginis, mantras, various practical systems.

He was not trying to create an academic library – he bought what he could find and afford. Sometimes a book turned out to be useless. Sometimes a single page justified the whole purchase. Sometimes what mattered was not the text but a note in the margin, made by some unknown person many years before.

He liked old editions more and more. Not because of the romance of age: he had already understood that old does not mean true. But an old object sometimes preserved what later disappeared in reprinting. The form of a word. An unusual mantra. A commentary. A drawing. The order of the lines.

Once he bought a book almost solely because several of its pages had been written by hand. He could not make out the handwriting. He kept the book all the same.

“Later.”

The word “later” was gradually becoming an important part of the collection. I will read it later. I will translate it later. I will find an explanation later. Later I will understand why I bought it at all.

Some of those “laters” would come ten years on. Some – never.

* * *

Dmitry’s visits to Manali were different now. The first rapture at the mountains had passed; something else remained.

He knew where it was cheaper to rent a room, where to buy food, where you could walk several kilometres in peace and meet almost no one. He knew a few shops. He knew where the seller would immediately start telling a legend about some great saint, and where it was better to ask nothing at all until you had looked the object over yourself.

His collection of prayer beads grew slowly. More and more often Dmitry bought not ready-made strings but individual beads: he liked putting them together himself. Taking them apart, matching them up, restringing, changing the spacing, putting in a different spacer. Then taking it apart again, because it still did not sit comfortably in the hand.

He could spend half an evening on this.

To an outsider there was hardly any difference. To Dmitry there was.

* * *

One day he was shown an old bone mala. Not the kind that lay on the tourist stalls: small beads, very light, a dark surface, each piece a slightly different shade.

Dmitry took it and noticed the difference at once.

“What bone?”

The man looked at him. He did not answer straight away.

“Kapala.”

Dmitry knew the word. But for a few seconds he was silent all the same.

“Human?”

The man nodded.

Dmitry looked at the mala again. Until then human remains in ritual culture had existed for him more as theory. Kapala. Ornaments. Objects he had read about and seen from a distance.

It was one thing to know.

Another to hold it in your hands.

After large bone prayer beads, the mala seemed almost weightless.

“Old?”

The man nodded. Dmitry smirked.

“Everybody says old.”

The man did not smile.

“This old.”

His tone made Dmitry stop joking. He slowly ran a few of the beads through his fingers. Each was slightly different: not a factory product, not an attempt at perfect geometry – separate little discs.

At the time Dmitry did not yet know all that he would later learn about prayer beads like these. But for the first time he felt one thing: the material here was not just material.

He gave the mala back.

“How much?”

The price was out of his reach. Dmitry did not even try to haggle.

“Maybe next time.”

The man took the beads back.

“Maybe.”

The phrase was already familiar. In India too much existed only at the moment of meeting: today the object is there, tomorrow it is not; today a person is ready to talk, in a month you will not find him.

Dmitry was gradually learning to accept that too.

Badly. But he was learning.

* * *

The years between thirty and thirty-five gradually lost their clear boundaries. Later Dmitry sometimes tried to remember: was that at thirty-one? Or thirty-two? Before going back in the winter? After Manali? Before that book? After meeting that man?

Memory assembled time differently – not by the calendar, by events. That was when he first saw a mala like that. It was after this that he took up a certain text in earnest. That was when he realised one translation had been wrong. That was when he came back to Russia with almost no money. That was when he earned enough in two months to live in India for a long time to come.

The calendar existed somewhere alongside. But real life was measured by other markers.

* * *

The work with people in Russia gradually began to bring in more money. Along with this Dmitry's inner irritation grew – not at the people, but at the system itself.

A person would come. Want a result. Pay. If things got better, they were glad. If they did not, they asked a question:

“Why?”

And Dmitry did not always know why.

His own position between certainty and the unknown troubled him more and more. He could see changes, could observe a person's reaction, could believe he understood the process taking place. But the more he practised, the more careful he became with the words “I know”.

At twenty-five not knowing had irritated him. By thirty-five it had begun to acquire a different value: if you do not know, at least you are not lying to yourself.

One woman, after another piece of work, asked:

“Are you quite sure it will help?”

Dmitry looked at her. A few years earlier he would have answered far more confidently. Now he said:

“No.”

She was surprised.

“Then why are we doing it?”

“Because it may help.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll go on trying to understand.”

The woman looked at him for a while.

“You have a strange way of reassuring people.”

“I don’t reassure people.”

She smiled all the same.

* * *

Money from work of this kind Dmitry still put aside.

Russia, work, taxi, practice, money, ticket, India, books, research, return. Money again.

The cycle repeated itself.

By the age of thirty-five his life between Russia and India had begun to change. Dmitry no longer went away for many months as often as before: several years of this regime had taken their toll. Constant flights, the need to earn money all over again each time and to come back only for the sake of the next trip gradually stopped suiting him.

On one of his visits home he stayed in Russia for longer than a month or two. Taxi driving still remained a way of earning quickly if need be, and the work with people did not disappear at once either, but the basis of his income gradually became an ordinary five-day-a-week job to do with texts, books and documents. It did not require Dmitry to live for his work, but it gave him what he had hardly ever had before – a predictable income and the chance to get on calmly with his books and research after the working day.

Outwardly, for the first time in many years, his life had become almost ordinary.

It was precisely then that something began to happen that was hard to call ordinary.

* * *

At first it was like ordinary intuition. A thought would arise too distinctly.

For instance, he would be about to go somewhere – and suddenly understand with complete clarity: don’t. Not fear. Not laziness. Simply an inner “no”.

Several times he ignored it. Then he would discover that the decision really had been a bad one.

At other times the word would arise inside him: wait. He waited, and a few minutes later something happened that changed his plans.

Dmitry was wary of this. Intuition was nothing new – but this was something slightly different. Too specific. Sometimes it even had a tone of voice.

At first he put it down to his own thinking: a person is capable of holding an inner dialogue, asking himself questions, answering. Nothing mystical about it.

Then one day the inner answer said something Dmitry flatly disagreed with. He objected silently. The answer came again.

Dmitry stopped in the middle of the room.

“Now this is interesting.”

Silence. He waited. Nothing.

“Well, of course.”

A couple of minutes later he went back to what he had been doing. But the episode stayed with him.

* * *

Moments like this began to recur. Rarely: sometimes weeks passed between them, sometimes a month.

Dmitry did not yet call it a voice – rather a clear thought from someone else, inside his own space. He could not prove that it came from someone else. But it felt different from his ordinary thoughts.

Once he was sitting over a text, trying for a long time to understand a construction. He found a translation, wrote it down – and almost at once the word arose inside him: wrong.

Dmitry read it again.

“Why wrong?”

There was no answer.

Irritated, he opened the dictionary and checked. Everything looked fine. Another dictionary. Then a commentary.

Forty minutes later he found a meaning he had missed before. The translation really did change.

Dmitry put down his pencil.

“All right.”

Silence.

“Thank you.”

No one. He smiled wryly.

“Very convenient.”

* * *

Another time it was the other way round. He wanted an answer: Dmitry asked silently, then again, then once more. Nothing.

This irritated him a great deal more.

“So when I don’t need it, there it is. When I ask – silence?”

Silence.

“Excellent.”

He did not yet know the main rule then: you cannot force yourself to hear what you are not yet able to listen for. And still less can you demand an answer simply because you have become curious.

* * *

One evening, back in Russia, Dmitry came home after work. It was cold, he was tired, he did not want to go anywhere. On the table lay a book he had been meaning to open for several days.

Dmitry looked at it.

“Tomorrow.”

And for the first time he heard inside himself, quite distinctly:

Today.

Dmitry did not understand at once what it had been.

Not a thought. Not a feeling.

An actual word.

A woman’s voice. Calm. Not loud. But so clear that Dmitry automatically looked round.

There was nobody in the room.

For several seconds he stood there.

“Who’s there?”

There was no answer.

“Marvellous.”

Dmitry took off his jacket, went to the table, sat down and opened the book. He worked for several hours and found what he had long been looking for.

Coincidence. Quite possibly. At the time he still allowed himself that explanation.

But that evening, before he went to sleep, a short entry appeared in his notebook:

“A woman’s voice. ‘Today’. Not mine?”

Beside it he put the date.

Later Dmitry went back to this page many times. Because it was with this page that the period began when the question “who is talking to me?” stopped being merely rhetorical.

For now there was still no answer.

But the silence had already stopped being empty.

Chapter Six

Hearing

After that evening Dmitry spent several days waiting for the woman's voice to come again.

Yes, waiting. Though he would not admit it, even to himself.

In the mornings he got up, got ready for work, brewed tea, opened his laptop – and all the while, without meaning to, he was listening.

