

Where Music
Becomes Light

BOOK ONE

of The Six Languages of Love

DMITRY RUSOV / NEXXE

Дмитрий Русов
Where Music
Becomes Light. Tom 1
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Аннотация

He was a man with a past and a head full of songs no one had heard. She was a girl he met by chance at a stop — and she walked straight into his life, and into his music. Dmitry had long ago stopped expecting anything from love. Ksyusha had a voice she had not yet dared to trust. Song by song — Dimka, Struck Blind, The Invisible Thread, To the Last Breath — what begins as a chance meeting becomes a story told in music: of tenderness and doubt, of words that arrived too late, of moments missed and found again. From their first song to the birth of Nexxe, this is the story of two people learning not simply to love, but to hear one another. Because light is not the absence of darkness. Light is what keeps two people from losing each other inside it.

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Дмитрий Русов

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Preface

This book is not a dry chronicle of events.

It is a work of fiction about love, music and an inward journey, drawn from living feeling, from personal experience, and from the songs and images that became part of the world of Dmitry Rusov and Ksyusha Rusova.

Some scenes are told as fiction, because memory, love and music rarely speak in exact dates. What matters is often not where a meeting took place, but what changed in a person afterwards. Not everything essential can be proved by facts. Sometimes it lives in an intonation, in a silence, in a glance, in a song that arrives where ordinary words are no longer enough.

This is the story of two people learning not simply to love, but to hear one another. Not simply to meet, but not to lose. Not simply to pass through pain, the past, fear and the distance between two worlds, but to find in all of it a way towards the light.

Music here is not a background.

It becomes a language of love, of memory, of pain, of

tenderness and of faithfulness.

And light is not the absence of darkness.

Light is what keeps two people from losing each other inside it.

Prologue

The Girl He Had Not Yet Met

Dmitry saw her for the first time not with his eyes.

It was long before the evening one might later have called the beginning, had their story contained anything so simple as a beginning.

She came to him in fragments.

Sometimes in colour.

A flare of fiery red hair at the edge of sleep.

Fair skin, as though touched by sun even on an overcast day.

A scattering of freckles — not a feature of her face but a sign, a star chart someone had spilled across her in childhood and forgotten to teach her to read.

Sometimes she appeared in music.

Not in the words. Not in the melody. In the interval between two notes, where an ordinary person hears emptiness and Dmitry saw space.

Music had never been merely sound to him.

One chord could be a high hall with dark walls.

A low bass, a heavy black circle sinking underground.

The strings, silver threads drawn through the air that trembled whenever memory came near.

A human voice could have a taste: bitter, metallic, warm as honey, or cold as water from an ancient stone well.

He had long since stopped explaining this to people.

At first he tried. Then he gave it up.

People like things they can grasp.

Height. Age. Occupation. The colour of your eyes.

Where you worked. Where you lived. Why you divorced.

What you earn. What you have been ill with. What you believe.

But how do you explain to anyone that a song sometimes opens in front of you like a room with depth to it, and that you do not compose it so much as walk inside?

How do you explain that certain melodies smell of rain in an unfamiliar city?

That pain can have a shape?

That loneliness sometimes sounds not like silence but like a low electrical hum, of the kind that carries from a distant transformer hut beyond the walls of an old Indian temple?

Dmitry did not explain.

He lived with it.

And with her.

With the woman he did not yet know.

Sometimes it seemed to him that her image had come after India. After the long days among manuscripts, dust and warm stone, the sharp smell of incense, and old texts in which the letters resembled not letters but the traces of a will that had outlived the centuries.

Sometimes, that she had been with him even earlier.

Before the temples.

Before Sanskrit.

Before the illnesses.

Before the training that kept him on his feet when his body betrayed him and his character had to be set again like a broken bone.

Before the music.

Before all those women beside whom he had tried to build a life and received, instead of a home, exhaustion, incomprehension and an emptiness inside.

He did not know.

He only felt that somewhere there was a person whose arrival would not make his life easier, but would make it real.

Not calm, not simple, not respectable in other people's eyes.

Real.

Sometimes he saw her by water.

Sometimes among the lights of a city.

Sometimes against an evening sky where orange gave way to violet depth, and the wind lifted her hair as though the air itself wished to remember its shape.

She never spoke.

She simply stood in his inner world, half turned away, as though waiting for him to arrive at last.

Dmitry did not yet know her name.

Did not know that she would be called Ksyusha.

Did not know that one day the name would become not a name at all, but an entire system of coordinates.

Ksyusha — like light, like fire, like home.

Ksyusha — like a wound one does not wish to heal, because the meaning drains out of it along with the pain.

He did not know.

He only woke once in the middle of the night, sat on the edge of the bed and looked for a long time into the darkness, where the remnant of a dream still trembled.

In the dream she had been laughing.

Not loudly, not for show. The way people laugh when they are not trying to be liked. The light inside simply grows for a second larger than the body and comes out.

That laughter stayed with him all day.

And then for years.

Chapter One

The Stop That Might Never Have Been

Afterwards he tried many times to remember where exactly he had first seen her.

And each time his memory gave a different answer.

Sometimes it was a concert.

Low light. Heavy sound. A crowd in which faces dissolved like stains on wet glass. The electric guitar struck him in the chest, and the bass travelled not through his ears but through his bones. Dmitry stood a little apart, as he always did — not quite inside what was happening, but not outside it either. He had a gift for being among people and remaining alone.

And then — a sudden flare of copper.

Not a spotlight, not a reflection, not some incidental detail.

Her.

Sometimes his memory showed him something else.

A bus stop in the evening.

Wet tarmac after recent rain. The yellow light of a street lamp. The clear wall of the shelter, beaded with drops. The occasional car going past with the hiss of tyres on water. A city tired of itself.

She stood not directly beneath the lamp but a little to one side, where the light touched her hair and turned it to flame.

There was a phone in her hands, he thought. Or a bag. Or nothing.

His memory had not kept the small things.

His memory had kept the blow.

Dmitry stopped.

Not abruptly. Not for effect. His body simply refused, for a second, to go any further.

There are moments in every life when the future touches your shoulder before you can turn round. People usually take it for anxiety, or coincidence, or tiredness. Dmitry did not.

He knew that kind of touch too well.

Certain melodies began this way.

Ancient texts opened this way, when you look at a line long enough and realise all at once that the meaning was never in the words but behind them.

The air in India changed this way before a storm: still light, everything still in place, and yet the world already other than it had been.

He looked at her and understood the impossible:

he remembered her.

Did not know her, did not recognise her, had never met her.

Remembered her.

The way one remembers the smell of a house that never existed.

The way one remembers a voice heard before birth.

The way the body remembers pain long after the mind has made itself forget the cause.

She raised her eyes.

For a fraction of a second.

It was enough.

Later Dmitry could have invented a fine phrase. Said there was sky in her look. Or that he had seen his fate in her. Or that his whole previous life had come off the rails in an instant.

But the truth was simpler, and worse.

He had seen a person one cannot walk past.

Not because she was beautiful, though she was beautiful in the way that no effort can produce. Not the kind of beauty put in a shop window, but the kind that comes of light, liveliness and a strangeness within.

Red hair.

Freckles.

Small, slight build.

A face with something in it at once girlish and obstinate.

Not fragility — no. Rather a fire that does not yet know its own strength.

He took a step.

Then another.

At that moment the whole of his experience — the years, India, the books, the manuscripts, the training, the illnesses, the past relationships, the caution, the difference in age, the habit of keeping everything under control — all of it ought to have stopped him.

A sensible man would have walked on.

Dmitry did not.

“Excuse me,” he said.

His voice came out steadier than he felt.

She looked at him more closely.

Not frightened. Not coy. Not annoyed.

More as though something inside her had stopped as well and was now listening.

“Yes?”

He meant to say something ordinary. Something safe. Ask for directions. The time. The bus. Say something foolish he could retreat from with a smile.

But the words refused to be ordinary.

“I think I have seen you before.”

It was a dreadful line.

Dmitry knew it the moment it left his mouth. Too blunt, too odd, too much like a cheap way of striking up an acquaintance.

He very nearly laughed at himself.

She did not laugh.

She was looking at him seriously.

“Where?” she asked.

It was a simple question. And there was no mockery in it.

That threw him more than laughter would have.

He looked at the wet tarmac, at the drops, at the lamp, at her hair, in which the light gathered as though it were afraid of going out.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “That is exactly the trouble.”

She said nothing.

Somewhere down the road a bus drew in. Opened its doors. Let two people out. Took one in. Closed its doors and pulled away, leaving behind the smell of wet metal and a warm interior.

Ksyusha — he did not yet know that this was her name — did not get on.

She stayed.

That was the first miracle.

Not a great one.

Not a loud one.

With no signs in the heavens.

Simply a girl who could have gone and did not.

“Do you always introduce yourself like that?” she asked.

There was a cautious smile in her voice.

Dmitry let out a breath.

“No.”

“How do you usually do it, then?”

“Usually I don’t.”

Now the smile showed a little more.

And that smile became something almost physical to him. Like the warmth of a palm. Like the first note of a melody he had not yet written but already knew he would write to the end.

“Why not?”

He shrugged.

“I don’t like getting in people’s way.”

“And you decided to get in mine?”

He looked her in the eye.

“Yes.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly.

“Bold.”

“Foolish, more like.”

“Possibly.”

They both smiled.

And in that brief smile there was as yet no love, no promises, no songs to come, no sleepless nights, no quarrels, no reconciliations, no pain and no faithfulness.

There was only the beginning of a possibility.

Sometimes that is enough.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Ksyusha.”

The name sounded plain enough.

But inside Dmitry something changed its shape.

It did not explode. It did not break off. It did not turn over.

It changed its shape.

As though in the empty space he had carried inside him for years a central point had at last appeared. Bindu, one of those men he had once sat with over ancient diagrams and texts would have called it. The point from which everything else unfolds.

Ksyusha.

He repeated the name to himself.

And the music inside him answered.

Not loudly.

Not as a song.

As colour only, for now.

Warm gold at the edge of a deep blue.

“Dmitry,” he said. “Dima will do.”

She nodded.

“Dima.”

He had heard his name from a great many people over the years. Sharply, formally, wearily, tenderly, indifferently, in anger. In her mouth it sounded less like a designation than a touch.

He wanted to close his eyes.

He did not.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Home.”

“May I stand near you a while?”

She studied him. Very carefully. The way one looks not at a face but deeper, to where a person is either genuine or is not.

“A while, then,” she said.

That was how their road began.

Not with a loud declaration, not with a handsome scene, not with happiness ready-made.

With a wet bus stop.

Or with a concert.

Or with that strange place between reality and memory where two people understand for the first time that chance is sometimes only a name fate takes for itself, so as not to frighten us too soon.

Chapter Two

A Man with a Past

Ksyusha did not know how many roads there had been in him. At first she saw only the surface.

An older man. Serious. Contained. With a particular way of looking at you — not heavy, no, but deep, as though he were used to seeing not only the person in front of him but whatever stood behind them.

He did not fuss.

He did not try to seem younger, did not waste words, did not smile without a reason.

And yet it was not cold beside him.

That surprised her more than anything.

Because people with a past like Dmitry's usually turn either hard or hollow. They build walls round themselves, then more walls, then live inside them and call it character.

Dmitry had his walls.

Ksyusha felt them almost at once.

But there was a light burning behind them.

Not a bright one. Not for show. More like the lamp in the window of a house you walk towards for a long time through snow: a small, stubborn, warm point that keeps you moving.

He did not speak of himself straight away.

And not of everything.

In separate sentences.

Of India — as though it were not a country but a layer of life he had once entered and never entirely left.

