

A man and a woman are walking hand-in-hand through a grand, ornate hall. The man is wearing a black suit and the woman is wearing a green coat. They are walking towards the camera. The hall has high ceilings, large windows, and ornate furniture. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The floor is polished and reflects the light. A large, ornate flower-shaped floor medallion is visible in the foreground.

Where Light *Becomes Silence*

BOOK TWO

of The Six Languages of Love

DMITRY RUSOV / NEXXE

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Where Light Becomes
Silence. Tom 2
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Аннотация

The songs are written. The love is real. Now comes the harder part: living it every day. In the studio Ksyusha stands behind the glass and finds her own voice. At home, she and Dmitry learn the small, stubborn craft of a life together — small requests, boundaries of care, gifts that cannot be bought, and evenings that belong to no one but the two of them. Old stories return, other peoples hurts ask for room, and every kindness must learn where it ends. Out of all of this they build the World of Two — and discover that love speaks in five languages of flame, and in a sixth that has no words at all: Silence.

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Дмитрий Русов

Where Light Becomes Silence. Tom 2

Prologue

Behind the Glass

The glass did not divide them in two.

It only showed the difference between two kinds of silence.

In the control room the silence was a working one: the computer hummed quietly, indicators flickered, a cursor moved across a screen. In the vocal booth it was denser. There every breath became part of the recording, every movement of clothing could reach the microphone, and the pause before the first line already belonged to the music.

Ksyusha stood behind the glass in large closed headphones. She had put her red hair up so that no strands would touch the cups and get in the way of hearing. In front of her were a microphone, a stand with the lyrics and a small bottle of water. Nothing else.

Dmitry sat at the edge of the desk. Beside the sound engineer, but not in his place. He could see the track of Ksyusha's voice on the screen and at the same time was watching her.

She did not look frightened.

Collected — yes.

A little quieter than she was at home — that as well.

But it was the silence of a person who knows why she has come into the booth.

“We shall give you four bars before the verse,” the sound engineer said, switching on the talkback. “Start at the same volume. Don’t take the headphones off at the end; I shall tell you when.”

Ksyusha nodded.

A short count went across the screen. After it the music came in — muffled at first, then gathering body. Ksyusha waited for her cue and came in.

She sang the first verse evenly, without trying to show the whole voice at once. In the chorus she opened out more. At the transition before the last section she moved back a little from the microphone, then came closer again.

Dmitry was following more than the accuracy.

He was listening to whom she was singing.

Not long ago there had still been a domestic direction in her voice at times: as though one person were sitting a few steps in front of her and the song need not go beyond the room. Now the intonation had grown wider without becoming impersonal. Ksyusha was not turning a declaration into an address to some notional hall. She was simply allowing people she did not know to hear it.

On the last line her voice trembled almost imperceptibly.

The take ended.

For several seconds Ksyusha stood still. Then she raised a hand.

“The last one again.”

The sound engineer looked at the track.

“The pitch is exact.”

“I am not talking about pitch. I closed the word too early.”

He played the end of the take. The last phrase sounded separately from the song.

Ksyusha listened and shook her head.

“Do you hear? It is as though I had already decided for her.”

“For whom?” the sound engineer asked.

“For the woman in the song.”

He turned to Dmitry.

“Do you hear it?”

“I hear that she is asking for another take.”

Ksyusha looked at him through the glass. Her expression grew sterner.

“Very informative.”

“But exact,” Dmitry answered.

The sound engineer gave a short laugh and moved the cursor back to the start of the line.

“Very well. One passage. We are not deleting the previous take.”

Ksyusha adjusted the headphones.

This time she left a barely noticeable space before the final word. Not a musical stop that could be measured in fractions, but an inward gap. The word came later and more freely. Now it did not close the fate of the woman in the song; it only named what she was feeling at that minute.

“That is it,” Ksyusha said, straight after the take.

The sound engineer did not argue. He moved the new passage to the adjacent track and played both versions one after the other.

In the first, not everyone would have heard the difference.

In the second the song had become more exact.

“The new one,” Dmitry said.

Ksyusha took one cup of the headphones off.

“I know.”

She said it without triumph. The decision had already been made inside the booth, before his confirmation.

That was how it ought to be.

Dmitry could hear what other people missed. He could suggest a breath, remove a superfluous layer, change the space around a voice. But Ksyusha’s intonation no longer needed permission to exist. She answered for what she wanted to say herself.

The recording went on for about another hour.

They made two complete takes, several short inserts and a separate vocal layer for the chorus. Between attempts Ksyusha came out of the booth, drank water, made notes on the lyric sheet. Dmitry once suggested changing the stress inside a phrase. She tried it and went back to her own version.

“Why?” he asked.

“Yours sits more handsomely in the rhythm.”

“And yours?”