Nothing. Nothing in the car either. At work, an ordinary day: documents, texts, emails and a few small tasks that should have taken half an hour and for some reason stretched almost to lunchtime.

After lunch his manager walked past his desk, stopped and looked at the monitor.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Good, then."

And he walked off.

Quite soon a convenient rule had settled between them: as long as Dmitry did everything on time and without mistakes, his manager did not interfere in what he did between work tasks. It suited them both.

He went back to the text. A few minutes later he again caught himself waiting for that voice.

"Idiotic," he muttered under his breath, looking at the monitor.

In reply – nothing.

* * *

On the third day Dmitry decided that what had happened could be regarded as a one-off. On the fourth, that this was exactly how it ought to be regarded.

On the fifth, in the evening, he came home, changed, opened the fridge and heard:

Not that.

His hand stopped. Dmitry was looking at a container of food.

"Not what?"

Silence. He waited.

"Are you serious?"

Nothing.

"If you've already started talking, could you at least finish the thought?"

The answer came almost at once:

Fruit.

Dmitry slowly closed the fridge. On the table there really was a large bowl of apples and grapes. He looked at it. Then he opened the fridge again.

"I want a proper meal."

Later.

Now there was considerably less doubt. This did not resemble ordinary inner dialogue: his own thoughts did not make him wait for an answer, and they certainly did not have so recognisable an intonation.

"And why fruit now?"

Silence.

"Of course."

He took an apple.

"I'm going to eat later anyway."

I know.

Dmitry froze with the apple in his hand.

“Right.”

He put it back.

“Let’s start again.”

There was no answer.

“Who are you?”

Silence.

“A splendid start to a conversation.”

He sat down at the table and waited another minute.

“I understand that I might be talking to myself. That’s normal, people do it all the time. But if you’re not me, it would be nice if you could indicate it somehow.”

No reaction at all.

“A name, at least.”

Silence.

“Fine. If you don’t want to, don’t.”

Dmitry picked up the apple again and bit into it.

And heard:

You know.

He stopped chewing.

Those two words unexpectedly changed everything. Until then the voice could be regarded as some puzzling phenomenon: intuition, a quirk of perception, a strange form of his own thinking. Now a question arose – the one Dmitry had spent the last few years putting to texts, to things and to people.

If he really did know – then what exactly?

He slowly finished chewing.

“I don’t know.”

You do.

“No.”

Silence.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking.”

You are asking because you are afraid of your own answer.

Dmitry put the apple aside.

Now he did feel uncomfortable. Not frightened – uncomfortable, that was the word, because the phrase had landed too accurately.

He got up and walked about the kitchen. Came back.

“Dhumavati?”

Nothing.

For some reason his heart thumped harder.

“Are you Dhumavati?”

The answer came calmly:

Yes.

Dmitry sat down. For several seconds he simply looked straight ahead. Then he asked:

“Just like that?”

And how should it be?

He laughed in spite of himself.

“I don’t know. Thunder, lightning. The walls shaking. Something impressive.”

Why?

“To be convincing.”

Is this not enough for you?

Dmitry thought about it.

“Not yet.”

This time it seemed to him that she gave a wry smile. He heard no laughter – what he felt was the wry smile itself.

“I suppose now I’m meant to start doubting my own sanity.”

Start.

“A very supportive approach.”

Test it.

One word. No offence taken. No attempt to persuade.

Test it.

Dmitry liked this considerably more than any assurances.

“All right.”

He took a notebook and wrote the date on a clean page. Then:

“Says she is Dhumavati.”

He looked at it. Added:

“Test. Do not fill in the answers myself.”

The voice was silent.

“Agreed?”

Yes.

“And no adjusting the result?”

Yes.

“And if it turns out I’m simply talking to myself?”

A pause.

Then you will be talking to yourself.

Dmitry smiled.

“Logical.”

* * *

The testing took months. Not because Dmitry had devised some complicated system – on the contrary, he tried not to set anything up on purpose.

He did not sit for hours waiting for the voice. Did not try to summon it. Did not turn every stray thought into a message from above. If an answer came, he wrote it down. If it did not, he did not fill it in himself. He paid particular attention to things that could be checked later.

One morning he was just about to leave the flat. Keys in his pocket, jacket zipped up, bag on his shoulder.

Wait.

Dmitry stopped.

“How long?”

There was no answer.

“Five minutes?”

Silence.

He looked at his watch: there was enough time before work. He took the bag off his shoulder and stood by the door.

Two minutes later something banged loudly in the stairwell, then voices could be heard. Dmitry looked out: between floors two men were trying to drag an enormous metal frame through, and the flight of stairs was almost completely blocked.

He shut the door.

“And?”

Wait.

“Is that all?”

There was no answer.

About ten minutes later the way was clear. Dmitry went out – and when he was already by his car he noticed that there had been a minor collision on the road in front of the courtyard: two cars were standing across the carriageway and people had gathered round.

He looked at his watch. If he had left on time, he might very well have been there at the moment of the accident.

Or he might not. A coincidence proved nothing.

That evening Dmitry wrote:

“Morning. She said wait. A few minutes later, a collision at the turning out of the courtyard. Causality unknown.”

He underlined the last two words.

Causality unknown.

He liked this formulation: it kept him from turning into an idiot.

* * *

Another time the voice said:

Do not buy it.

Dmitry was sitting at his laptop looking at an old edition he had been hunting for almost a year. The price was reasonable, the photographs good, the seller quick to reply.

“Why?”

Silence.

“Is something wrong with it?”

Nothing.

“A fake?”

No reply.

“Listen, you do realise that if you just say ‘don’t buy it’ without any explanation, it’s not much help?”

Do not buy it.

“Very informative.”

All the same, he did not buy it.

Three days later the seller vanished along with the listing. A week after that, a complaint appeared on an enthusiasts’ forum from someone who had transferred the money to the seller and received nothing.

Dmitry read the post and leant back in his chair.

“All right.”

What?

“Thank you.”

For what?

“Don’t start.”

* * *

Then there were the mistakes. These were what convinced Dmitry most of all.

Not her mistakes. His.

He kept confusing his own thought with what he had heard: he wanted a particular answer – and got it. Or at least so it seemed. He acted. The result turned out badly.

“But you said so.”

No.

“You did.”

No.

“I remember perfectly well.”

You wanted to hear it.

Dmitry would get angry, open the notebook – and find that he really had not written the answer down. Because there had been no real answer: he had finished the phrase himself, given it its intonation himself, decided himself that it had come from outside.

Another time he would ask:

“Should I do it?”

A clear answer would arise inside him: do it. Dmitry would begin. After a while Ma would say calmly:

I did not tell you that.

“Then who did?”

You.

“Very convenient.”

For you – yes.

“Why for me?”

You can blame me for your own decision.

After that Dmitry was angry for several hours. Then he admitted that she was right.

A new rule appeared in the notebook:

“Wanting an answer is not an answer.”

A week later, another:

“A strong thought is not necessarily someone else’s.”

Then:

“If in doubt, assume there was no answer.”

And a good deal later:

“Do not ask about what I am going to decide for myself anyway.”

Ma approved of the last entry.

At last.

“At last what?”

You are beginning to understand.

“Very slowly?”

Very.

“Thank you.”

You are welcome.

* * *

Gradually the voice became clearer. Not louder – clearer.

Dmitry began to notice the difference between the way his own thought arose and the way Ma’s answer came. His own thought seemed to unfold from within: you could feel its beginning, one association hooked on to another, a question produced a possible answer, and that answer drew the next one after it.

The voice sometimes had no beginning. The phrase already existed whole – with no preliminary movement, no inner construction. It simply turned up in his mind.

And, most importantly, it had character.

This was the hardest thing of all to explain. Dmitry could imagine a woman’s voice, could alter its timbre in his head, could make his own inner monologue say anything he liked. But here the point was not the sound: behind the phrase there stood a personality.

Calm. Very old. Sometimes ironic, sometimes sharp. Not interested in being liked by Dmitry. And not in the least impressed by his opinion of himself.

That last part irritated him especially.

* * *

“Why do you talk to me as if I were a child?”

Because you are a child.

"I'm thirty-five."

And?

"Nothing."

Do you yourself realise how funny that sounded?

"By human standards, thirty-five isn't a child."

By human standards – no.

"And by yours?"

A pause.

A child.

"Marvellous."

Are you upset?

"No."

You are lying.

"A bit."

Why?

Dmitry shrugged, though she was not sitting in front of him.

"I don't know. I'm used to thinking of myself as a grown man."

You are a grown man.

"Then why a child?"

The one does not rule out the other.

"A very convenient philosophy."

It is not philosophy. You are my child.

Dmitry fell silent.