Of Sanskrit — calmly, though at those moments his eyes changed.

Of the manuscripts — with respect, almost with caution, as though they were not paper but living creatures.

Of the closed cults he said little. Not because he wanted to create a mystery, but because he knew the worth of other people's curiosity. Some things must not be dragged into the light to make an impression.

Ksyusha listened.

She did not always understand all of it, but she felt the essential thing: this man was not inventing himself.

There was a great deal in him that was strange, difficult, abrupt. There was no emptiness.

One day she asked:

“What did you want all that for?”

They sat in the kitchen. Outside it was growing dark. Tea cooled on the table. Dmitry was silent for a long while, turning his mug in his hands.

“I don't know,” he said at last. “I suppose I was always looking for the thing that doesn't disappear.”

“Did you find it?”

He looked at her.

And Ksyusha suddenly wished she had not asked so directly.

Because there was too much of an answer in his look.

"Not in the texts," he said.

She lowered her eyes.

She felt warm and frightened at the same time.

Later she would learn that he had been ill. That training, for him, was not about the beauty of the body or about strength for its own sake, but about being able to get up in the morning and not fall apart. That character can be trained like a muscle. Through pain, repetition, discipline, obstinacy.

She would learn that he had a marriage behind him which had left not merely memories but a caution inside. Not mistrust of her — no. Rather mistrust of the very possibility of being happy without paying for it afterwards.

She would learn that Dmitry could love deeply, and that this was exactly why he was sometimes too afraid.

She would learn that he had no middle setting.

If he took a thing up, he took it to the end.

If he searched, he searched until it drew blood.

If he wrote, he wrote until the night came apart into morning.

If he loved, he did not love by halves.

For her this would be a gift and a trial at once.

Because the love of such a man is never a light ornament to a life. It becomes a space you enter whole.

And Ksyusha was not a blank sheet either.

She had her own pain. Her own experience. Her own fears. Her own stubborn tenderness. Her own way of flaring up and

taking offence, not because she wanted to destroy anything, but because she was afraid of not being understood.

The difference in their ages was not merely a number.

Fifteen years means different songs heard in youth.

Different words you grow used to; different ways of being silent; different notions of how an apology is made; different reactions to pain.

He sometimes wanted to settle everything by talking.

She sometimes wanted him simply to feel it, without explanations.

He was used to holding himself in.

She wanted a living reaction.

He sometimes became too serious.

She sometimes went into feeling too sharply.

But in one thing they met almost at once.

Neither of them wanted a shallow love.

Neither wanted to live beside someone for years and know nothing of what went on inside them.

They needed more than that.

To understand.

To touch what lay deepest.

To see weakness and not turn away.

To hear fear and not use it as a weapon.

To accept the past without turning it into an accusation.

They were not always able to.

But they wanted to.

And perhaps that was what saved them each time a chasm opened between them.

Chapter Three

Ksyusha

Ksyusha could not be described simply.

Anyone who tried to set down her appearance in ordinary words was bound to miss the essential thing. You could say: small, slight, red-haired, with long curling hair, fair skin and freckles. You could add that her eyes were not of one colour but seemed to change with her mood, with the light, with the hour of the day: now green, now grey, and now showing such a quiet depth that it seemed to Dmitry she saw more than she said.

But all of that was only the shell.

Ksyusha was not simply beautiful.

She was alive.

That was the first word that came to Dmitry when he looked at her. Alive — not in the trivial sense, not because she laughed and moved and talked and breathed. Alive in another way: as though the fire in her had never been quite tamed. Not destructive, not unkind, but warm, stubborn, real. A fire that could heat a house if it was treated with care, and burn you if you tried to take hold of it.

Her red hair did not merely lie on her shoulders. It existed separately, an element of its own. In sunlight it flared copper and gold; at dusk it darkened to a thick amber; under street lamps it became almost unreal — flame kept behind glass.

Dmitry sometimes caught himself thinking a strange thing: if music could be plaited into hair, it would look exactly like that.

Ksyusha laughed rarely, and not because she was gloomy. Her laughter simply could not be drawn out by an empty joke. It came when she genuinely felt well. And then something in her would swing open: her face brightened, the freckles seemed to stand out more, her eyes narrowed, and a sense of warm air gathered round her, as on a summer evening before sunset.

Dmitry loved that moment.

Loved it so much that he was sometimes afraid to move, for fear of startling it away.

He could watch her doing something quite ordinary: pushing back her hair, looking for something on her phone, drinking tea and thinking, gazing out of the window, saying nothing after a conversation. And in those simple movements he found more meaning than he had once found in the long treatises he had spent his nights over.

Not because the texts had lost their meaning.

But because Ksyusha had suddenly become a text for him that cannot be carried from one language into another.

She had to be read differently.

Not by eye, not by mind, not by the habit of explaining.

She had to be felt.

And that was the greatest difficulty of all for Dmitry.

He was used to reaching depth through effort. Through discipline. Through repetition. Through analysis. He could sit for

hours over a single line of an ancient text, comparing variants, hunting for the roots of words, restoring what had been lost, sensing the place where the meaning had been damaged by time but had not yet died.

He was used to difficult things yielding if you worked at them long enough and honestly.

But Ksyusha was not a manuscript.

She could not be reconstructed from fragments.

She could not be opened by pressure.

She could not be understood once and for all and closed with a full stop.

She was a person.

And the more Dmitry loved her, the more clearly he understood that real love gives no right to know another person to the end. It gives only the right to be near while that person opens her doors to you herself — one after another, sometimes quickly, sometimes over years, sometimes in tears, sometimes with a smile, sometimes in a silence that holds more trust than a hundred declarations.

Ksyusha was learning too.

She did not understand Dmitry at once.

At first he seemed to her too serious. Too deep. Too complicated. There was a great deal in him that did not fit the usual notions of the man beside you.

He could speak about music as though he were describing not a song but a landscape.

“Here the sound goes downwards,” he would say, listening to a rough mix. “Do you see?”

She would look at him and smile.

“I hear it.”

“No, you don’t hear it. You see it. It drops through the floor, as it were. Black, and round. And above it there is a thin blue line. If you put a voice in here, it must not sit on top of that line. It has to be inside it.”

Ksyusha did not always understand how one could see sound.

But she understood something else: at such moments Dmitry was absolutely genuine. He was not performing, not inventing, not trying to impress. He was simply living in a world that was closed to everyone else.

Sometimes she thought that beside him ordinary things grew larger than themselves.

Rain was not simply rain.

Silence was not simply a pause.

A song was not simply a song.

A touch was not simply a touch.

Even his look sometimes seemed to her not a look but a question he was afraid of having answered.

Ksyusha felt the strength in him. Not the kind that is boasted of. Not the strength of a loud voice, of money, of power or of rudeness. Dmitry’s was another sort — stubborn, hard-won, assembled out of pain, discipline, knowledge, illness, past mistakes and the will to go on regardless.

She felt that he did not simply want to be near her.

He was reaching towards her.

It was something more than being in love. Being in love often looks at a person as at an attractive possibility. Dmitry looked at her as though she were the answer to a question he had been putting to life for far too long.

Sometimes that frightened Ksyusha.

Because to be somebody's answer is a great responsibility.

She did not want to be perfect. She was not perfect. She could be angry, take offence, grow tired, fail to understand, speak sharply, shut herself away, expect from him what she could not herself put into words. She had her own history too — not always bright, not always gentle. And somewhere deep down there lived a fear: what if one day he saw her not as an image, not as the red light of his visions, but as an ordinary woman with fears and weaknesses and mistakes — and was disappointed?

But Dmitry was not disappointed.

Sometimes it hurt him.

Sometimes it was hard.

Sometimes he did not know how to approach her, what to say, where to keep silent and where, on the contrary, to stop the silence becoming a wall.

But he never went away inside.

And Ksyusha felt that.

What she valued most in him was not his words. Not even his actions, though his actions mattered. She valued the sensation

that came over her beside him: that at last nobody was trying to remake her into a convenient shape.

He wanted to understand her.

Not to correct her, not to subdue her, not to make her resemble his expectations.

To understand.

And that is rare.

People often say “I want to understand you” and mean: explain yourself in a way that makes me comfortable. Dmitry wanted something else. He could argue, he could disagree, he could be heavy going, stubborn, difficult, but at the very bottom of his feeling for her lay the essential thing: he did not consider her an accident in his life.

With him Ksyusha felt herself a woman.

But not only a woman.

Beside him she felt herself a soul that was needed.

Not an ornament, not a habit, not a function in somebody else's life.

A soul that is seen, heard and cared for, even when it is not always understood correctly the first time.

That mattered more to her than wealth, fine promises and loud words.

Money was never at the centre of their world. It could be necessary, it could make things comfortable, it could settle domestic questions, but it was not what held them together. Dmitry and Ksyusha both seemed to understand that there are

things which cannot be bought, cannot be replaced, and cannot be explained to people who measure a bond by advantage.

What mattered to Dmitry was her.

What mattered to Ksyusha was him.

It did not sound like poverty. On the contrary, there was a rare abundance in it.

One evening they were walking along the street beside each other. It was cool. The city had begun to light its windows, though the sky still held the remains of blue. Ksyusha was silent longer than usual. Dmitry noticed, but did not ask at once. He knew by now that sometimes she had to arrive at words herself.

She stopped by a shop window in which they were both reflected. Not directly, not clearly — the glass divided the reflection into layers: the street, the lights, their two figures, the silhouettes of strangers going past.

Ksyusha was looking not at the window but as if through it.

“Dima,” she said quietly.

“Yes?”

“Did you really see me before?”

He knew what she meant.

The question had been between them from the very beginning. It came up now and then — not as suspicion but as a wish to touch the impossible. To check that it had not gone.

Dmitry was silent for a long time.

He did not want to answer beautifully. Beautiful answers often lie, even when they sound convincing.

“Yes,” he said at last. “But not the way you see a person in the street.”

Ksyusha turned to him.

“How, then?”

He looked at her reflection in the glass. At the red hair with the light of the window caught in it. At a face he knew so closely by now and which was new to him every time.

“As an image. As a sensation. Sometimes in sleep. Sometimes in music. Sometimes simply...” He stopped, searching for the words. “Simply, you would appear inside me. With no name. With no place. But I knew that if I ever saw you, I would not walk past.”

Ksyusha lowered her eyes.

“That is strange.”

“Yes.”

“And a little frightening.”

“I was frightened as well.”

She gave a half-smile, and there was no mockery in it.

“You don’t look like a man who is ever frightened.”

Dmitry looked at her gently.

“I simply don’t always show it.”

She said nothing.

Then, slowly, she took his hand.

A simple gesture. No theatre. No words. But for Dmitry there was more trust in it than in any long declaration she might have made.

Her fingers were warm.

He pressed them carefully, the way one holds not a hand but a promise.

They walked on.

And the city around them seemed to grow quieter.

It did not vanish. It did not dissolve. It simply stepped back and left them a little space.

At such moments Dmitry understood with particular clarity: Ksyusha had not merely come into his life. She had altered its acoustics.

Before her, many days had sounded muffled, as though through a thick wall. There had been work, people, roads, obligations, interests, knowledge, training, pain, tiredness, the occasional joy. All of it existed, and inside there remained the strange echo of an empty room.

With Ksyusha the sound changed.

The world did not become easier.

The illnesses did not go away.

The past was not rewritten.

The mistakes were not cancelled.

Age did not stop being a difference.

The difficulty of two characters did not go anywhere.

But a fine, bright frequency appeared that went through all of it.

Dmitry called it, to himself, by her name.

Ksyusha.

The name did not merely sound. It shone.