“Mine says what has to be said.”

Dmitry nodded.

There was nothing to argue with.

During the next break he was rung about another release. Dmitry went out into the corridor, asking them not to wait for him if it was only a matter of comping the vocal.

The sound engineer opened three tracks on the screen.

“We take the opening from the full take. There are two versions in the middle. Here it is cleaner, here the intonation is stronger.”

He played the first passage, then the second.

Ksyusha moved closer to the monitor.

“Again, without the music.”

In the dry voice details became audible that the arrangement had hidden: a breath drawn too fast, a soft touch on a consonant, a brief tightening before a high note.

“The second,” she said.

“The breathing is louder there.”

“Leave it.”

“Dmitry usually asks for that to be cleaned up.”

“Then he can say so afterwards. Just now I am choosing the second.”

The sound engineer moved the passage into the working track.

On the next line Ksyusha stopped him earlier.

“The first one here.”

“We are not even going to listen to the second?”

“We are, to check.”

They listened. The decision did not change.

When Dmitry came back, the comped version was already on the main track. He put on a loose pair of headphones and asked to start at the join.

“You kept the breath?” he asked.

“I kept it,” Ksyusha answered.

“Why?”

“If you take it out, the entry becomes easier than the phrase itself.”

Dmitry listened again.

“Agreed.”

“And if you had not agreed?”

“I should have shown you another version.”

“And who would have chosen?”

He looked at her.

“You.”

The sound engineer saved the project.

“Then we need no longer put ‘for Dmitry’s approval’ in the file name?”

“You need never write that,” Ksyusha said.

He renamed the track, leaving only the date, the version number and her name.

The change took a few seconds and meant almost nothing to the sound. But it removed from the working order the assumption that Ksyusha's voice becomes final only after another person's decision.

Towards evening they listened to the comped version in full. Ksyusha sat beside Dmitry but looked at the screen rather than at him. At the end the sound engineer paused the playback.

"That is the vocal done. I shall check the joins tomorrow with a fresh head."

"Take the last word from the short take," Ksyusha said.

"Already done."

She read her notes through and closed the lyric sheet.

Marina looked into the control room. During the recording she had gone out several times to answer messages, and now she was holding a laptop under her arm.

"Am I interrupting?"

"We have finished," Ksyusha answered.

Marina came over to the desk.

"Then I have a question. The organiser of the chamber evenings at the cultural centre wrote today. He has heard two recordings with Ksyusha's voice. He is asking whether he may be given her contact."

She was looking at Ksyusha.

Not at Dmitry.

Ksyusha did not answer at once.

"What sort of evenings?"

“A small hall. A mixed programme, usually one or two numbers from each performer. Not a competition and not a large concert. They are looking for new voices for next month.”

“Is he offering a performance?”

“So far he only wants to get in touch and discuss it.”

Ksyusha turned to Dmitry.

He said nothing.

Not out of indifference. The question simply had not been put to him.

“Pass it on,” Ksyusha said.

“Very well. I shall write first that you have given permission.”

Marina made a note on her phone.

“If he gets in touch, you need not answer at once. Find out the programme and the terms first.”

“I shall,” Ksyusha answered.

“How shall I introduce you?” Marina asked. “Simply give the number, or write a working name?”

Ksyusha thought.

“Write: Kseniya Rusova. And give the e-mail, not the telephone.”

“Shall I copy Dmitry in?”

“Not for now.”

The answer came faster than she had expected of herself.

“If there are technical questions, I shall forward them myself,” Ksyusha added.

Marina looked at Dmitry, checking not for permission but for

the absence of any organisational conflict.

“Is that all right?”

“It is her contact,” he said.

“Good. Then the letter goes direct.”

Ksyusha wrote three items on her phone: the format of the evening, the number of songs, the sound. The list came out short, but it already separated the invitation itself from a handsome idea about a stage. Passing on a contact meant allowing a conversation, not agreeing to everything that might follow.

Marina said goodbye and left.

The sound engineer began closing the project. Dmitry gathered the printed sheets, checked that the working files were saved in two places and put the drive away in its case.

Ksyusha went out into the small room next to the control room, put on her jacket and let her red hair down. When she came back, Dmitry was already standing by the door.

“Are you not going to say anything?” she asked.

“About what?”

“About the cultural centre.”

“You gave permission for the contact to be passed on.”

“I did.”

“So now we have to wait and see what they actually offer.”

Ksyusha looked at him more closely.

“Is that all?”

“Were you expecting a speech?”

“I do not know.”

“I can prepare one.”

She smiled.

“No need.”

They came out of the studio.

The corridor was brighter than the control room. Ordinary overhead light, white walls, several closed doors. Behind one of them somebody was rehearsing a guitar passage. Behind another several people were talking at once.

Dmitry pressed the button for the lift.