It was the first time the phrase had been said. Without solemnity, without warning – as something perfectly obvious.

He slowly put his mug down on the table.

"In what sense?"

In the literal one.

"Ma..."

He stopped himself. The word had slipped out on its own, and only now did he hear it.

Ma.

Not Dhumavati. Not a goddess. Not a long Sanskrit name.

Ma. Mother.

The voice fell silent too.

"Did I just call you Ma?"

Yes.

"Why?"

Because it is simpler.

"For whom?"

For you.

He thought about it.

"Does that suit you?"

Yes.

"All right."

From then on Dmitry more and more often addressed her simply as Ma. Not at once – at first he still sometimes said "Dhumavati". But gradually that began to sound too official, especially when an argument started over food, sleep or yet another idea that Dmitry considered excellent and Ma considered utterly idiotic.

“The great goddess Dhumavati, embodiment of time and destruction” did not sit well with the phrase:

Are you going to eat properly today, or will you be messing about again?

“Ma” sat a great deal better with it.

* * *

One evening Dmitry asked:

“When did you actually start talking to me?”

Long ago.

“How long ago?”

Very.

“Before that first word?”

Of course.

“I didn’t hear.”

You did not.

“Then what’s the point of talking if I can’t hear?”

And what is the point of a mother talking to a child who does not yet understand speech?

Dmitry thought about it.

“So you were speaking all along?”

Not the way I do now. But I was always near.

“Even in India?”

Yes.

At once he remembered Varanasi. The notebook. Two words: Dhumavati, Aghora. Then Manali, the books, the prayer beads, Sanskrit. Dozens of decisions that had seemed random at the time.

“Did you lead me there?”

No.

The answer surprised him.

“What do you mean, no?”

You went of your own accord.

“But you were near.”

Yes.

“Then what’s the difference?”

A big one.

“Explain.”

If I am near, that does not mean that I do everything you do.

“All right.”

He thought for a moment.

“Did you know I would go?”

Yes.

“Knew I would look for you?”

Yes.

“And said nothing.”

You did not hear.

“We’ve had that already.”

Because the answer is the same.

Dmitry was silent for a while.

“And did you always see me?”

Yes.

“Absolutely always?”

Yes.

“And hear me?”

Yes.

“Even when I wasn’t speaking to you?”

Yes.

He looked into the emptiness in front of him.

“That’s a bit frightening.”

Why?

“Because a person has the feeling that at least his thoughts belong to him alone.”

They do.

“But you hear them.”

I hear you, Dmitry. Your thoughts remain yours; they are simply not hidden from me.

“You might at least have warned me.”

When?

“I don’t know. When I was five or so.”

Would you have understood?

“No.”

Then why?

Dmitry laughed.

“Sometimes it’s impossible to argue with you.”

It is possible. You do it all the time.

“All right. Impossible to win.”

That is closer.

* * *

The strangest thing turned out to be not that Ma had begun to speak. The strangest thing was how quickly it became ordinary.

For the first week Dmitry would stop whatever he was doing after every answer. After a month he could talk to her while heating up his supper. After several months he was arguing with her in the car.

“No.”

Yes.

“I said no.”

I heard.

“Then why are you carrying on?”

Because you are wrong.

“It’s my decision.”

Of course.

“So I’ll do it my way.”

Do it.

A pause.

“I don’t like that ‘do it’ of yours.”

Why?

“Because usually after it I realise it’s better not to.”

You are learning.

“Slowly?”

Very.

“Could you at least vary the repertoire now and then?”

I could.

“And?”

Catastrophically slowly.

Dmitry laughed. The car in front stopped at the traffic lights, and he braked too. In the next lane a driver looked at him, and Dmitry realised that he had said the last few sentences out loud.

“Wonderful.”

What?

“Soon people will start thinking I talk to myself.”

You do.

“Thanks.”

After that, out in the street, he more often answered in his head. It did not always work.

* * *

At work it was harder. Ma had absolutely no respect for work meetings – or at least so it seemed to Dmitry.

One day his manager had been explaining for a good twenty minutes a task that could have been put in two sentences. Dmitry sat there, diligently keeping a normal expression on his face.

A calm voice sounded in his head:

He has said that three times already.

Dmitry pressed his lips together, almost imperceptibly. He answered in his head:

“I know.”

Why does he keep repeating it?

“I don’t know.”

Ask him.

“I won’t.”

Why?

“Because I want to keep my job.”

This time Ma laughed. Dmitry coughed, hiding a smile.

“Is something wrong?” the manager asked.

“No. It’s all clear.”

“Then I’ll go on.”

Fourth time.

Dmitry lowered his eyes to his notepad.

“Ma, please.”

I am saying nothing.

A minute later:

Fifth.

He very nearly laughed out loud.

* * *

On another day it was not funny.

At work Dmitry suddenly felt a heavy tiredness – not the usual kind that comes after too little sleep. It was as if his body were switching off the power.

He looked at the clock. There were almost three hours left until the end of the working day.

“Damn.”

Home.

“I can’t.”

You can.

“I’ve got work.”

Home.

He tried to carry on and ten minutes later realised that he was reading one paragraph for the fourth time. He got up and went over to his manager.

“I’ll leave a bit early today. I’m not feeling well.”

The manager looked at him.

“Done everything urgent?”

“Yes.”

“Then go.”

Outside it felt easier at once, simply because he no longer had to pretend that everything was fine. Dmitry got into the car.

“Did you know in advance?”

I saw it.

“Why didn’t you say so this morning?”

You would not have stayed at home.

“Possibly.”

No.

“All right. I wouldn’t have.”

He started the engine.

“Is this how you’re going to control me for the rest of my life?”

No.

“Thank God.”

You do not do as you are told anyway.

“Exactly.”

That is why controlling you is pointless.

“A very trusting relationship.”

Very.

* * *

By thirty-six the conversations had become part of everyday life. Not continuous: Ma might be silent for a day, sometimes for several days, and then suddenly step in at the most ordinary moment.

Dmitry would ask:

“Where were you?”

Here.

“Why were you silent?”

There was no need to speak.

“And if I want to talk?”

Talk.

“Who with, if you’re silent?”

With me.

“But you don’t answer.”

You asked to talk, not to be answered.

“You’re taking the mickey.”

A little.

Gradually Dmitry stopped taking silence for absence. This change turned out to matter more than the voice itself.

Before, if there was no answer, the thought arose inside him at once: there is no one there. Now he knew that Ma could be near and not speak, and that her silence did not mean she had gone – just as a person beside you does not stop existing when they close their mouth.

A very simple thought. For some reason it had taken a long time to reach.

* * *

One day Dmitry asked:

“Have I learnt to hear you?”

Yes.

“Why now, of all times?”

Not now. Gradually.

“All right. Why in these particular years?”

Ma was silent for a while. Then she answered:

Because before, you always wanted to hear what you already thought yourself.

Dmitry winced.

“Unpleasant.”

But true.

“And now?”

Now you are sometimes able to hear an answer you do not like.

“Sometimes?”

Sometimes.

“A very generous assessment.”

I could say “rarely”.

“Don’t.”

He smiled.

“So the problem was never that you didn’t hear me.”

No.

“And not that you weren’t near.”

No.

“The problem was me.”

Not a problem. An ability.

Dmitry looked straight ahead.

“I couldn’t hear you.”

You could not tell the difference.

“Is there a difference?”

A big one.

“What is it?”

You heard a great deal. But you took it for your own, for chance, for intuition, for mood, for coincidence. Now you are beginning to tell where it comes from.

He remembered dozens of episodes. Premonitions. Decisions. A sudden urge to open a particular book. Journeys. People. Sometimes an entirely illogical choice.

“So some of that was you?”

Some.

“And the rest?”

You.

“How do I tell which is which?”

Learn.

Dmitry sighed.

“Do you ever have an answer without the word ‘learn’ in it?”

I do.

“For example?”

No.

He laughed.

“Ma, it’s impossible to argue with you.”

So I have heard.

“I know.”

* * *

Around that time something else new began to appear in the flat.

People.

Until then Dmitry had been used to his home belonging to him, his books and the silence. Acquaintances dropped in now and then, sometimes someone came about matters of practice, but there was no regular circle. Now, more and more often, people turned up who wanted not simply to get some kind of help from him but to understand what exactly he was doing.

At first the questions irritated him.

“But why is it like this here?”

“Because that’s how it works.”

“But why?”

“Because...”

And Dmitry would suddenly discover that explaining an action was considerably harder than performing it himself. It is one thing to know something with your hands. It is quite another to take that knowledge apart into words so that another person understands and does not repeat half your mistakes.

After one such conversation he closed the door behind the woman who had come to see him and said at once:

“I’m not going to teach anyone.”

Ma answered:

You will.

“No.”