In his inner space it was warm and rounded, a golden copper with soft green lights at the edges. Sometimes like sunset on water. Sometimes like a fire in a window. Sometimes like the first note of a song that must not be lost, because if you lose it the whole melody falls apart.

He did not tell her all of this in such detail.

Not because he was hiding it.

But because he was afraid the words would make smaller what was larger than words.

Ksyusha felt things in her own way.

She did not see music as Dmitry did. She did not walk into it through rooms and colours and volumes. But she felt people. Sometimes too strongly. Sometimes another person's mood reached her before he had managed to say anything at all.

Dmitry she felt at once.

On that first evening, when he came up to her, she did not think: what an interesting man, or why is he talking to me. Something else arose inside her, almost bodily: this man is not going past.

And something more: he had been walking a very long time.

Not to the bus stop. Not towards her across a few yards of wet tarmac.

Towards her — across years.

She could not have explained it then. Nor would she have tried. People break fine things too easily when you make them explain

in coarse words.

But she felt how he reached towards her.

Not pressure. Not pursuit. Not the wish to possess.

The wish to be near her.

And these are different things.

Pressure frightens.

Pursuit humiliates.

The wish to possess closes round you.

The wish to be near you warms.

Ksyusha did not give her trust all at once. She had caution enough not to throw herself blindly into a feeling. But something in Dmitry disarmed her by degrees. Not promises. Not fine phrases. Constancy.

He could be wrong, but he came back to the conversation.

He could fail to understand, but he tried to.

He could be silent, but he did not disappear.

He could be tired, ill, busy, sunk in his music or his own thoughts, but in the essential thing he stayed near.

And that built between them the thing that cannot be built quickly.

Trust.

Not loud. Not perfect. Not without cracks.

Real.

One morning Ksyusha woke before he did. Outside it was a grey morning. The light lay pale and even on the walls. Dmitry was sleeping heavily, the way people sleep who rarely allow

themselves truly to switch off. Even in sleep his face kept a trace of strain, as though somewhere inside the work went on — a thought, a piece of music, a struggle with himself.

She lay beside him and looked at him.

It became very clear to her all at once that this man had lived through a great deal before her. More than he said. And that not all of his wounds had visible edges. Some were hidden so deep that he had probably grown used to counting them as part of his character.

Ksyusha touched his shoulder carefully.

He did not wake.

She thought: “I want him to have peace.”

Not happy every second. That is impossible. Not perfect. There is no such thing. Not without pain. Life does not ask.

Peace, precisely.

So that beside her he need not hold a defence all the time.

So that he could be strong without being obliged to be stone.

So that his past would not govern every one of his tomorrows.

So that music would stop being only a way of surviving and become a way of loving as well.

Perhaps it was that morning she understood that she loved him not only for his strength.

She loved him for his tiredness as well.

For his depth.

For his strangenesses.

For the way he fell silent when there was too much feeling.

For his hands, for his look, for his obstinacy.

For being difficult and never hollow.

For the fact that beside him she wanted to be better, not from fear of losing him but from a wish to be equal to something real between them.

Dmitry woke later.

He opened his eyes and saw that she was looking at him.

“What is it?” he asked hoarsely.

Ksyusha smiled.

“Nothing.”

“Do I look terrible?”

“No.”

“Then why are you looking?”

She thought for a moment.

“Memorising.”

It took him a moment to find an answer.

“What for?”

Ksyusha shrugged.

“So that I have it.”

Dmitry looked at her, not quite awake, and felt music beginning inside him.

Very quiet.

An acoustic guitar.

A single soft picking pattern.

A warm low sound.

Almost without words.

He did not yet know that one day he would write songs in which she would be a star, a lighthouse, a fire in the dark. Did not know that her name would become a title, a chorus, a light on a cover, a story that other people would hear.

But at that moment he already knew the essential thing.

If music is ever able to tell the truth about love, it will have to begin with the way she looked at him.

With the way Ksyusha looked at him in the morning.

Without performance, without demand, without fear.

Simply near.

And perhaps that was why, on that day, he thought for the first time not as a man afraid of losing something but as a man who wants to build.

Not a song, not an image, not a handsome story.

A home.

Not necessarily one made of walls.

A home made of trust.

Of conversations; of warm hands; of patience; of words said in time; of forgiveness; of faithfulness.

Of that rare feeling that in an enormous, noisy, often cruel world there is one person to whom your soul returns.

For Dmitry that person was Ksyusha.

And for Ksyusha it was becoming clearer and clearer: Dmitry was not simply a man who had appeared in her life.

He was the one beside whom the noise inside her grew quieter.

The one she wanted to believe, not because he promised an

easy road but because he was ready to walk a hard one.

The one whose name was gradually becoming not a habit but a direction.

Dimka.

She did not yet know how many songs would be born out of that name.

Did not know how much pain and light they would have to pass through.

Did not know that love, when it is real, does not always resemble a celebration. Sometimes it resembles a long road along which two people walk holding on to each other, even when the wind is in their faces.

But in that period she did not need to know everything.

One thing was enough.

She wanted to be near him.

And he wanted to be near her.

Everything else they decided to learn to understand together.

Chapter Four

Learning to Be Near

Love seldom begins with skill.

At first it comes as light.

As a sudden warmth in the chest.

As the wish to write, to hear a voice, to see a face.

As a strange certainty: here is the person towards whom everything inside you leans.

As joy in simple things — a message, a look, an accidental touch, a shared silence.

And then, when that first light becomes part of the everyday, love begins to ask questions.

Not fine ones.

Not festive ones.

Real ones.

Can you hear?

Can you speak at times other than the ones that suit you?

Can you keep out of your pride when you are hurt?

Can you admit that the other person is not an extension of your wishes but a whole universe near you?

Dmitry and Ksyusha could not do it straight away.

They wanted to very much.

But wanting and being able are different things.

In the early days their life together was like a long evening

after rain: the city still wet, the air fresh, the lights reflected in the tarmac, and everything around seeming a little deeper than it had been the day before.

They walked a great deal.

Sometimes with no purpose. They simply walked beside each other, and that was enough. Dmitry loved such walks: in them nothing had to be proved. The city chose the scenery for them itself — lamps, windows, the occasional car, the warm light of a café, a damp wind, the smell of autumn, sometimes the distant bark of a dog or the sound of a tram passing somewhere behind the houses.

Ksyusha walked beside him easily, but not thoughtlessly. She might stop suddenly at a shop window, look at the sky, laugh at some thought of her own, ask a question he was not ready for.

“Are you always this serious?”

He looked at her.

“No.”

“When are you not, then?”

“When I’m asleep.”

Ksyusha snorted with laughter.

“Then I shall have to watch you sleep more often.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s research.”

Her laughter went through him in a warm wave. Dmitry did not always show how strongly such small things worked on him. He could keep his face. The years had taught him that. But inside,

at such moments, something softened.

With Ksyusha he was learning simplicity again.

Not the simplicity that has no depth.

But the kind in which you need not be collected, guarded and braced for a blow every second.

She might take his arm simply because she felt like it.

Might put her head on his shoulder.

Might say, "Dima, you're tired," before he had admitted it to himself.

Might be silent beside him in a way that never let the silence become a wall.

For the first time in a long while Dmitry began to understand that closeness is not only passion and not only talking into the night.

Closeness is when someone sees your tiredness and does not require a performance of strength from you.

But there were other days.

Days when the difference between them stood up not as a number but as an entire language.

Fifteen years is not simply age.

It is a different childhood.

Different music in one's youth.

Different films, phrases, habits, fears; different ways of living through an injury; different expectations of love; different speeds of inward reaction.

Dmitry often wanted to come straight to the point. It seemed

to him that when a misunderstanding arose you should sit down and work it out. Calmly. Honestly. To the end. Find the root, name the problem, come to an agreement.

Ksyusha could not always do it that way.

Sometimes what she needed was not an explanation but the sense that he was near her now. Not after analysis. Not after a pause. Not after he had found the right words. At once — living, warm, real.

She could shut herself away if it seemed to her that he was being too rational.

He could be at a loss if she went into feeling and did not explain what exactly she felt.

She expected subtlety from him.

He expected directness from her.

Both expected love.

And both sometimes forgot that love speaks a different language in each of us.

Once they quarrelled over a trifle.

Afterwards, of course, it turned out that the trifle had only been the surface.

It always is: a cup, a message, the wrong tone, the wrong pause, a word said at the wrong moment. People rarely quarrel about the cause itself. More often the cause is a door through which something long overdue comes out.

That evening Ksyusha turned sharply to the window. Beyond the glass the city was slowly darkening. The sky was low and grey,

as though someone had laid a heavy damp cloth over the houses.

Dmitry stood behind her and said nothing.

He already knew he had said the wrong thing.

He had not insulted her. Had not betrayed her. Had done nothing terrible on the face of it. He had simply answered too drily where she had needed warmth.

Sometimes what wounds the heart is not a blow but the absence of a hand.

“Ksyusha,” he said quietly.

She did not turn round.

“What?”

“Look at me.”

“I don’t want to.”

He nodded, though she could not see it.

Once, in another life, he might have closed up as well. Gone into silence. Decided that if a person does not want to talk, then there is no need. Pride is good at passing itself off as dignity. Especially in those who have been wounded many times.

But with Ksyusha he did not want to win.

That was new.

In what had gone before, people had often tried to defeat one another. Who was right. Who was stronger. Who would give in first. Who needed whom more.

With Ksyusha the very thought of winning seemed wrong.

Because if one of them won, both would have lost.

He came closer but did not touch her.

"I didn't mean to be cold."

She gave a short laugh.

"But you were."

"Yes."

That "yes" came out unexpectedly, even to him.

Not a defence, not an explanation, not "you misunderstood", not "that isn't what I meant".

Simply an admission.

Ksyusha turned her head a little, but still did not look at him.

"Sometimes you talk as though I were a problem to be solved."

Dmitry lowered his eyes.

The remark had gone home.

It hurt not because it was unjust but because there was truth in it.

He really did sometimes try to understand her as he understood texts, music, the body, illness, training, a system. Find the structure. Take it apart. Restore it. Put it right.

And Ksyusha was not in need of putting right.

What she needed was to be loved alive.

"Forgive me," he said.

She said nothing.

"I can't always do it another way," he went on. "But I want to learn."

Ksyusha closed her eyes.

A car went past outside, and its headlights slid across her face for a second. Her red hair flared in the half-dark room, and

Dmitry felt an almost physical pain of tenderness for her.

He took another step.

“I really do want to,” he said.

Then she turned.

There were tears in her eyes. Not large ones, not for show. Simply a wet brightness she had perhaps not wanted him to see.

“And I don’t want to be difficult for you,” she said, almost in a whisper.

Dmitry shook his head.

“You aren’t difficult. You are real.”

“Is that the same thing?”

“No.”

“Sometimes I think it would be easier for you with somebody else.”

He looked at her for a long time.

A great many words rose up inside him. Too many. That easier does not mean more needed. That he had not been looking for a convenient woman. That he had spent a lifetime growing tired of half-presence, of empty talk, of people beside whom there is a body and no soul.

But he said only the essential thing:

“I don’t want anybody else.”

Ksyusha looked at him as though testing whether the words would bear the weight of reality.

“Even if I am hard work?”

“Especially then.”

She frowned.

“Why?”

Dmitry smiled faintly.

“Because when it is hard, you find out whether the thing is real or not.”

She said nothing.

Then she said quietly:

“I want to learn too.”

“Learn what?”

“Not to run away inside myself when I am hurt.”

He put out his hand.

This time she let him touch her fingers.

They stood in the middle of a room where a few minutes before there had been a cold tension, holding each other's hands as carefully as if they had just lifted something fragile off the floor.

Not love.

Love was not fragile.

Trust was the fragile thing.

It had to be looked after.

That night they talked for a long time.

Not beautifully. Not in a literary way. Not the way characters talk in films, where every word goes straight to the heart. They stumbled, went back, grew irritable, softened, fell silent, began again. Sometimes Ksyusha cried. Sometimes Dmitry covered his face with his hands because he could not immediately find the

right phrase.

But they did not walk away.

That mattered more than anything.

They stayed in the conversation.

Even when it hurt, even when they wanted to close up, even when it would have been easier to say, “all right, forget it”.

They did not forget it.

They tried to understand.

And it was on nights like that that something stronger was built between them than on the days of easy happiness.

Easy happiness is beautiful.

But it does not always test the depth.

A conversation after pain does.

In the morning Ksyusha fell asleep on his shoulder. Dmitry sat almost without moving so as not to disturb her. A pale dawn was beginning outside. The city was still quiet. Somewhere far off the first car hummed, someone was hurrying to work, someone was coming home after a night out, someone was opening a kitchen window.

The ordinary world went on.

And Dmitry sat and looked at her face.

After the tears she seemed particularly young and particularly real. Not weak — no. Simply without defences. And that trust was almost sacred to him.

He carefully moved a strand of red hair from her cheek.

Ksyusha did not wake.

Dmitry thought that love is perhaps not the feeling people most often describe. Not a storm, not a celebration, not a flame, not perpetual rapture.

Love is when, after a hard conversation, you look at a sleeping person and want not to prove yourself right but to see that they are never hurt like that again.

He remembered that morning.

Later it would come back to him in music.

As a soft acoustic guitar.

As a low bass, barely audible.

As a thin line of synthesiser, like light under a door.

And as a voice — almost a whisper, because there are admissions that cannot be sung loudly, only entrusted to silence.

Ksyusha woke when the sun had climbed higher.

She opened her eyes, did not understand for a few seconds where she was, then looked at Dmitry.

“Didn’t you sleep?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

He shrugged.

“I was looking.”

“At what?”

“At you.”

She frowned, though a smile flickered in her eyes.

“Studying me again?”

Dmitry shook his head.

“No. Memorising.”

Ksyusha remembered her own word from another morning and smiled quietly.

“So that you have it?”

“So as not to lose it.”

She moved a little closer and laid her palm on his chest.

“You won’t lose it.”

He covered her hand with his own.

“Do you promise?”

Ksyusha looked at him seriously.

“If you don’t go losing yourself either.”

It was not a vow out of a handsome book.

But it meant more to them than one.

Because you can lose yourself without going anywhere.

You can lose yourself in a grievance.

In silence, in fear, in old wounds, in work, in music, in pride, in waiting for the other person to guess.

They both understood that they would have to look for each other more than once.

Even while near each other.

Especially while near each other.

After that quarrel something between them changed.

It did not become perfect. No. Perfection was never their road at all.

But it became more honest.

Dmitry began more often to ask not “what has happened?”

but “what are you feeling now?”. The difference seemed small, and for Ksyusha it was enormous. Because “what has happened” demanded a report, while “what are you feeling” gave her the right to be alive.

Ksyusha began more often to speak directly, even when at first it came out unevenly.

“I am not angry,” she would say. “I am frightened.”

And Dmitry was learning to hear fear behind sharpness, a request behind silence, and behind a grievance the wish to be closer.

She was learning to see in his seriousness not coldness but an attempt to hold himself together. In his silence, not indifference but inward work. In his tiredness, not an absence of love but a body that sometimes found it hard to carry everything he had taken on.

They were learning.

Slowly.

Unevenly.

Sometimes beautifully.

Sometimes through pain.

But learning.

And in that lay the real growing up of their love.

One evening Dmitry played her the rough version of a new melody.

The room was half dark. A mug of cold tea stood on the table. On the laptop screen the sound tracks moved. Ksyusha sat beside

him with her feet tucked up, looking now at the screen, now at Dmitry.

“Is it about us?” she asked.

He did not answer at once.

A quiet guitar was playing through the speakers. Then a low bass came in — soft, almost cardiac. Then a synthesiser like the air before dawn.

Ksyusha listened closely.

“It is sad,” she said.

“Yes.”

“But not hopeless.”

Dmitry looked at her.

“You hear it?”

“It is hard not to.”

He smiled.

She moved closer.

“Do you always write like that? Sadness first, then light?”

“Not always.”

“And with me?”

He thought about it.

“With you the light turns up even where I hadn’t planned it.”

Ksyusha lowered her eyes, and across her face passed that quiet smile he loved more than any loud show of joy.

“Then leave it in.”

“Leave what in?”

“The light.”

He looked at the sound tracks.

There really was a fine warm line inside the melody. He had not put it there deliberately. It had appeared of itself — in the interval between the guitar and the bass, between pain and hope.

Dmitry understood that this was Ksyusha in his music.

Not always a voice, not always a name, not always an image.

Sometimes simply a light that keeps the song from going altogether into the dark.

He left it in.

Afterwards they sat near each other for a long while, listening to the same passage over and over. Sometimes Ksyusha closed her eyes; Dmitry looked at her profile, at the freckles, at the soft line of her lips, at the red hair in the light of the screen.

The music went round and round.

Not as a finished song.

As a promise.

Outside the city was living its own life. Somebody was quarrelling, somebody was meeting somebody, somebody was leaving, somebody was coming back. Somewhere in the night the bus stops were getting wet, windows were lit, heels struck the pavement, wires hummed, courtyards were noisy.

And in the small space between Dmitry and Ksyusha their own language was being born.

Not Russian, not musical, not mystical.

The language of two people who had decided to be together not because it was easy but because without each other the world

went wrong.

And the further they went, the more clearly they understood that being near is not a state.

It is a daily choice.

Sometimes a glad one, sometimes a hard one, sometimes almost unnoticed.

And it is out of those choices that a love is built which can stand time.

Chapter Five

Fifteen Years

Fifteen years is a strange measure.

Said aloud, it sounds almost dry. A figure. A difference. A fact you can enter on a form, pronounce at table, throw into an argument, hide behind a joke, or pretend means nothing at all.

But in the life of two people fifteen years is not a figure.

It is two different times.

When one was already learning to endure, the other was only learning to dream.

When one was making mistakes and paying for them, the other did not yet know what kinds of mistake exist.

When one had already understood that promises can be empty, the other still wanted to believe words.

When one had grown used to pain as to weather, the other still hoped that love must always be warm.

Dmitry never made a weapon of his age.

He never said, "I am older, so I know better".

He did not demand obedience.

Did not try to set himself above her.

On the contrary — the difference sometimes troubled him.

Not because he doubted Ksyusha.

Not because he was ashamed of his years.

And not because he was afraid of other people's talk.

Other people's talk rarely mattered to him at all. People will always find something to discuss. If not age, then looks. If not looks, then character. If not character, then the past. If there is nothing to discuss, they will invent it.

No.

Something else troubled him.

He was afraid that he might unintentionally press on her with his own experience.

Not by his voice. Not by anything he did. Not even by intention. Simply by the fact that too much lived life had already gathered inside him. Too many conclusions. Too much caution. Too many places where he had once been burned and now pulled his hand back by instinct, before the fire had time to become visible.

Ksyusha felt it.

Sometimes it seemed to her that Dmitry stood near her, held her hand, looked at her with tenderness, and yet somewhere deep inside was still testing reality for strength.

As though he expected happiness to turn out suddenly to be a trap.

She did not always know what to do about it.

She wanted something simple.

Not crude — no. Simple in the purest sense.

That he should believe her when she said, "I am near".

That he should not look for a threat in her silence.

That he should not compare the present with what had once

hurt him.

That he should sometimes simply be glad of her, without an inward readiness to defend himself.

But love does not come into empty houses.

Each brings his own things into it.

Dmitry brought experience.

Ksyusha brought fire.

He brought caution.

She brought a living wish to be loved without reserve.

He brought the ability to endure.

She brought the need to feel an answer at once, with her whole heart.

He brought depth.

She brought light.

And all of it had to learn to live in one space.

One day they went to the shop for something perfectly ordinary. Bread, tea, perhaps fruit — afterwards Dmitry could not even remember. The day was grey but not heavy. One of those days when the city seems a little tired but not unkind. Ksyusha walked beside him, talking about something, laughing, and then suddenly fell silent at a window full of children's things.

Dmitry did not notice at once.

He took a couple more steps, then turned round.

Ksyusha was standing at the glass, looking in.

At little jackets. Soft hats. Tiny boots that looked almost like toys.

There was no sadness in her face. Rather something thoughtful, quiet, very womanly — the sort of thing in front of which Dmitry always felt slightly clumsy. Not because he did not understand. Because he understood too much and did not know how such subjects should be touched.

He came over.

“What is it?” he asked gently.

Ksyusha did not answer at once.

“Nothing. It is just pretty.”

He looked at the window.

“Yes.”

She gave a half-smile.

“You said ‘yes’ in the voice of a work report.”

Dmitry smiled with one corner of his mouth.

“I do my best.”

“In report form?”

“Carefully.”

Ksyusha turned to him.

“That is you, entirely.”

“In what?”

“Carefully.”

He said nothing.

She looked at the window again.

“Sometimes I want you not to be careful, Dima.”

The words were said quietly. Without reproach. But something in them trembled.

Dmitry felt it at once.

“What should I be, then?”

Ksyusha shrugged.

“I don’t know. Not correct. Not collected. Not as though everything has to be borne.”

He wanted to answer quickly, and stopped himself.

Once he would perhaps have explained. Said that being collected is not coldness but a way of not falling apart. That carefulness is a form of care. That he did not want to press on her. That he had his reasons.

But by now he knew that not every question calls for a defence.

Sometimes a person is not speaking against you.

They are speaking to you.

“I can’t always do it another way,” he said.

Ksyusha nodded.

“I know.”

They came out of the shop later with a bag that did indeed hold bread, tea and one or two small things bought almost mechanically. The rain began suddenly — fine and frequent, as though the sky had decided not to pour water down but to sift it through the city.

Dmitry opened the umbrella.

Ksyusha stepped closer.

Under one umbrella they always ended up almost against each other. Her shoulder touched his arm. Red hair escaped from under her hood. Small drops gathered on her lashes.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Dima.”

“What?”

“Just walk beside me.”

He said nothing more.

And walked beside her.

Sometimes love learns exactly like that: not through large promises but through a small obedience to another person's heart. Not to check, not to clarify, not to decide, not to protect, but simply to walk beside them.

They reached home almost in silence.

Ksyusha took off her wet jacket and hung it up at the second attempt, because the sleeve caught on the hook. Dmitry wanted to help, but she managed on her own. Then she went into the kitchen, put the light on and took down the mugs.

He watched her and felt a strange, heavy tenderness rising inside him.

Not rapture, not passion, not anxiety.

Tenderness, precisely — thick, almost painful.

He wanted to go to her, put his arms round her from behind, bury his face in her hair and say something simple. Something not philosophical at all. Not deep. Not hard-won.

Something like: you are mine.

But he did not say it.

Caution about words that can be misunderstood had lived in him too long. "Mine" is tenderness to some and a cage to others. Dmitry was afraid of any cage. Afraid of becoming for her the thing he would once have wanted to run from himself.

Ksyusha put the kettle on and suddenly turned round.

"You are thinking too loudly again."

He looked up in surprise.

"Can you hear it?"

"Very clearly."

"And what am I thinking?"

"About the correct way to love me."

Dmitry went still.

She had said it without a smile.

And so exactly that he had nothing to cover himself with.

"Possibly," he said.

Ksyusha came closer. Slowly, without hurrying. Stopped in front of him.

"Perhaps it needn't be correct?"