You will.

“I’m not an educator.”

That is obvious.

“Thanks.”

You are welcome.

Dmitry went through to the kitchen.

“I get tired of people quickly.”

I know.

“I haven’t got the patience to explain the same thing five times.”

I know.

“Then why would I want students?”

To learn to explain five times.

He stopped.

“No.”

Yes.

“I’m serious.”

So am I.

“Ma, I don’t want to become any kind of guru.”

Then do not become one.

“Then how am I supposed to teach?”

Teacher and guru are not the same word.

“For the person on the other side of the table the difference is sometimes small.”

It is your task to make it clear.

Dmitry poured himself some tea.

“I have a feeling someone is about to ruin my quiet life again.”

Have you ever had a quiet life?

He thought about it.

“Sometimes.”

When?

“I don’t remember.”

Exactly.

* * *

The first girl to stay longer than the rest appeared a few months later.

At first she came with an ordinary question. Then with another one. Then she brought a notebook.

Dmitry disliked this at once: people with notebooks seldom meant to ask just one question.

She sat down opposite him and opened it at the first page.

"I wrote down what you said last time."

Dmitry looked at the notebook. Then at her.

"Why?"

"So as not to forget."

"Sensible."

"And I've got some questions."

"That's less sensible."

She smiled.

"Many?" Dmitry asked.

"Questions? Yes."

She turned the page. There was a list. A long one.

Dmitry closed his eyes and said in his head:

"Ma."

I am here.

"Is this you?"

Is what me?

"This."

She came of her own accord.

"But you knew."

Of course.

"And said nothing."

You would have refused.

He looked at the girl. She was waiting.

"All right," said Dmitry. "Let's take them in order."

Ma said quietly:

Well then. Learn.

Dmitry answered in his head:

"Don't start."

But he already understood that it was not Ma who had started. Something else was starting.

And for the first time since he had begun to hear Ma, her voice was not the strangest part of what was happening. By then Dmitry had grown used to her hearing him.

Now he had to find out whether he himself could hear another person.

Chapter Seven

The Student

After the first long list of questions the girl came again a week later.

Dmitry had not invited her. But nor had he told her not to come again.

At seven in the evening the doorbell rang. He had only just got back from work, had managed to change and was about to have a proper supper. He looked at the clock.

“Don’t tell me it’s her.”

Ma answered at once:

It is her.

“Are you taking the mickey?”

No.

The bell rang again. Dmitry opened the door.

The same girl was standing on the threshold. In her hands, a notebook.

Dmitry looked first at her. Then at the notebook.

“Have you brought that with you again?”

The girl lowered her eyes to the notebook.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Last time there were a lot of questions in it.”

“There are fewer now.”

“How many fewer?”

She thought for a moment.

“Twelve, probably.”

Dmitry stepped back from the door without a word.

“Come in.”

Ma remarked quietly:

You could have refused.

“I could.”

But you did not.

“Ma.”

I am saying nothing.

* * *

This time the conversation lasted almost three hours. Several times Dmitry tried to bring it to an end, and each time there came:

“And one last question.”

By the third hour he had stopped believing in the word “last”.

The questions, however, were not stupid, and that saved the situation. She did not ask how to gain power in three days. She was not interested in ways of making another person do what she needed. She did not ask to be shown anything spectacular.

What interested her was something else. Why does one and the same practice feel different to different people? Can a strong experience be taken as a sign of results? Why does a person sometimes feel nothing at all after several weeks of work? What matters more – the precision of the action or the state? Can you practise when you are not in the mood? And why does Dmitry say every time that mood has nothing whatever to do with discipline?

At the last question he looked at her.

“Because it hasn’t.”

“But if a person’s in a bad state?”

“Then they’re in a bad state.”

“And they still have to practise?”

“Depends on the practice.”

“And if they don’t feel like it?”

“That’s a different question.”

“What’s the difference?”

Dmitry leant back in his chair.

“The difference is that ‘I feel awful’ and ‘I can’t be bothered’ are not the same thing.”

She wrote it down.

“Do you write everything down?”

“Nearly everything.”

“Why?”

“I reread it afterwards.”

“And does it help?”

“Sometimes I see that I understood it wrongly at first.”

Dmitry nodded.

“That’s useful.”

The girl raised her eyes.

“And do you write things down?”

He glanced at the cupboard where the old notebooks from India were kept.

“Far too much.”

“May I see?”

“No.”

The answer came so quickly that she dropped the subject at once. Dmitry liked that. Not because she showed no curiosity – there was curiosity. But she had heard where the boundary lay the first time round, and to him that meant more than long speeches about reverence for one’s teacher.

* * *

After she had gone Dmitry cleared away the cups. A sheet of paper with several diagrams he had drawn while explaining was left lying on the table. He crumpled it up and threw it away.

“Well?”

Ma did not answer.

“I know you’re here.”

You do.

“Then – well?”

What do you want to hear?

“What you think of her.”

Why?

“Because she’s come a second time.”

You noticed that without my help.

“Ma.”

Observe.

Dmitry opened the fridge.

“Your favourite answer again.”

You want a ready-made opinion so that you do not have to form your own later.

“No.”

A pause.

“Possibly.”

There.

He took out his supper.

“But you understand why she comes?”

Yes.

“And?”

She wants to learn.

“That’s obvious.”

Then why ask about the obvious?

Dmitry put the plate on the table.

“All right. Will she manage?”

The answer did not come at once.

We shall see.

“Does that mean you don’t know?”

No.

“Then why ‘we shall see’?”

Because knowing what a person is capable of becoming and seeing what they actually choose are different things.

Dmitry fell silent.

He did not like that phrase. Not because it was hard to understand – on the contrary, because it was too easy to understand.

“So the potential is there.”

It is.

“And the rest depends on her?”

Not only on her.

“Who else?”

On you as well.

He gave a wry smile.

“That’s just what I was afraid of.”

No. You were not afraid yet.

“Very reassuring.”

* * *

The third time she came not with questions. With a book.

She put it on the table.

“I tried to read it.”

Dmitry looked at the cover. He knew the book: a popular edition he had once bought himself, back when his interest in the subject was just beginning.

“And?”

“I can’t tell which parts are sound and which the author is making up.”

“Good question.”

“That’s why I brought it.”

Dmitry opened the book and leafed through it. Several pages were marked with slips of paper.

“Did you finish it?”

“Yes.”

“All of it?”

“Yes.”

“And how much did you understand?”

She thought about it.

“About thirty per cent.”

“That’s already better than if you’d said ninety.”

The girl laughed.

“Why?”

“Because then I’d have had to start by explaining that you’d understood nothing.”

He found one of the bookmarks.

“What raised a question here?”

She pointed to a paragraph. Dmitry read it and winced.

“Forget this altogether.”

“Why?”

“Because the author has mixed up three different things and made out he’s ended up with a single system.”

“So what’s the right way?”

Dmitry took a sheet of paper and began to explain. Twenty minutes later there were two diagrams on the table. After forty minutes, four. After an hour he stopped.

“Now I understand why teachers sometimes tell their students simply to be quiet and listen.”

She smiled.

“Do I ask a lot?”

“A great deal.”

“You don’t like it?”

He was about to answer automatically. But he stopped himself.

“Sometimes it’s irritating.”

“Then I can ask less.”

“Don’t.”

She was surprised.

“Why?”

“If you stop asking because I can’t be bothered to answer, what’s the point of studying at all?”

She looked at him for a few seconds.

“All right.”

Dmitry suddenly realised that he liked her seriousness. Not the seriousness with which a person tries to look initiated into the secrets of the universe – another kind, an ordinary kind. She could be laughing at his irritation one minute and pull herself together instantly the next, if the talk turned to something important.

He had noticed this quality almost at once. And made a mental note of it.

* * *

Gradually a routine emerged. Not set up on purpose – it simply took shape. Once or twice a week she came in the evening, sometimes at the weekend.

For the first months almost everything took place at an ordinary table. Books, notebooks, tea, explanations. No beautiful ceremonies, no promises of secret power. Dmitry generally tried, for as long as possible, not to give her anything that might make too strong an impression.

“Why are we always going over theory?”

“Because you don’t know it.”

“But surely we need to practise too.”

“We do.”

“Then when?”

“When you’re ready.”

“And how will I know?”

“I’ll tell you.”

She looked at him.

“And if I feel it myself?”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Why?”

“Because a beginner feels their own readiness most keenly precisely when it isn’t there.”

She frowned.

“How do you mean?”

“The less a person knows, the less they see of what they don’t know.”

“And afterwards?”

“Afterwards it gets worse.”

“Why worse?”

“They begin to grasp the scale of it.”

She wrote it down. Dmitry looked.

“You needn’t write that down.”

“Why?”