He looked at her.

"How should it be, then?"

She raised her hand and touched his chest with her fingertips.

"Honest."

The word stayed between them.

Not loud.

Not ornamented.

Very simple.

Honest.

Dmitry covered her palm with his own.

“Honestly, I am sometimes afraid.”

Ksyusha did not look away.

“Of what?”

He drew breath.

Here it was. The place where he could have turned it into a joke. Changed the subject. Said “nothing”. Put his arms round her, kissed her, retreated into domestic matters. Pretended there was no dark room inside him that he himself rarely opened.

But she had asked for honesty.

And he wanted to learn.

“I am afraid that my experience will get between us. That I shall be seeing not you but what has already happened. That one day you will grow tired of how complicated I am. That I shan’t have time to give you everything you deserve. That the difference between us will one day stop being a figure and become a wall.”

Ksyusha listened calmly.

Only the fingers on his chest trembled slightly.

“And what else?” she asked.

He almost smiled.

“Is that not enough?”

“You haven’t said it all.”

He lowered his eyes.

She knew.

Somehow she always knew when he left the essential thing in

shadow.

“I am afraid of losing you,” he said, more quietly.

Ksyusha said nothing.

“Not because you will leave tomorrow,” Dmitry went on. “Because I know too well that people can be near each other and still get lost. In silence. In a grievance. In tiredness. In what goes unsaid. I am afraid that one day I shall not hear you where I ought to have heard you.”

Ksyusha looked at him for a long time.

Then she suddenly put her arms round him.

Not carefully. Not for the sake of the gesture. With her whole body, tightly, as though she wanted not merely to press against him but to hold him here, in this kitchen, in this light, in this present where he had at last told the truth.

Dmitry froze for a second, then held her in return.

And all his carefulness vanished for a moment.

He pressed her to him as he had long wanted to. Without measuring his strength. Without the observer inside. Without the fear of seeming too much in need.

Ksyusha closed her eyes.

“Like that,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Love me like that.”

He did not answer.

Because his arms had become the answer.

That evening the kettle boiled and went on clicking in the

kitchen, forgotten by both of them. Outside the rain grew thicker. The light was reflected in the glass, making the room look like a small island in the middle of a wet city.

They sat on the floor by the sofa. Ksyusha wrapped herself in a blanket; Dmitry sat near her with his back against the wall. Between them stood mugs of tea that neither of them touched.

The conversation grew quieter.

After admissions people often speak more gently, because it is no longer possible to pretend to be entirely defended.

“You know,” Ksyusha said, looking at her fingers, “I am sometimes afraid of the age as well.”

Dmitry turned his head.

“Yours or mine?”

“Ours.”

He gave the faintest of smiles.

“Do we have one between us?”

“Don’t joke.”

“Sorry.”

She pulled the blanket higher.

“It is just that sometimes I think... you have lived through so much already. India, the texts, a family, illnesses, music, training, things you don’t even talk about. And beside all that I sometimes feel...”

She stopped.

“Feel how?” he asked.

“Small, I suppose.”

The word came out quietly, almost shamefaced.

Dmitry turned to her at once, his whole body.

“Ksyusha.”

“What?”

“You are not small.”

“Not to you?”

“To me you are enormous.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“In what sense?”

He thought.

In his inner world it was obvious. But how do you say it normally? How do you explain that a person can be short, fragile-looking, red-haired, freckled, sitting on the floor in a blanket, and at the same time take up more room in you than cities, temples, manuscripts, years and all your past lives?

“You simply don’t understand how much room you take up in me,” he said at last.

Ksyusha lowered her eyes.

“Beautifully put.”

“Not beautifully. Exactly.”

She gave a half-smile.

“Everything with you goes through exactness.”

“Not everything.”

“What doesn’t, then?”

He looked at her.

“You.”

Ksyusha was silent.

And there was no anxiety in that silence any more.

Dmitry went on:

“Yes, I am older. Yes, I have more past. Not better, not worth more — simply more. That does not make you less. Sometimes the opposite. Beside you a great deal of my past becomes less heavy.”

“Why?”

“Because it acquires a continuation.”

Ksyusha looked at him for a long while.

The phrase settled deep in her.

A continuation.

Not a cancellation. Not an erasure. Not “forget everything that was”. A continuation. There was something grown-up and honest in that. You cannot cut the past out of a person like a spoiled page. But you can write on in such a way that the earlier chapters stop being a sentence passed.

She moved closer and put her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t want to be your salvation,” she said.

Dmitry touched her hair with his lips.

“You needn’t be.”

“What then?”

“Yourself.”

“Is that all?”

“It is the hardest thing there is.”

Ksyusha laughed quietly.

“There you go again.”

“What?”

“You have made even the simple thing difficult.”

“I do my best.”

“I can see that.”

They fell silent.

The rain outside grew softer. Somewhere water was running in the pipes. The room smelled of tea, wet clothes and something domestic that cannot be named in one word.

Dmitry suddenly remembered India.

Not the bright touristic India, not postcards with temples and sunsets, but another one: narrow rooms, dust, dark corners, old manuscripts they had sat over for hours; letters faded with time; hot air; the sense of touching not paper but somebody's breath that had come down through the centuries.

He remembered an old man saying to him once: “Not every text has to be understood. Some have to be kept until they open of themselves.”

At the time Dmitry thought this was about manuscripts.

Now he understood that it could be said of love as well.

Ksyusha did not have to be conquered by understanding.

Did not have to be deciphered to the end.

Did not have to be made convenient.

She had to be kept.

Not as a possession.

As a fire, as trust, as a living presence in your life.

And then she opened of herself.

The next day Dmitry went to train.

His body answered heavily. There were days when the training came easily, almost gladly. And there were others when every movement was a reminder: strength is not a permanent condition but an agreement with pain that has to be renewed again and again.

He worked in silence.

The iron was cold under his palms. The air smelled of rubber, metal and tiredness. Somewhere in the gym a man was talking loudly, someone was laughing, someone was filming himself on a phone. Dmitry noticed almost none of it.

He was thinking about the conversation of the night before.

About Ksyusha in the blanket, about her word “small”, about his own fear of losing her.

About the fact that love demands not only strength but suppleness.

Strength without tenderness becomes pressure.

The thought came to him between sets.

He sat down on the bench and lowered his head, feeling his heart beat heavily and evenly.

Strength without tenderness becomes pressure.

He repeated the line to himself.

There was a song in it.

Not a melody yet. Only a line so far. But the line already had weight. Dark red, dense, with a metallic aftertaste and a thin gold

thread inside. Dmitry could almost see it settling on a riff, slow and heavy but not unkind.

Then he thought of Ksyusha.

And a light appeared inside that heaviness.

It happened more and more often: any darkness of his, once Ksyusha entered it, stopped being final.

It did not disappear.

It did not turn sugary.

A way out simply appeared in it.

After training he wrote to her:

“I have understood something.”

The answer came almost at once:

“What?”

He typed:

“I sometimes confuse strength with the ability to bear everything. And near you it is not enough to bear things. One has to be alive.”

Ksyusha did not answer for a long time.

Then she sent:

“That is what I love.”

He smiled.

“What exactly?”

“When you are alive.”

Dmitry looked at the screen and felt his chest grow warmer.

Not even because of the words. Because she saw in him not only a strong man, not only an older one, not only a complicated

person with a past. She wanted him alive.

Tired.

At a loss.

Tender.

Sometimes wrong.

Not always knowing the answer.

For him this was a new kind of acceptance.

That evening he came home with flowers.

Not luxurious ones. Not elaborate. Simply a bunch he had seen and somehow known at once would suit her. Warm shades, a little wildness, nothing too neatly arranged.

Ksyusha opened the door and looked first at the flowers, then at him.

“Are those for me?”

“No, for the neighbour.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Very funny.”

“I was trying to be alive.”

She laughed.

And the laughter made the room brighter again.

Dmitry held out the flowers.

Ksyusha took them carefully, lifted them to her face, breathed in the scent.

“They are lovely.”

“They look like you.”

“I look like a bunch of flowers?”

“Like a fire that has somehow grown out of the ground.”

She looked at him and smiled.

“Now that was beautiful.”

“I was being exact.”

“Sometimes your exactness is beautiful.”

He stepped closer.

“Sometimes?”

“Don’t push your luck.”

He bent and kissed her forehead.

Ksyusha closed her eyes for a second.

That gesture was special to her. There was no passion in it, no demand, no hurry. Only care. Warm, quiet, almost domestic.

She thought that perhaps this is what happiness looks like — not a perpetual celebration but a man at the door with flowers after a hard conversation. Like laughter after fear. Like the chance to talk about difficult things without falling apart.

They put the flowers in a vase.

Dmitry spent a long time adjusting the stems, as though composing something. Ksyusha watched.

“You even arrange flowers the way you restore a manuscript.”

“We all have our gifts.”

“You are impossible.”

“But yours?”

Ksyusha looked at him.

“Mine.”

The word was short.

But Dmitry felt it in his whole body.

Not as ownership, not as a tether, not as a cage.

As a home.

That night he could not get to sleep for a long time.

Ksyusha slept near him, turned away, but her hand lay close to his. Dmitry looked into the darkness and listened to her breathing.

Fifteen years.

He thought about the difference again.

It had seemed to him before to be something to allow for, overcome, explain, step round carefully.

Now he saw it differently.

Fifteen years is not only a chasm.

It is also a bridge, if two people build it from both banks.

His past could become a weight to her.

Or it could become a support.

Her youth could become a fear to him.

Or a light that gives back liveliness.

Their differences could break them.

Or teach them.

None of it depended on a figure.

It depended on whether they would go on walking towards each other.

Dmitry turned his head and looked at Ksyusha. In the dark her red hair seemed dark, but he knew what fire was hidden in it in the light.

He touched her fingers carefully.

Ksyusha did not wake, but in her sleep she moved her hand a little closer.

And that small movement was enough to make the night softer.

Dmitry closed his eyes.

Somewhere inside, a new melody began to sound.

Slow. Warm. With a low pulse of bass like a heart. With an acoustic guitar picking not at strings but at memories. With a woman's voice in the distance — not words but light.

He saw the music in space.

Two lines.

One dark blue, deep, heavy, cracked with silver.

The other copper-gold, alive, warm, flaring scarlet now and then.

At first they ran separately.

Then they crossed.

They did not merge completely. No. Each kept its own colour. But where they crossed a new shade appeared — one that neither he nor she had had alone.

Dmitry understood: it was the two of them.

Not alike, not convenient, not simple.

But together.

And perhaps that was exactly why they were real.

Chapter Six

The Music She Lived In

It was some time before Dmitry understood that Ksyusha had changed more than his life.

She had changed his music.

Before her, songs had come to him in different ways.

Sometimes heavily, like an illness.

Sometimes abruptly, like a blow.

Sometimes at night, when his body was already demanding sleep and his mind suddenly opened a door inside itself with a sound standing behind it.

He would wake at three or four in the morning with the sense that a melody had just been playing somewhere near. Not in the room, not from the phone, not through the window — inside. And if he did not write it down in time it would go. Not vanish altogether, but hide so deep that all that remained was the tormenting feeling of loss: as though someone had said an important sentence to you in an unknown language and you had not managed to remember a single word of it.

He would get up.

Sometimes almost blindly, sometimes with a bad head, sometimes with a heavy body that resisted every movement.

He would find a phone, a sheet of paper, a laptop — anything. He would write down a line, a rhythm, a colour, an image. Not

always notes. Notes were only a part of it. Sometimes it mattered more to catch the shape.

“Low black circle under the voice.”

“Blue light from above, as after a storm.”

“Guitar — rusted iron, but a warm line inside it.”