“It’s a joke.”

“A good one.”

“Thank you.”

She wrote it down anyway.

* * *

Ma hardly ever interfered, and this surprised Dmitry. He had expected comments, warnings, at least the usual “not like that”. But more often she simply kept silent.

Only once, after the girl had gone, did she say:

You explained too much.

Dmitry stopped by the door.

“Where?”

In the last conversation.

“What exactly?”

You gave her the answer before she had reached the question herself.

He frowned.

“I was just explaining.”

Exactly.

“And what should I have done?”

Asked.

“Asked what?”

Something that would have made her think.

Dmitry took a cup off the table.

“I don’t know how to teach.”

Learn.

“I’ve heard that one before.”

Then repetition is useful.

“Very funny.”

At their next meeting Dmitry tried it. The girl asked a question – he did not answer.

“What do you think?”

She was taken aback.

“That’s why I’m asking.”

“I understand.”

“Then why don’t you answer?”

“I want to find out what you already know.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking.”

Dmitry unexpectedly recognised himself in that phrase and gave a wry smile.

“That’s roughly how I talk to my own teacher.”

“And what does he say?”

Dmitry looked straight ahead.

Ma said:

Do not even think about it.

He barely held back a smile.

“Usually something that irritates me.”

“Does it help?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

* * *

The first real practice he gave her came a good deal later than she had counted on. A very simple one: no complicated actions, no dangerous methods. The task was almost boring – discipline of attention, counting, steadiness, precision and a daily record of the result.

She was disappointed. Dmitry noticed at once.

“Were you expecting something different?”

“A little.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“Excellent.”

“Why excellent?”

“Because if a person knows in advance what a mystical experience is supposed to be like, they very quickly start manufacturing it for themselves.”

“And is this a mystical practice at all?”

“Not yet.”

“Then what is it?”

“A test of whether you can do a simple thing the same way every day.”

“And that’s important?”

“Far more important than it seems.”

She nodded.

“For how long?”

“Two weeks, for now.”

“Every day?”

“Every day.”

“And if I miss one?”

“You write down that you missed it.”

“And that’s all?”

“What would you like me to do?”

“I don’t know. Tell me off.”

“You’re not at school.”

“Then why do you need to know?”

“To know whether you can be trusted with anything further.”

She stopped smiling.

“I see.”

“Now you really do see.”

* * *

Two weeks later the notebook lay in front of him. Fourteen entries. One day missed.

Dmitry looked.

“Why?”

“I got back late. I was very tired. I decided I’d do it twice in the morning.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t make up for the missed day.”

“But the amount’s the same.”

“Practice isn’t bookkeeping.”

She frowned.

“What difference does it make, if the quantity’s the same?”

“A big one.”

He turned the notebook round towards her.

“The condition was every day.”

“Yes.”

“Not a certain amount over two weeks.”

“All right.”

“Have you just agreed, or do you simply want to end the argument?”

She looked at him.

“For now I just want to end the argument.”

Dmitry laughed.

“Excellent.”

“Why?”

“Because at least it’s honest.”

She smiled too.

“All right. What is the difference?”

Dmitry explained. Not about punishment, not some ritual bogeyman – about steadiness. If a person promises themselves to perform a small action every day and at once begins changing the condition to suit their own convenience, it is too early to give them complicated commitments.

She was silent for a long time. Then she said:

“So – start again?”

“Yes.”

“Another two weeks?”

“Yes.”

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

“No.”

“Looks like it.”

“You needn’t do it.”

She raised her head.

“I’ll do it.”

And she did. All fourteen days, without missing one.

On the fifteenth she brought the notebook and put it on the table.

“Now?”

Dmitry looked through it.

“Now we move on.”

She smiled as though she had been given a prize. He noticed it.

So did Ma.

Do not encourage a dependence on your approval.

“I didn’t say anything.”

You looked.

“So what am I supposed to do now, shut my eyes?”

Do not play the fool.

Dmitry lowered his gaze to the notebook, hiding a smile.

“What?” the girl asked.

“Nothing.”

* * *

In time the formality between them began to get in the way. Not on purpose – it simply sounded stranger and stranger.

They could spend several hours going through a text, arguing, laughing, drinking tea, and then she would suddenly say:

“And do you consider...”

And the distance would fall back into place.

One day Dmitry interrupted:

“Let’s drop the formalities, shall we?”

She fell silent.

“May I?”

“I thought that’s what I’d just suggested.”

“I thought students weren’t allowed to.”

“Who said so?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then nobody did.”

“All right.”

A pause.

“So you reckon...”

She stopped and laughed.

“What?”

“It feels strange.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Will you?”

“I already have.”

That was not true. For several more meetings Dmitry would sometimes slip back into formality without thinking, and each time she noticed.

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Being formal.”

“Habit.”

“You’re getting old.”

He looked at her.

“Getting bold, aren’t you?”

“You said I could.”

“I said you could drop the formalities. I don’t remember saying you could be cheeky.”

She laughed.

Ma said:

You have only yourself to blame.

“Thanks.”

* * *

It was then that Dmitry first noticed that he had begun to look forward to her coming. He did not like this discovery.

Until then the student had been part of the work. Interesting, sometimes irritating, capable – but a student all the same. Now, on the day she usually came, Dmitry caught himself clearing the table in advance, brewing more tea, looking at the clock. If she was ten minutes late, he noticed. Twenty – and he began to get irritated.

Once she was almost an hour late. She had not warned him.

When she finally arrived, Dmitry opened the door and said:

“There’s such a thing as a phone.”

She understood at once.

“Sorry.”

“If you’re going to be late, text me.”

“All right.”

“I’m not going to sit for an hour wondering whether you’re coming or not.”

She took off her jacket.

“Were you waiting for me?”

“We had an arrangement.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Don’t push your luck.”

She smiled.

“So you were waiting.”

“Get your notebook out.”

She went through to the table.

Ma was silent – and that was precisely why Dmitry knew the conversation was not over yet.

After she had gone he asked:

“Well?”

What?

“Go on.”

You have already understood everything.

“What exactly?”

Do not pretend.

He sat down.

“I like her.”

Ma did not answer.

“I said: I like her.”

I heard.

“And?”

It is your life.

“Very convenient.”

Were you expecting a prohibition?

Dmitry thought about it.

“I don’t know.”

Or permission?

“Not that either.”

Then why are you asking?

He looked at the empty chair opposite.

“Because she’s my student.”

And?

“There’s a boundary.”

There is.

“There you are.”

But you are not talking about a boundary now. You are talking about feelings.

“They could destroy it.”

They could.

“Or the teaching.”

They could.

“Once again you’re no help whatsoever.”

I am helping you not to shift the decision on to me.

Dmitry was silent for a while.

“Do nothing?”

That is also a decision.

“Ma.”

What?

“Could it be simpler, just occasionally?”

It can. Do not hurry.

He nodded. That, at least, was clear.

Not hurrying, admittedly, was the thing he was worst at.

* * *

For several months nothing changed on the surface. She learnt, Dmitry taught – and at the same time learnt himself.

More and more often Ma made him hold back from answering at once. Leave a person room to make a mistake. Not prompt every next step. Not turn help into a constant steering of someone else's decisions.

For Dmitry this proved harder than he had expected: whenever he saw a mistake coming, he wanted to stop it before it happened.

Ma stopped him.

Do not interfere.

“She'll get it wrong.”

Let her.

“I could tell her.”

You could. But then it would be your decision, not hers.

“What's a teacher for, if he keeps quiet?”

To know when to keep quiet.

This idea infuriated Dmitry almost physically. And yet gradually it began to make sense.

One day the girl came and said, unprompted:

“You were right.”

“That's a rare and pleasant start to a conversation.”

“Don't get excited.”

“Too late.”

She put down her notebook.

“Remember you asked why I do it exactly that way?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were nitpicking.”

“That's the usual theory.”

“And then I understood.”

“What?”

She explained. Dmitry listened and felt two things at once. First – she really had understood. Second – if he had given her a ready-made answer back then, she would simply have written it down and moved on.

After she had gone Ma said:

That is why.

“I've got it.”

Really?

“Don't spoil the moment.”

* * *

The relationship between them changed slowly. So slowly that afterwards it was impossible to pin down the exact point.

When did the student become someone Dmitry wanted to see not only for the sake of lessons? When did the talks after practice grow longer than the practice itself? When did she first stay not because there was a question, but simply because neither of them wanted the evening to end? When did Dmitry begin telling her about his life in India no longer as a teacher giving an example, but simply because he wanted to share it? When did she stop sitting squarely opposite him and start curling up to one side with her legs tucked under her? When did her cup get a permanent place in the cupboard?

Not one moment looked like an event.