“Woman’s voice far off, like flame behind glass.”

“The bass should not sound. It should press on the chest.”

Anyone else seeing such notes would probably have decided that this was not music but the raving of a tired man.

For Dmitry it was a working language.

He did not merely hear.

He saw.

Sometimes a song opened in front of him like a building.

A verse might be a narrow corridor with damp walls.

A chorus, a high hall where the sound rose like smoke.

A bridge, a crossing over dark water.

An outro, a door closing slowly and leaving nothing behind it but a low hum.

There were songs that had a taste.

The bitterness of things left unsaid.

The metal of anger.

The sweetish warmth of a memory.

The dry dust of an old grievance.

The cold of rain on the tongue.

He had long since stopped being surprised by it.

Synaesthesia was not a talent and not an ornament. It was

rather a way of existing. Sometimes a gift. Sometimes a punishment. Because the world rarely asked whether he wanted to see more than everyone else.

He saw.

And it was not always beautiful.

Some sounds had the shape of pain.

Some voices left a dirty trail behind them.

Some melodies seemed false not because there were wrong notes in them but because the colour did not match the intention.

Dmitry felt a lie in music almost physically.

That was exactly why he could not write by halves.

If a song was born out of pain, the pain had to be real.

If out of love, the love must not pretend to be easy.

If out of anger, the anger had to have a cause and not be a pose.

He did not know how to make a simple “track”.

He made a space that he walked into himself.

And then Ksyusha appeared.

And the space changed.

Imperceptibly at first.

He would be writing something dark — the familiar thing, deep, with a heavy bottom end, with pressure, with the inner gloom he knew how to walk in. The guitar would sit densely. The bass would go down. Electronic noise would gather at the edges like a city night beyond the windows.

And then, somewhere inside that gloom, a warm reflection

would appear.

Unasked for.

He would take it out, and the sound would go dead.

Put it back, and the song would begin to breathe.

Dmitry would sit in front of the screen, frowning, playing the same passage round and round, and understand: it was her.

Not in the sense of a song about her.

Not necessarily.

She had become a frequency that got in even where he had not planned any light.

Before Ksyusha his music had often been like a man standing in a dark room and speaking to emptiness. After her a window appeared in that room.

Not always open.

Not always large.

Sometimes only a narrow bright strip under a curtain.

But the window was there.

One evening he was working on a draft that began with a heavy riff. Slow, dense, almost angry. There was something in it of a long walk across a wet city, when the lamps are reflected in the tarmac and inside you there is neither the strength nor the wish to explain to the world why you are still walking.

Ksyusha was sitting not far off, wrapped in a blanket, scrolling through something on her phone. In fact she had stopped reading long ago. She was simply pretending to be occupied so as not to disturb him.

Dmitry saw it.

He saw a great deal in her, in fact, even when he was looking at a screen.

“Are you listening?” he asked.

Ksyusha looked up.

“Of course.”

“And saying nothing?”

“You are working.”

“It matters to me.”

She put the phone down.

“Then play it from the beginning.”

He played it.

The room filled with a low guitar sound. Not loud — he had learned long ago to listen to drafts at a moderate volume so as not to deceive himself with sheer pressure. But even quietly the riff had weight. Behind it came the 808 bass, deep and slow, like the pulse of an enormous animal. Over the top, a barely noticeable synthesiser, cold, almost transparent.

Ksyusha listened seriously.

Dmitry was looking not at the screen but at her face.

She knew how to listen without technique. Not like a musician who goes straight after mistakes, frequencies, structure. She listened with her whole condition. And she sometimes noticed what Dmitry himself missed because he was too close to the material.

The passage ended.

“Well?” he asked.

Ksyusha said nothing for a moment.

“Heavy.”

“Is that bad?”

“No. It is just that he seems to be walking alone.”

Dmitry frowned.

“Who does?”

“The man in the song.”

He sat back in his chair.

“Alone?”

“Yes. As though he is walking through a city and nobody answers him.”

Dmitry turned slowly back to the screen.

She had got it.

That was exactly what he had felt and had not put into words. The riff was strong, the sound dense, the atmosphere right, but inside there really was the emptiness of a single figure moving.

“And what is missing?” he asked.

Ksyusha thought.

“I don’t know. Not joy. There shouldn’t be joy. But there ought to be light somewhere. Not so that everything turns out well, but so that he knows where to walk.”

Dmitry said nothing.

Ksyusha grew slightly embarrassed.

“Perhaps I am talking nonsense.”

“No,” he said quietly. “Not nonsense.”

He picked up the guitar.

Not the electric one — the acoustic. It stood beside him, as it always did, because Dmitry did not like to put instruments away where he could not reach them. Music sometimes came suddenly, and while you were fetching a guitar from another room you could lose the most important thing.

He tried a few notes.

Softly.

Carefully.

Too beautiful — he took it out.

Then again.

One note lay over the heavy riff strangely, almost wrongly. But it did not destroy the riff. On the contrary — it opened a depth in it.

Dmitry played it again.

Ksyusha looked up.

“There.”

He stopped.

“That?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She shrugged.

“Because now he is not entirely alone.”

Dmitry looked at the strings.

Sometimes her simple words did to the music what hours of technical work could not.

Now he is not entirely alone.

He recorded the acoustic line. Then added a thin layer of synthesiser, almost unnoticeable but warm. A copper-gold thread appeared inside the heavy song. Not the main thing, not insistent, but without it everything went empty again.

Ksyusha sat quietly.

Dmitry played the passage from the start.

Now the music went differently.

The same riff.

The same bass.

The same night.

But somewhere far off, behind wet glass, a light was burning.

“That is you,” Dmitry said.

Ksyusha looked at him.

“What is me?”

“That line.”

She smiled, a little at a loss.

“Did I sound as strange as that?”

“You did not sound. You shone.”

Ksyusha shook her head.

“Sometimes you talk in a way that leaves me unsure whether to believe you or laugh.”

“Better believe me.”

“And if it is funny?”

“Then laugh. I like it.”

She laughed.

And Dmitry suddenly understood: here it was, the real music. Not only in the speakers. Not only in the riffs. Not only in frequencies that can be measured. Music is also the moment when a person laughs in a half-dark room and you realise that for the sake of that laugh the whole chorus can be rewritten.

That rough melody would not necessarily become a finished song later on.

Dmitry had a great many fragments that lived on their own. Not everything had to turn into a release. Some pieces of music were like private photographs: not for the public, not for the stage, not for a cover. Simply proof that on a certain day, in a certain room, something between two people had been real.

But that evening he understood clearly for the first time: Ksyusha did not merely inspire him.

She was the co-author of the light inside him.

Not because she sat beside him and said which note to put where.

Because she changed the very need for that note.

Before her he had often written in order to bear pain.

With her he began to write in order to keep the warmth.

Those were different reasons.

And different songs.

A few days later Dmitry woke before dawn.

This time without anxiety.

Usually the night melodies came at him sharply, almost imperiously. They woke him, pulled at his shoulder, forced him

up. This one came differently. It was already near when he opened his eyes, as though it had been sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for him to wake.

Outside it was a dark blue morning. Not night, but not yet day. At such times the world seems unfinished: the houses are silent, the roads empty, the sky slowly remembering light.

Ksyusha was asleep near him.

Her hair was spread across the pillow in dark copper. Her face was calm. In sleep she looked younger and more defenceless, but Dmitry knew how much strength there was in her. It was simply that Ksyusha's strength did not always look like armour. Sometimes it looked like the ability to smile again after pain.

He lay and listened to the silence.

And then, inside him, it sounded:

Ksyusha, you are my one star...

The line was simple.

Too simple, if you looked at it with a cold mind. Almost like a child's declaration. But Dmitry did not push it away. He had known for a long time that the most honest things often arrive without a complicated form. The complication comes later, when a man begins to defend himself against his own sincerity.

He got up carefully so as not to wake her.

Pulled on a T-shirt, went into the kitchen, put on a dim light.

Wrote down the first line.

Then the second.

In this world without a trace...

He stopped.

A world without a trace.

Yes. That was it exactly.

A world in which people pass one another leaving noise behind them but no meaning. A world with too many grey days, faceless faces, empty conversations, other people's expectations. And in that world Ksyusha was not simply a woman he loved.

She was a mark of eternity.

He wrote further:

You are eternity held in silence,
my only fire in the dark.

The words fell into place at once.

Not perfectly, not finally, but alive.

He did not see this song as a dark one, though there had to be weight in it. At its base were concrete jungles, grey days, a crowd, an industrial sound, an 808 bass, synthesisers. But above all of it — her.

Not as an ornament.

As the centre of the light.

Dmitry closed his eyes.

The music opened in front of him with volume.

First a grey city. High walls. Concrete. Cold air. A low bass somewhere underground. Faceless people moving past like shadows. Time melting like dew on glass, and nobody noticing.

Then her look.

Not the harsh light of a spotlight. Not a flash.

Lightning.

It pierces the dark without destroying it. It simply shows that the dark is not absolute.

In the chorus the colour changed.

Grey became a deep blue. Then gold appeared in it. Then copper. Then fire — not a blaze but a steady flame you could hold in your palms if you were very careful.

Dmitry began typing out the structure.

Intro — heavy 808, industrial synthesiser.

Verse — concrete, crowd, fate, a look.

Pre-chorus — lighthouse, clouds, time.

Chorus — Ksyusha as a star.

Bridge — guitars, a synthesiser fracture.

Outro — a whisper, where her name dissolves into the music.

He wrote quickly.

Sometimes he stopped so as not to lose the breathing of the song. Not every word was final, but the direction was exact.

This was not simply a song about love.

It was a map.

A map of the world before her and after her.

Before — grey.

After — fire.

He was so absorbed that he did not hear Ksyusha come into the kitchen.

“Not sleeping again?”

Dmitry looked up.

She was standing in the doorway, sleepy, in her house clothes, her red hair tousled. She was screwing up her eyes against the light. On her face was the expression he adored: a mixture of displeasure, tenderness and the familiar understanding that arguing with his night music was useless.

“It is morning already,” he said.

“Is that the excuse you have invented for yourself?”

He looked out of the window.

“Nearly.”

Ksyusha came closer and looked at the screen.

“What are you writing?”

Dmitry felt suddenly embarrassed.

It was strange. He could talk about difficult things, about pain, about texts, about fears. But showing her a song with her name at the centre of it turned out somehow to be more frightening.

Because it was too open.

“A song,” he said.

“I can see it is not a shopping list.”

He gave a short laugh.

“About you.”

Ksyusha was silent.

The sleep went out of her face.

“About me?”

“Yes.”

She looked at the screen.

Read the first lines.

Dmitry watched her as closely as if not the song but his right to feel depended on her reaction.

Ksyusha slowly sat down beside him.

Read on.

Then said quietly:

“You are my only fire in the dark...”

He nodded.

“Too simple?”

She looked at him.

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Dima.”

“What?”

“Don’t hide behind complication.”

He smiled, and something tightened in his chest.

She was reading again.

This time Dmitry looked at her hands. At the fingers lying beside the keyboard. At the small movements as she scrolled the text. It became clear to him all at once: the song no longer belonged to him alone. The moment she read her own name inside those lines, the music became theirs.

Ksyusha reached the chorus and was silent for a long time.

“Is that really how you feel me?” she asked.

Dmitry did not answer at once.

Because he could have said yes.

He could have put his arms round her.

He could have made a joke.

But he wanted to be exact.

“Sometimes I feel you more strongly than I can explain,” he said. “To me you are not simply a person near me. You are a... a bearing. A lighthouse. Only the word is worn out by now. But that is the sense of it. When it is dark inside, I still know where the light is.”

Ksyusha lowered her eyes.

An expression appeared on her face that Dmitry did not often see: not gladness, not embarrassment, not sadness. Something deeper. As though the words had touched a place she guarded herself.

“I am not always bright,” she said.

“I know.”

“I can be angry.”

“I know.”

“I can be difficult.”

“I know.”

“I can be wrong.”

“So can I.”

She looked at him.

“Then why a star?”

Dmitry leaned a little towards her.

“Because a star is under no obligation to be convenient. It simply is. And you can find your way by it.”

Ksyusha said nothing.

Then, very quietly:

“Write it.”

“Write what?”

“The song. To the end.”

He looked at her.

“Do you like it?”

She smiled.

“It frightens me.”

“Why?”

“Because it is beautiful to be seen like that. And frightening if one day you don’t match it.”

Dmitry took her hand.

“You don’t have to match a song.”

“What then?”

“Yourself. The song will adjust on its own.”

Ksyusha laughed quietly.

“You are talking strangely again.”

“But clearly?”

“To me, yes.”

And that was enough.

That day Dmitry hardly left the music.

He worked in pieces. Now writing words, now finding a riff, now looking for a synthesiser layer, now taking out everything superfluous. Ksyusha went off to her own affairs and came back, listened, asked questions, sometimes simply sat near him.

The song grew.

In the introduction the heavy bass was to appear at once, as though the pressure of a grey world were rising out of the ground. Industrial synthesisers — concrete, metal, electricity, a city with no face.

The verse lower, almost restrained. A man in a crowd. Grey days. Faceless shadows. And suddenly a look that cuts through a fate.

The pre-chorus, the air before an opening. Time melting, a world without end, and somewhere a lighthouse appearing.

The chorus, not too fast. Not brightly commercial. It had to be strong, wide, almost hymn-like, but with a heavy foundation. Because Ksyusha was a light to him not in an easy world but in a dark one.

That mattered.

Light in a bright room is hardly noticeable.

Real light is seen in the dark.

By evening the first version was ready.

Not the final one. A draft. With rough places, with parts that would still have to be rewritten, strengthened, cleaned. But the song already had a body.

Dmitry played it from the beginning.

They sat near each other.

Ksyusha listened in silence.

When the chorus came she did not smile. On the contrary, she became very serious. At first Dmitry was afraid something was wrong. Then he saw: she was simply taking it in.

Sometimes a person needs time to accept love that has been said too directly.

In the finale, where the whisper was to dissolve into the synthesisers, Dmitry had not yet recorded a voice. For the moment there was silence there and a rough pad.

But he could already hear it:

Ksyusha... you are silence in the storm,
the light that keeps my dreaming warm...

He did not say it aloud.

He could not yet.

Ksyusha turned to him when it finished.

"It is not only about me," she said.

"What else is it about?"

"About what you are like when you are near me."

Dmitry thought.

Once again she had been more exact than he had.

The song was called by her name, but inside it there was not only her. He was in it too — a man who had found light and was now trying not to lose it. A man for whom love had become not an ornament to a life but a way of surviving without turning bitter.

"Possibly," he said.

"Not possibly. Certainly."

He smiled.

"Very well."

"And one more thing."

“What?”

“Don’t make it too dark.”

Dmitry gave a short laugh.

“You are saying that to a man who writes heavy music?”

“I am saying it to a man who sometimes forgets to leave the light in.”

He looked at the screen.

“I shall leave it in.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

She nodded.

“Good, then.”

Later, when Ksyusha had fallen asleep, Dmitry sat down at the project again.

He listened to the chorus at low volume.

“Ksyusha, you are my one star...”

The line repeated itself without wearing thin. There was something almost prayerful in it, though he did not want to make the song religious. It is simply that the name of the person you love sometimes becomes a private prayer, even if you never say it in front of an altar.

He remembered India.

Remembered the ancient texts in which names were not accidental. A name could be a key, a formula, an address, a way of coming nearer to a power. In another culture, in another context, in another world he had worked for many years with

words that people pronounced not merely for their meaning but for their action.

Now he understood that love creates such words as well.

Ksyusha.

To strangers, an ordinary name.

To him, a sound that opened an inner door.

He repeated it in his mind.

The music answered with golden light.

Dmitry wrote another note:

“Do not overload it. The light must breathe. She is not an effect, she is the centre.”

Then he added:

“No borrowed beauty. Only her. Red fire. Freckles. Liveliness. Warmth. Not a perfect picture — a real one.”

He was not thinking yet about covers, about a visual style, about the fact that in time the project would have a canon of its own. But he already felt that if a song ever became a picture, there could be no accidental woman in it.

Because an accidental woman would destroy the truth.

Ksyusha is Ksyusha.

You cannot replace a person with an image, however beautiful.

You cannot replace a living face with a perfect mask.

You cannot replace the woman you saw before you met her with the one somebody else’s imagination has drawn.

Dmitry closed the laptop only towards morning.

Before going to bed he went over to Ksyusha.

She was asleep with her hand tucked under her cheek. Her hair covered part of her face. He moved a strand carefully, trying not to wake her.

“My star,” he whispered, almost inaudibly.

Ksyusha did not wake.

But she smiled faintly in her sleep.

Perhaps by chance.

Perhaps because she felt it.

Dmitry lay down beside her.

The room was quiet. Outside a new day was beginning. Somewhere far off the city was preparing to make a noise again, to demand, to argue, to thunder with roads and voices. The world had not grown any softer for the appearance of a song in it.

But inside Dmitry something was different.

He understood that while this woman existed, while her name shone in his music, while her hand could find his in the dark, he did not belong to the darkness altogether.

He belonged to the road.

And the road now sounded with her name.

Chapter Seven

Dimka

Ksyusha called him by different names.

Sometimes Dmitry.

That came out when a conversation turned serious, when something arose between them that needed a level voice and exact words. “Dmitry” sounded grown-up, almost stern, as though she were addressing not only him but the whole of his past: India, the manuscripts, the illnesses, the strength, the mistakes, the weight he had carried in himself so long that he sometimes confused it with part of his body.

Sometimes Dima.

That was simpler, warmer, more domestic. It was what she called him in the morning when he would not get up. It was how she said his name in the kitchen, setting a mug down beside his hand. It was what she wrote in messages when she wanted to say something tender but not too open.

And sometimes Dimka.

That name was a different matter.

There was nothing official in it. No age. No heavy past. None of the layers through which Dmitry was used to looking at himself.

“Dimka” was who he was to her.

Not a man fifteen years older; not a scholar of ancient texts;

not someone who had come through pain.

Not Nexxe, inside whom the music built its dark cities.

Simply her Dimka.

The one whose eyes sometimes softened when she was near.

The one who could be strong and still need warmth.

The one who thought too much but could be silent in a way that turned silence into presence rather than emptiness.

The one whose hands she would have known in the dark.

Ksyusha loved the name.

There was something almost childlike in it, though nothing weak. Something of her own, rather. As though in him she found not only a grown man but the boy who had once dreamed, been ill, dug his heels in, refused to give up, taken an interest in medicines, wanted to understand how a body is made, how sound is made, how the world is made, and why a person sometimes lives through pain and still goes on looking for light.

She did not think of this at once.

At first love was closer to the body.

To his shoulder beside her; to his look; to the way he straightened his collar; to his voice when he spoke more quietly than usual at night.

To the way he held her hand — without gripping it, without showing any power, as though asking permission to stay.

Then love went deeper.

She began to notice things in him that are not visible at a first meeting.

How Dmitry grew tired, for instance.

Not simply physically. Physical tiredness he knew how to manage. His body was not an enemy to him but a territory of permanent negotiation. He knew when to hold out, when to force himself, when to say nothing, when simply to get up and do the thing because there was no other way.

But tiredness of the soul came differently.

It did not always make him weaker. Sometimes the opposite — he became still more collected. Too calm. Too exact. Too far away inside.

Ksyusha learned to see it.

If Dmitry began speaking in shorter sentences, if he stared at one spot longer than usual, if he did not answer simple questions at once, then his invisible mechanisms were working again. Music, memory, pain, responsibility, unfinished thoughts, old fears — all of it could be moving in him at once, like the wheels of a great clock.

Once she would have taken offence.

It seemed to her that he was drawing away.

Then she understood: he was not drawing away from her.

He sometimes drew away from himself, so as not to fall to pieces.

And then she learned not to demand an immediate answer.

She simply came closer.

Sat down near him.

Touched his shoulder.

Sometimes she said:

“Dimka.”

He would look up.

And in that one word there was more than in a long conversation.

“I am here.”

“I see.”

“You need not explain everything now.”

“But don’t go far.”

“Come back.”

One evening he sat over the music again.

Outside it was a late, warm dusk. Not summer yet, but no longer winter. The city was gradually losing its sharpness. Lights were coming on in the windows. Somewhere in the courtyard children were laughing; then a door of the block banged; then a car went past, leaving behind it the quiet hiss of tyres.

Ksyusha sat on the sofa with a blanket over her knees and watched Dmitry.

He was at the table. In front of him a laptop, a guitar, a notebook, several sheets with broken-off lines. The light of the desk lamp fell on his face from one side, deepening its features. He listened to something in his headphones, then took one off, wrote down a couple of words, went back to the sound.

Ksyusha loved watching him at such moments.

A particular concentration came over him — almost priestly. As though music were for him neither entertainment nor work

but a place you must not enter with dirty hands. He could be harsh about a result, dissatisfied, exacting; he could spend hours hunting for a shade of sound that another person would not even have noticed.

But she noticed something else.

When Dmitry wrote about pain, his face closed.

When he wrote about her, it softened.

Even when the music was heavy.

She did not know whether he understood this himself.

Most likely not. Dmitry was aware of a great deal in himself, but not of everything. Sometimes he looked so hard into the depths that he failed to see the simple light on the surface.

Ksyusha got up quietly and went to the window.

The glass reflected the room: his figure at the table, her own outline, the soft light of the lamp, the dark window in which the city seemed distant and almost unreal.

She looked at Dmitry's reflection and thought that she loved him differently from the way she had once imagined love.

In youth love seems a bright and straightforward thing. A person arrives and everything becomes beautiful. The heart beats, the world sings, the words find themselves. You want it to be easy, with no difficulties, no past, no wounds belonging to somebody else, no need to explain, endure and learn.

But real love turned out to be otherwise.

Deeper.

There was happiness in it, yes. A great deal of happiness. So

quiet that it could sometimes go unnoticed if you were waiting only for loud celebrations.

Happiness is hearing him walk about the room; happiness is knowing that he will come back; happiness is seeing his mug beside your own; happiness is touching his hand under the table.

Happiness is when he says your name not even aloud but somehow inwardly.

But beside happiness there was responsibility.

Not heavy, not forced. The kind a person takes on himself, because he loves.

Ksyusha understood that to love Dmitry meant loving more than his strength.

That is too easy.

Plenty of people could love his strength. A serious man, a deep look, a hard body, intelligence, experience, an unusual life, music with something strong and dark in it.

But to love truly means seeing where that strength has cracked. And not pressing there.

She turned from the window.

“Dimka,” she said.

He took off one headphone.

“Yes?”

“When did you last eat?”

He looked at the table, as though food might be there among the cables and the sheets of paper.

“I don’t remember.”

“Then it was a long time ago.”

“I have almost finished.”

Ksyusha smiled.

“You said that two hours ago.”

Dmitry looked at the clock and was so genuinely astonished that she laughed.

“Really?”

“No, I made it up to get you fed.”

“Cunning.”

“I am learning complicated systems from you.”

He smiled.

It was a small smile, a tired one, but real.

Ksyusha came closer and ran her hand over his shoulder.

“Come on.”

“In a minute.”