But one day Dmitry opened the cupboard, saw two cups side by side and realised that he had long thought of the second one as hers.

He closed the cupboard door.

“Ma.”

Yes.

“Nothing.”

I know.

“Then keep quiet.”

I am keeping quiet.

* * *

The first time they quarrelled it was over something completely trivial. She had not kept an arrangement – not to do with practice, an ordinary one. She had promised to ring and had not rung.

Dmitry asked why. She replied:

“I forgot.”

“Then say so straight away.”

“I did say so.”

“After I’d asked a second time.”

“What difference does it make?”

“A big one.”

“Everything makes a big difference to you.”

“When it’s about an arrangement – yes.”

She shut the notebook irritably.

“Sometimes you’re impossible.”

“Nobody’s making you study with me.”

The words came out too fast. The girl looked at him, and the room went quiet.

Dmitry knew at once that he had said too much. But he did not want to back down straight away. Character.

She stood up.

“Fine.”

“What’s fine?”

“Nothing.”

She put on her jacket.

“Wait.”

“What for?”

“Because right now we’re both behaving like idiots.”

She did stop, after all. Dmitry let out a breath.

“I didn’t mean you should leave.”

“But you said it.”

“I did.”

“Then what was it?”

He was silent for a moment.

"I got angry."

"So did I."

"I can see that."

"And?"

"And I said too much."

She looked at him for a few more seconds.

"Is that an apology?"

"Yes."

"A very pretty one."

"It's the only one I've got."

The corner of her mouth twitched.

"All right."

She took off her jacket and sat down again. Dmitry looked straight ahead.

Ma said:

Progress.

"Not now."

You apologised in less than five minutes.

"Ma."

Before, you could go about angry for a whole day and night.

Dmitry only just managed not to roll his eyes. The girl noticed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Again?"

"Again."

* * *

After that things became easier. Not perfect – simply more honest.

Dmitry might get irritated, she might argue. He would raise his voice, then realise he had gone too far, and apologise. She, too, was learning not to turn disagreement into silent punishment.

Ma watched. Sometimes she stepped in. More often not.

It was in this period that Dmitry began to understand that teaching another person was nothing like working with a text. A text can be opened again; you can go back to a line, correct a translation. A person remembers not only what you meant to say – they remember how you said it. When. With what expression on your face. What you did afterwards.

Sometimes one unfortunate phrase meant more than ten correct explanations.

Dmitry did not like this knowledge. Too much responsibility.

But it was no longer possible to give it up.

* * *

One evening the girl left earlier than usual. Dmitry closed the door and went back into the room. She had left her pen on the table.

He picked it up and turned it between his fingers.

"I'll give it back tomorrow."

Ma asked:

Do you miss her?

"She left ten minutes ago."

That is not an answer.

Dmitry put the pen down on the table.

"Yes."

Silence.

“Satisfied?”

No.

That put him on his guard.

“Why not?”

I did not ask in order to get the answer I wanted.

“Then why?”

So that you would hear your own.

Dmitry sat down.

“I’m falling in love.”

Ma was silent.

“I think I already have.”

Yes.

This time her short answer did not irritate him. Rather the opposite.

Dmitry looked at the pen for a long time.

“Is that bad?”

No.

“Good?”

Do not ask childish questions.

He gave a wry smile.

“Understood.”

Love is no guarantee of results. Nor is it a reason to abandon the path.

“I know.”

No. For now you only think you know.

Dmitry wanted to object. He did not.

After a while he asked:

“Does she feel the same?”

Ma answered at once:

Do not ask me what you must hear from her.

“Fair enough.”

He moved the pen to the edge of the table. The next day the girl took it back.

And a few weeks after that she herself said what Ma had refused to say for her.

* * *

It all happened far more simply than Dmitry had expected. No special conversation, no grand scene.

They were sitting together after a lesson, tea going cold on the table. The conversation had long since drifted away from practice. She was telling him something, then stopped.

“Can I ask a question?”

“You’ll ask it anyway.”

“Not that kind.”

“What kind?”

She was silent for a moment.

“What am I to you?”

Dmitry had not expected that.

“My student.”

She looked at him.

“Only that?”

He felt everything inside him go very quiet.

Ma was silent too. Rightly so: this was not her conversation.

“No.”

“Then what?”

Dmitry gave a wry smile.

“Have you decided to make me say obvious things today?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her.

“I like you very much.”

She smiled.

“I like you too.”

“Very much?”

Now she laughed.

“Don’t start.”

For a few seconds they simply looked at each other. And Dmitry suddenly felt relief. Not rapture, not a bolt of lightning – it was simply that the tension had gone, the tension that for several months had hung between them and pretended not to be there.

She was the first to hold out her hand. Dmitry took it in his.

No mysticism. Ordinary human warmth.

And for some reason it was this, just then, that mattered more than everything else.

* * *

Later, after she had gone, Dmitry did not switch on the light in the big room for a long time. He sat by the window.

Beyond the glass the city went on living its ordinary life: cars, windows, the occasional passer-by. No signs. No supernatural events.

“Well?”

Ma responded:

Well what?

“You knew all along.”

Knew what, exactly?

“That it would turn out like this.”

I knew that it might turn out like this.

“Wording again.”

Wording matters.

“Will she stay?”

Ma fell silent.

Dmitry felt at once that he had asked the wrong thing.

“All right.”

What?

“Don’t answer.”

Why?

“Because that’s exactly the kind of question I want a particular answer to.”

Ma said nothing.

Dmitry smiled.

“I’m learning.”

Slowly.

“But on my own.”

Do not exaggerate.

He laughed. Then, more seriously, he asked:

“What happens to the teaching now?”

Carry on.

“Nothing changes?”

Everything changes. But the teaching must not disappear just because your relationship has changed.

“And the boundaries?”

They will become more complicated.

“Very helpful.”

Did you want it simpler?

“Of course.”

Then you chose the wrong life.

That was hard to argue with.

* * *

The months that followed really did become more complicated. And better.

They went on studying. Sometimes they argued no longer as teacher and student but as a man and a woman. Sometimes the other way round – the personal had to be left outside the door, because practice was beginning and Dmitry demanded precision.

She might protest:

“Five minutes ago you were hugging me, and now you’re talking like an examiner.”

“Because five minutes ago we weren’t studying.”

“Convenient.”

“Very.”

“And no allowances?”

“None.”

“Not even for me?”

“Especially for you.”

She would look at him crossly. Then she would do it. Sometimes better than before. Sometimes worse – because now the wish to learn had been joined by the wish not to disappoint Dmitry.

He noticed it quickly. Ma, more quickly still.

Dangerous.

“What is?”

She is beginning to do some things for your sake.

“What’s wrong with that?”

Do you want a student, or someone who guesses your mood?

Dmitry looked at the girl. At that moment she was diligently repeating what he had shown her.

“Understood.”

After the lesson he said:

“I don’t need you to do this for my sake.”

She was surprised.

“Then for whose?”

“For your own.”

“But you’re the one teaching me.”

“Yes.”

“So what you think matters to me.”

“It does matter. But if my approval becomes the main result for you, we’ll ruin everything.”

She was silent for a while.

“And if I like it when you’re pleased?”

Dmitry smiled.

“I like it too.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Proportion.”

“A very precise answer.”

“It’s the only one I have for now.”

She nodded. The conversation seemed to be over.

But Dmitry did not forget it. Nor did Ma.

* * *

By this time the girl already knew about Ma. Not everything – far from everything: Dmitry did not like going into detail about such things at all. But hiding the fact itself was becoming pointless. Too often he fell silent in the middle of a conversation, too often his expression changed, too obviously he sometimes answered someone who was not physically in the room.

One day the girl asked him straight out:

“Are you talking to her now?”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Who to?”

“To Dhumavati.”

He did not answer at once.

“What makes you think so?”

“You went quiet and you’re looking as if someone’s explaining something to you.”

“Very observant.”

“So, yes?”

“Yes.”

She fell silent too.

“And what did she say?”

Dmitry gave a wry smile.

“That you ask too many questions.”

Ma said immediately:

I did not say that.

Dmitry laughed.

“What?”

“Now she says I’m lying.”

“And are you?”

“Just now – yes.”

The girl laughed as well. Then she asked seriously:

“Can she see me?”

Dmitry was about to answer.

Ma said:

Yes.

“She can.”

“Always?”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘always’.”

“When I’m here.”

Yes.

“When you’re here – yes.”

The girl was a little embarrassed.

“That’s strange.”

“I’m used to it.”

“And does she say anything about me?”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Sometimes.”

“What?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s a conversation between me and her.”

She wanted to object. Then she changed her mind.

“All right.”

Dmitry noticed that. Another boundary. And once again she had accepted it.

* * *

It was after this that Ma first spoke of the next stage.

Dmitry was sitting alone; the girl had already gone home. On the table lay two notebooks and a book.

Ma said:

Soon it will be possible to give her more.

Dmitry raised his head.

“What exactly?”

Later.

“No, I already know that ‘later’ of yours.”

Then why ask?

“Will it be an ordinary practice?”

A pause.

No.

Dmitry straightened up.

“For her?”

For both of you.

He felt the change at once. Not fear. Concentration.

“Paired?”

Yes.

“What kind?”

Ma was silent.

“I should at least know what I’m preparing her for.”

For now – nothing new. Carry on with what you are doing.

“And afterwards?”

Afterwards I will explain.

Dmitry looked at the two cups on the table.

“Is this to do with us being together?”

Yes.

“Do we have to be a couple?”

This practice needs a different kind of bond from the usual relationship between teacher and student.

“And is she right for it?”

Ma’s answer came more slowly than usual.

She may be right for it.

Dmitry noticed the wording at once. Not “she is”. She may be.

“What has to change?”

Both of you.

“Very specific.”

For now nothing more specific is needed.

He was silent for a while.

“Is it dangerous?”

Ma answered:

If you do what you are not yet ready to hold – yes.

Dmitry felt the familiar urge to ask ten more things at once. And stopped himself.

“All right.”

Ma was silent.

“I said ‘all right’.”

I heard.

“And no comments about progress?”

Do not be in a hurry to rejoice.

He gave a wry smile. Now everything was as it should be.

A hair tie the girl had forgotten lay on the table. Next to it was her notebook, which she had left by accident and was to collect tomorrow.

Only a year ago the flat had belonged to Dmitry, his books and the silence alone. Now it held someone else’s cup, forgotten things, laughter, arguments and a person whose return he waited for.

He did not yet know what exactly Ma intended to propose. He did not know how deeply two people could be joined by a practice that begins not with the body, nor even with feelings. Nor did he know that beginning it would prove far simpler than one day bringing it to completion.

For now there was only the student in front of him. The girl he had come to love.

And the first practice that Ma would not let him hurry.

Chapter Eight

Union

Ma returned to the conversation about the paired practice almost a month later. Dmitry had already begun to suspect that she had changed her mind, but he did not ask: after several attempts he had understood that if Ma said “later”, the question was best left alone. Attempts to hurry her “later” usually led only to his receiving another “later”, spoken in a considerably more irritated voice.

That evening the girl left at about ten. They had worked for almost four hours, and after the lesson they had gone on talking in the kitchen for a long time.

Dmitry closed the door behind her, went back into the room and gathered the exercise books from the table.

Ma said:

Now.

He stopped.

“Now what?”

Now I can explain.

Dmitry understood at once.

“The paired practice?”

Yes.

He put the exercise books back down. Sat down.

“I’m listening.”

First understand the main thing. This is not a practice of the body.

“All right.”

The body may take part. Feelings may take part. Your relationship may take part. But they are not what the work is about.

Dmitry said nothing.

You will be working at the level at which two people are able to create a shared structure. Not to agree on one. Not to imagine one. Not to play at closeness. To create.

“An energetic one?”

Ma did not answer at once.

That word is too small, but for now you may use it.

“All right. A shared energetic structure.”

Yes.

“And what does it give you?”

Do not begin with what it gives.

Dmitry smiled wryly.

“I knew it.”

Begin with what it demands.

“Which is?”

Trust. Steadiness. Honesty. The ability not to hide from the other what will become noticeable after the union anyway.

He frowned.

“Noticeable in what sense?”

In the literal sense.

“Thoughts?”

Nothing so primitive.

“Then explain.”

Ma was silent for a while.

Imagine that you are used to thinking of yourself as a separate room. You have walls, a door, things that you show and things that you keep inside.

“I’m picturing it.”

Now part of the wall between two rooms has been taken away.

Dmitry saw at once where this was going.

“So the boundary stays, but becomes permeable?”

Better.

“How permeable?”

As far as you are able to hold it.

“And if we don’t have that kind of steadiness yet?”

Then you cannot begin.

He thought about it.

“Is she capable of it?”

I said: she may be suitable.

“And me?”

A pause.

You too.

“Very convincing.”

Did you want to hear that you are completely ready?

“It would have been nice.”

Then ask someone else.

Dmitry laughed.

“All right. Suppose we’re both capable. What happens next?”

You begin to sense each other not only as two people who happen to be near each other.

“As what, then?”

As one system with two centres of consciousness.

He stopped smiling.

“Now that’s serious.”

That is why I did not give it to you before.

“And after completion?”

The bond will appear earlier. Once it has been established, it can no longer be broken. Completion does not make the bond permanent – it is permanent from the moment it is established. Completion makes the shared structure whole.

“Even if we’re far away from each other?”

Distance changes nothing here. Physically you may be in different places; the bond will remain all the same.

Dmitry looked at the empty chair opposite.

“Will I be able to feel her when she isn’t near?”

Sometimes.

“And will she feel me?”

Yes.

“Thoughts?”

You are back to thoughts again.

“Because I want to understand the limits.”

Not reading thoughts. Rather, understanding the other person’s state before they have managed to explain it in words. Sometimes deeper. Sometimes considerably deeper.

“Sounds inconvenient.”

Very.

“And that’s the point of it?”

No. That is a consequence.

“Then what is the point?”

Ma answered simply:

Synergy.

Dmitry was silent for a moment.

“In the practice?”

In everything you are able to do as a single structure.

“So one plus one is more than two?”

A simple formulation at last.

“How much more?”

Ma fell silent. Dmitry understood at once that she did not like the question.

“What?”

You want a number again.

“I like numbers.”

I know.

“At least the order of magnitude.”

With the right compatibility and the right work, the effect can be multiplied many times over.

“Twice as much?”

More.

“Five times?”

Silence.

“Ten?”

Ma answered:

Sometimes even that. But if you latch on to the number now, I will stop explaining altogether.

“Understood.”

He really had understood. It was not a matter of a guarantee, nor of a coefficient in a table.

“All right. The number is forgotten.”

Then forget it.

“And now the most unpleasant part.”

Which part exactly?

“The cost of a mistake.”

Ma did not answer at once. Dmitry felt her presence change: the conversation had stopped being theoretical.

If the bond is established, there will be no way back. You will be able to stop the outward actions, quarrel, part, even try to build separate lives – but the bond itself will not disappear. If the shared structure remains incomplete, that is precisely what will create problems: two structures that are already bound will be trying to live as though they were still entirely separate.

“For whom?”

For both of you.

“How serious?”

Serious enough for me to speak about it separately now.

He was silent for a moment.

“So you can’t try it and, if you don’t like it, drop it?”

No. There is no trial version here.

“None at all?”

None at all.

“And if we split up?”

Splitting up does not break the bond.

“If we quarrel?”

It does not break it.

“If we stop speaking to each other?”

That does not break it either.

Dmitry felt an unpleasant chill inside.

“So once it begins, there’s an obligation.”

Yes.

“To whom?”

To the structure that you have created.

“And who has to complete it?”

The one who began it.

“Me?”

You are the initiator.

“And her?”

She is a participant. Without her you will not create this structure. But the responsibility for having proposed to begin lies with you.

Dmitry nodded slowly.

Now he understood why Ma had been putting it off.

* * *

The next day he said nothing to the girl. Nor the day after. Though she noticed almost at once.

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You’ve been miles away these last two days.”

“Work.”

She looked at him.

“You’re lying.”

“Why go straight to calling me a liar?”

“Because when it’s work, you grumble about work. And now you’re keeping quiet.”

Dmitry smiled wryly.

“You’ve become observant.”

“I’ve got a good teacher.”

“Don’t flatter me.”

“I mean it.”

He wanted to change the subject. It did not work.

“Is it to do with me?”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Partly.”

“Then tell me.”

He was silent for a little while.

“Ma has explained that paired practice.”

She became serious at once.

“And?”

“And I’m still thinking.”

“Why are you thinking on your own?”

The question caught him off guard.

“Because the responsibility is mine.”

“But I’m the one who’ll be taking part.”

“Yes.”

“Then why is the decision only yours?”

Dmitry opened his mouth. Closed it.

Ma said quietly:

A good question.

“Thank you.”

The girl waited.

“Not only mine.”

“Then tell me.”

“Not today.”

She frowned.

“Why not?”

“Because first I want to understand how to explain it so that you don’t agree simply because you trust me.”

She was silent for a few seconds.

“And is that bad?”

“In this case, yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m your teacher.”

“And?”

“And if I say, ‘This is the next stage, it has to be done,’ you might decide that refusing means your training stops.”

“And does it?”

“No.”

“Then say so straight away.”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Even if you refuse, the training will go on.”