“No. Now means now.”

He wanted to object, then looked at her and changed his mind.

“Are you giving orders?”

“I am looking after you.”

“It sounds the same.”

“Get used to it.”

He stood up.

In the kitchen she warmed up the supper, put a plate in front of him and sat down opposite. Dmitry ate in silence, but it was clear from his face that only now had his body remembered itself.

Ksyusha watched.

“When you go off into the music, it is as though you forget you are alive.”

He looked up.

“It happens.”

“And I need you alive.”

He went still for a second.

Then nodded.

“I remember.”

“Not always.”

“Which is why you remind me.”

She propped her chin on her hand.

“I don’t want to be your alarm clock.”

“What do you want to be?”

Ksyusha thought.

The question had sounded light, almost joking, but the answer inside her was serious.

“A home, I suppose,” she said.

Dmitry stopped eating.

“A home?”

“Yes. Not walls. Not housekeeping. A place you come back to not because you must but because there you are allowed to be yourself.”

He looked at her for a long time.

Ksyusha felt slightly awkward at her own frankness.

“Too grand?”

“No,” he said. “Too exact.”

She smiled.

“You see, I can be exact as well.”

“You can.”

“I just don’t show off about it all the time.”

Dmitry laughed.

And Ksyusha felt the warmth rise inside her. She loved it when he laughed. Not a half-smile, not a corner of the mouth, but an actual laugh. Then part of the weight went out of him, and she saw not only a man with a past but a living person to whom joy could still be given.

After supper they stayed in the kitchen.

The tea went cold, but neither of them hurried. Dmitry held his mug in both hands. Ksyusha looked at his fingers. Strong, but neat. The hands of a man who could hold a guitar, iron, an old manuscript, her palm — and did each of them differently.

“What were you writing today?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

“How can that be?”

“Sometimes I understand later.”

“But what is the mood of it?”

He thought.

“Warm. Oddly warm. A heavy song, but not about pain.”

“About what, then?”

Dmitry looked at her attentively.

“Possibly about somebody holding me on the ground.”

Ksyusha lowered her eyes.

“Me?”

“You.”

She said nothing.

She wanted to answer, but for some reason the words would not do. Love sometimes becomes so dense that any phrase seems thin and papery.

She got up, went to him and put her arms round his shoulders.

Dmitry laid his hands on her waist.

They stood like that for several minutes.

Without music, without conversation, without explanations.

Simply a kitchen, an evening, cold tea, the light above the table and two people still learning to be for each other not only passion but peace.

Later, when Dmitry went back to the laptop, Ksyusha did not go straight to bed.

She sat down near him and opened a notebook.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Writing.”

“Writing what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He looked at her with interest.

“So that is how it starts with you?”

“As though it is different with you.”

“Mine is more complicated.”

“Naturally.”

She took up the pen and for a few seconds simply looked at

the blank page.

It felt unfamiliar.

Dmitry wrote constantly — verses, notes, structures, musical images, strange phrases that later turned into songs. For him paper was a working space. For Ksyusha it was more a place where one had to be honest, and honesty is sometimes more frightening than a stage.

She wrote the first word:

“Dimka”.

She looked at it.

The word turned out to be very much alive.

Not “Dmitry”, not “Nexxe”, not “my man”, not even “my love”.

Dimka.

And everything gathered round it at once.

His eyes, his voice in the morning, his tired shoulders, his habit of taking too long to find the right words.

His hands, which became surprisingly gentle when they touched her face.

His seriousness, which she sometimes wanted to shake loose.

His pain, which he did not always admit to.

His light, which he saw in her for some reason without noticing that he shone as well.

Ksyusha began to write.

Slowly at first.

In my soul, Dimochka, you are like a song...

She stopped.

The line was simple. Almost naive. But it held what she felt. There was no need to complicate it. Dmitry could turn sound into three-dimensional spaces, hunt for shades, see music in volume. She wanted to say it plainly:

you are like a song inside me.

Not beside me.

Not outside.

In my soul.

She wrote on:

Your eyes are like a sky gone blue.

And she saw his look at once.

Not literally blue every time — the light changed, the mood changed, tiredness changed his face. But in her sense of him it was exactly that: deep, blue, sometimes stormy, sometimes clear, sometimes shut behind cloud.

She wrote, and it grew easier.

As though what had lived inside her for so long had finally found a way out.

Dmitry did not interfere.

He only turned his head now and then and looked at her. In his eyes was that mixture of tenderness and astonishment which appeared every time Ksyusha opened a new door in front of him.

“Don’t peep,” she said, without looking up.

“I am not peeping.”

“You are looking.”

“That is different.”

“Naturally.”

He smiled and turned back to the screen.

But he was listening.

He listened even to her silence.

Ksyusha went on:

With you, my dear, I have become
someone entirely other; now I believe in heaven.

She stopped.

That was the truth.

Before Dmitry she had not been a different woman in any literal sense. A person does not change entirely. But beside him parts of her opened that had seemed to have no place before. Tenderness grew bolder. The wish to care for someone went deeper. Belief in closeness became possible.

He had not made her different.

He had helped her to see what was already in her.

Sometimes that is exactly how love works: it does not create a new person, it lights up the one who has been standing a long time in half-shadow.

Ksyusha wrote on.

Dimka, my one and only,
you are my most tender one...

She smiled.

Tender.

Somebody seeing Dmitry from outside would not have

reached for the word at once. Strong, yes. Serious, yes. Closed, deep, complicated, stubborn — perhaps.

But Ksyusha knew his tenderness.

It was not sugary. Not for show. Not the kind handed out at the beginning of things in order to please.

His tenderness showed itself in small matters.

In the way he pushed her hair back when a strand fell across her face.

In the way he asked whether she was cold, even when she grumbled that he fussed too much.

In the way he brought her tea when she was tired.

In the way he listened when she spoke of something that to others might have seemed a trifle.

In the way he could apologise — with difficulty, not always at once, but honestly.

In the way he stayed near after a quarrel.

In the way he held her at night when words were no longer enough.

Yes, he was tender.

Her most tender one.

She wrote faster and faster.

Dmitry saw her face change. Saw concentration give way to warmth. Saw her smile now and then at a thought only she understood. Saw her red hair fall across her cheek and her push it back impatiently.

He asked nothing more.

He wanted her to reach the end by herself.

Half an hour later Ksyusha put down the pen.

“There.”

“May I?”

She looked at the page, then at him.

Suddenly she was frightened.

To sing or to write about love is not the same as saying “I love you” on an ordinary day. In a song the feeling becomes open. It can be heard, remembered, repeated. It stops belonging to you alone.

But Dmitry was not a stranger listening.

He was the one the lines were about.

Ksyusha held out the notebook.

“Only don’t analyse it.”

He took it carefully.

“I shall try.”

“Not ‘try’. Don’t analyse it.”

“Very well.”

He began to read.

Calmly at first.

Then more slowly.

Ksyusha watched his face.

She knew how he read texts: attentively, deeply, sometimes too deeply. But something else was happening to him now. He was not assessing the structure, not looking for weak places, not thinking about rhymes.

He was taking it in.

Line by line.

I love you with my whole heart and my soul,
you became a part of me, my fate...

Dmitry stopped.

Ksyusha tensed.

“What?”

He did not answer at once.

“Nothing.”

“Dima.”

He looked up.

In his eyes was the expression that made her heart contract at once: openness without defences.

“Nobody has written about me so plainly for a long time.”

Ksyusha was silent.

She had not expected it.

She had thought Dmitry strong, deep, used to words, to declarations, to complicated meanings. But now she saw: being loved openly was unfamiliar to him as well. Perhaps even harder than loving.

Loving he could do to the point of pain.

Accepting love he was still learning.

She came over and sat down beside him.

“Get used to it,” she said quietly.

He gave a short laugh, but his voice was hoarse:

“Giving orders?”

“Looking after you.”

He nodded.

“It sounds the same.”

“Good, then.”

Dmitry read to the end.

When he reached the lines:

You are my lighthouse in the misty air,
my brightest one, my dear one,

he did not close the notebook at once. He held it open a few seconds longer, as though afraid that if he closed it the feeling would go.

“This is a song,” he said at last.

Ksyusha let out a breath.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes.”

“A bright one?”

“Very.”

“Don’t make it gloomy.”

He looked at her and smiled.

“That is your line now.”

“So you remembered it.”

“I remembered.”

She took the notebook back and pressed it to her chest.

“I want it to be warm. With a guitar in it. Not weight. Well, perhaps a little of your weight, but not so that it presses down. So that it is... like a sunset. Like air. As though I am singing not

to everyone but to you.”

Dmitry listened.

“And at the end,” she went on, bolder now, “could the music go out slowly? Like the sea. And I say: ‘Dimka, Dimochka, my beloved...’”

She grew embarrassed.

“Too tender?”

Dmitry shook his head.

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Ksyusha,” he said gently, “all my life I have written pain as though it had a right to be loud. Why should love be ashamed of its own tenderness?”

She looked at him.

The sentence became important to her.

Why should love be ashamed of its own tenderness?

Indeed.

People are often ashamed of speaking plainly. They are afraid of seeming naive, weak, too open. They hide feeling behind irony, behind a complicated form, behind a cold aesthetic. But sometimes the truth is precisely in the plainness.

I love you with my whole heart.

What could be more exact?

Dmitry took up the guitar.

“Shall we try?”

Ksyusha nodded.

He played the first chords.

Softly.

Too sad — he took it out.

He tried another picking pattern.

Ksyusha closed her eyes.

“That is closer.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. Only warmer still.”

He changed the movement of his fingers. Put more air between the notes.

“And like this?”

She opened her eyes.

“Yes.”

And then she began to sing, quietly, almost uncertainly:

“In my soul, Dimochka, you are like a song...”

The voice was cautious at first.

Not a stage voice. Not a trained one. Not aggressive, as in the songs where she was supposed to be a frontwoman, sharp, strong, almost defiant.

Here the voice was domestic.

A woman's.

Real.

Dmitry went on playing, trying not to knock her off. He was hardly breathing.

Ksyusha sang looking not at him but somewhere in front of her, as though following an inward image. Perhaps she saw the

sea. Perhaps the sky. Perhaps his eyes. Perhaps all of it at once.

When she reached the chorus her voice grew surer.

“I love you with my whole heart and my soul...”

Dmitry felt a wave rise inside him.

Not even music.

Gratitude.

There are things a man can wait for all his life without admitting it to himself. Not because he is weak. Because he understood too early that waiting is dangerous. But when the woman he loves suddenly sings about you as though you had become her fate, a place opens inside that has long been shut.

He played.

Ksyusha sang.

The room gradually disappeared.

Only the voice, the guitar and the warm light of the lamp remained.

There was no mysticism in the song in the usual sense. No ancient texts, no night visions, no complicated symbols, no dark rites, no enigmatic signs. But there was another mysticism, quieter and perhaps stronger.

The mysticism of one person becoming a home for another.

When the last sound dissolved, Ksyusha fell silent.

Dmitry did not take his hands off the strings at once.

They both sat quietly.

Then he said:

“Thank you.”

She was surprised.

“What for?”

“For my not being heavy in that song.”

Ksyusha looked at him tenderly.

“You are not only heavy to me.”

“What am I, then?”

She smiled.

“My blue-eyed one, my own.”

He closed his eyes for a second.

“That has to stay.”

“What has?”

“That line.”

“It is already there.”

“Then it is right.”

Ksyusha laughed.

Then she went to him and put her arms round his neck.

“Dimka.”

“Mm?”

“You really are my bright one.”

He wanted to object. To say that there was too much darkness in him to be anybody's bright one. That she saw him better than he was. That he should not be idealised.

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