“All right.”

“And our relationship will go on.”

“All right.”

“And I won’t think you’ve let me down.”

She smiled.

“Are you preparing me in advance to say ‘no’?”

“I want to make sure in advance that your ‘yes’ really is yours.”

She stopped smiling. Then she nodded slowly.

“Now tell me.”

* * *

He talked for a long time. He showed no actions, gave no sequence, did not say what exactly they would have to do technically – for now there was no need for that.

He explained the meaning. A shared structure. Deep synchronisation. A change in how they perceived each other. An acceleration of the practice. And the main thing – the impossibility of simply stopping halfway.

She listened, hardly interrupting. When Dmitry had finished, she asked:

“So if we establish this bond and then split up, it’ll still be there?”

“Yes. For ever, from then on.”

“Even if the practice is completed?”

“Completion doesn’t remove it. That isn’t what it’s for at all.”

“Then what does it change?”

“It makes the shared structure whole. With the right completion we don’t go back to the state of two completely independent inner systems. We stay two people, two bodies, but within this practice we are one bound structure of soul and energy.”

“So two bodies, one soul?”

“Yes.”

“And if people aren’t ready for that and go their separate ways all the same?”

“You can go your separate ways physically. The bond won’t go anywhere because of that. But if the practice has been left incomplete, the bond starts to get in the way of each of them living as a fully separate system: people try to force what is already united to exist apart.”

She thought about it.

“Are you afraid?”

Dmitry answered honestly:

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

“Of being wrong about you.”

She frowned. He added at once:

“And about myself.”

“That’s better.”

“I wasn’t trying to offend you.”

“But it sounded as if I’m an exam you have to mark correctly.”

“In a sense we’re both an exam.”

“For whom?”

Dmitry shrugged.

“For ourselves.”

She was silent for a long time. Then she asked:

“Does Ma think I’m ready?”

“Ma thinks you may be ready.”

“You two and your wording again.”

“Now do you see why it drives me mad?”

The girl smiled.

“A bit.”

“There you are.”

“And do you want to?”

The question was much quieter. Dmitry did not answer at once.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

She looked him in the eyes.

“Is that a reason for a practice?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

He thought about it.

“Because I want to go further. And I want to try going further together with you.”

She nodded.

“Then I want to as well.”

“Don’t answer now.”

“Why not?”

“Because five minutes ago I said I love you.”

“And?”

“That has an effect.”

“Of course it has an effect. We’re not strangers.”

“That’s exactly why you should think about it.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

She sighed.

“Sometimes you’re terribly annoying.”

“I know.”

“Can I say now that I want to, and confirm it tomorrow?”

“You can.”

“All right.”

She stood up, came over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Then I’ll confirm it tomorrow.”

“A very independent decision.”

“You’ll find out tomorrow.”

Ma was silent. For some reason Dmitry was sure that she was pleased.

* * *

The next evening the girl came earlier than usual. Without her exercise book – that had never happened before.

She took off her jacket and went through into the room. Dmitry waited for her to begin the conversation herself.

She sat down.

“I’ve thought about it.”

“And?”

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“What if I say you can still refuse, right now?”

“Still yes.”

“What if I say it has no effect on your training at all?”

“You’ve already said so.”

“On our relationship?”

“That too.”

“And still?”

She looked at him.

“Dmitry.”

“What?”

“Stop it.”

He smiled.

“All right.”

Ma said:

Now her decision has been made.

Dmitry answered in his mind:

“I understand.”

No. Commit it to memory. This is important.

He stopped smiling.

“Committed to memory.”

* * *

The preparation took several more weeks, and it was this that became the first test. Ma did not allow them to hurry.

Several times Dmitry asked irritably:

“Are we ever going to start?”

When you stop treating the beginning as the goal.

“And what should we treat as the goal?”

The completion.

That phrase would come back to him many times later. At the time Dmitry took it almost as just another methodological formulation. Later he would understand how literally it had been meant.

They carried on with their ordinary lessons, conversations and evenings together. Sometimes they practised separately from each other. Ma watched.

Gradually Dmitry stopped asking when.

And it was precisely then that she said:

You may.

* * *

The first stage turned out to be almost disappointingly calm. Dmitry had expected something far more noticeable.

Ma had warned him beforehand:

Do not hunt for sensations.

He hunted for them anyway.

For the first few days there was nothing unusual. Then small things began to appear.

Once Dmitry was about to write to the girl and picked up his phone – but a message from her had already arrived:

“Were you just about to write to me?”

He looked at the screen and replied:

“Yes.”

A few seconds later:

“Somehow I knew.”

Dmitry put the phone down.

“Ma.”

What?

“Has it started?”

Possibly.

“Did you do that on purpose?”

Do what?

“Nothing.”

Another time they were sitting side by side, each busy with their own thing: Dmitry was reading, the girl was writing something down. At some point he felt a sudden irritation, entirely without cause. He raised his eyes – she was sitting there frowning.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re angry.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“A little.”

“With me?”

“No.”

“Then with what?”

She explained. The problem really was hers, but Dmitry had felt the irritation before he saw the expression on her face.

He drew no conclusions. He simply wrote it down.

A week later it happened the other way round. The girl suddenly asked:

“Have you got a headache?”

Dmitry looked at her.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling.”

His head really was beginning to ache.

“A little.”

She thought about it.

“Strange.”

Dmitry thought so too.

* * *

Over time the coincidences multiplied. They stopped being amusing – they were too systematic. Sometimes Dmitry woke with a sense of her anxiety, and a few minutes later a message would come. Sometimes she rang at the very moment he was thinking about her.

Once he was sitting at work and suddenly felt such strong anguish that he put the document aside. There was no reason for it.

A minute later he understood: not mine.

He wrote at once:

“What’s happened?”

The reply came almost instantly:

“How do you know?”

He looked at those words for a long time. Then he wrote:

“Tell me.”

That day the girl admitted for the first time that it had been hard since the morning and that she had spent several hours trying not to tell anyone about it.

After work Dmitry asked Ma:

“Is this it already?”

Part of it.

“How far can it go?”

Further than you would like just now.

“Why wouldn’t I like it?”

Because for now you are glad of the chance to feel the good. Later you will understand that the bad comes closer too.

He fell silent.

Quite so. If the structure is shared, it is impossible to open the door only to what is pleasant.

* * *

The next stage changed everything far more. Dmitry could not have described the moment precisely: there was no click, no flash.

One day he simply realised that he perceived the girl’s presence even when he was not looking at her. Not hearing her. Not touching her. She was in the kitchen, and he still knew when she stood up, when she stopped, when she was about to come back.

At first he tested it. Then he stopped.

She began to notice too.

“Were you just about to call me?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Very informative.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Another time she was sitting with her back to him. Dmitry looked at her. Simply looked. She turned round at once.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You called me.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“Not with your voice.”

They both fell silent.

“This is getting a bit strange,” she said.

“A bit?”

“All right. Very.”

Dmitry smiled.

“Do you want to stop?”

She looked at him seriously.

“Can we?”

He stopped smiling too.

“Not any more.”

It was the first time they had both truly felt the meaning of Ma’s warning. The practice had stopped being an experiment – it already existed between them.

* * *

Along with the closeness, comfortable illusions disappeared.

Dmitry had once believed that he knew how to hide his irritation. It turned out that he did it badly.

The girl might walk into the room and ask at once:

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re angry.”

“I’m not angry.”

A pause.

“All right. Irritated.”

“With me?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, then.”

Before, a conversation like that could have taken half an hour. Now a few seconds were sometimes enough.

But it worked the other way too. The girl might say:

“Everything’s fine.”

Dmitry would look at her.

“No.”

“It’s fine.”

“No.”

“What makes you think so?”

He could not always explain. He simply knew.

At first this annoyed her.

“A person ought to have the right to keep something to herself.”

Dmitry answered:

“You do.”

“Then why do you still feel it?”

“I don’t do it on purpose.”

She fell silent.

That evening Dmitry asked Ma:

“Where’s the boundary here?”

Where it was before. In respect.

“But if I can feel her state?”

Feeling does not mean having the right to demand an explanation.

This thought proved important. The shared structure did not cancel a separate will, and closeness did not turn into permission to pry into everything. If the girl did not want to talk, Dmitry could understand that something was going on – but the question “tell me” and the demand “you have to tell me” remained entirely different things.

He remembered it. He did not always keep to it perfectly. But he remembered.

* * *

After several months, practising together began to feel quite different.

They could start work in different states and fairly quickly arrive at a single rhythm. Dmitry would speed up – she would take it up. She would hold the steadiness – and Dmitry felt that it was becoming easier for him too. If one of them lost concentration, the other would sometimes literally pull the shared structure along for a few minutes while the first found the way back.

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