Ksyusha stood beside him.

“Dima.”

“Mm?”

“Would you like me to perform?”

He turned to her.

“I should like you to work out for yourself whether you want to.”

“And if I do?”

“Then we shall prepare.”

“Together?”

“As far as you ask me to.”

The lift doors opened.

They went in. In the mirrored metal wall not whole faces were reflected but separate fragments: his shoulder, her hair, the dark case with the drive in his hand.

“Very diplomatic,” Ksyusha said.

“Very exact.”

“We shall see.”

The lift went down.

There was still no message from the organiser on Ksyusha’s phone. There was no date, no stage, no programme, no answer that had to be given.

There was only a door, still closed.

And for the first time the key to it was not in Dmitry’s hands.

Chapter One

Small Requests

At home three letters, two files and a list that Dmitry had called short that morning were waiting for them.

Ksyusha opened it on the screen and counted the items.

“Eleven.”

“This morning there were nine.”

“That explains a good deal.”

After the studio she wanted to take her shoes off, put her hair up higher and decide nothing for a while. But Marina needed a photograph, the final text about the song and a fragment of the recording for a short announcement by ten in the morning. They had brought the finished master with them. Everything else was in the study at home: in folders, notes, letters, several versions of one paragraph.

That room served them for preparation. Here Dmitry wrote, worked on arrangements, gathered materials for releases and worked with texts. A final vocal could not be recorded in it, and there was no need for that. The professional studio remained a separate place — with its own air, its own equipment and its own people. What they brought home was already made; here they decided how it would go out to a listener.

Dmitry switched the computer on.

“The announcement first?”

“First you are going to listen to one passage.”

“Which one?”

Ksyusha found a short file in the folder, recorded before today’s take.

“From here, from the twenty-sixth second. Only listen. Don’t correct anything until I ask separately.”

Dmitry took his hand off the mouse.

“Why the qualification?”

“Because you sometimes open the editor before a person has finished the sentence.”

“Fair.”

He put on the headphones. Ksyusha started the passage and stood beside him, watching the movement of the waveform. In the recording her voice sounded slightly drier than in the studio version. On the last word a quiet extra sound appeared — perhaps a breath, perhaps the touch of clothing.

Dmitry listened to the end and took the headphones off.

“Is that all?”

“For now, yes.”

“Then I have heard it.”

“And?”

“You asked me to listen.”

Ksyusha narrowed her eyes.

“Now I am asking you to speak.”

“The extra sound is there. I should leave it. It is alive and does not get in the way.”

“That is what I think as well. And would you have taken it out?”

“If you had asked me to, I should have shown you two versions. You would have decided.”

She closed the file before he could reach for the keyboard.

“Now we can go on.”

Dmitry looked at her without offence. The boundary had been named clearly, so there was no reproach in it and no test. Only a condition of taking part.

They turned to the text of the announcement. The first version looked too official; the second explained the song instead of letting it be heard. Ksyusha took out three adjectives, Dmitry shortened the opening. Then they both fell silent over the last two lines.

“Read them aloud,” he asked.

“Now?”

“One passage. Five minutes, if it needs correcting.”

Ksyusha glanced at the clock.

“Very well. But after that we take a break.”

“Agreed.”

She read it. On the screen the text had seemed collected, but in the voice an unnecessary solemnity showed itself at once.

“Again,” Dmitry said.

“That is the second time already.”

“Four minutes twenty seconds.”

Ksyusha read it more slowly and stopped before the end.

“The problem here is not the rhythm. We are promising a person what he will feel.”

“A song that will bring back to you...”

“Yes. How do we know what it will bring back to him?”

Dmitry deleted half the sentence. What was left was simple.

“A song about what is kept between two voices”.

“Now?”

Ksyusha said the line once more.

“Now we are speaking for ourselves.”

He saved the document.

“Three minutes.”

“You may keep the other two.”

She went out of the study, let her hair down and walked to the kitchen. There was a ready meal in the refrigerator — it only needed heating. Ksyusha put one plate on the table and reached for a second on the top shelf. Her fingers barely touched the edge of it.

Dmitry came in with his phone in his hand.

“Shall I get it down?”

“Yes, please.”

He took the plate down and handed it to her. Ksyusha accepted it without the usual explanation that she could have managed herself.

“Marina has answered,” he said. “The text will do. She is asking for a photograph in landscape format as well.”

“Today?”

“Preferably.”

Ksyusha put the food on to heat.

“Choose three, please. I shall look after supper.”

Dmitry opened the folder on his phone.

“I shall choose now.”

“No. After supper.”

“Why?”

“Because you have only just got home as well. And because if you start now, in ten minutes there will not be food on this table but twenty-seven photographs.”

“Three.”

“Twenty-seven first. Then nine. Then you will find an old shoot and say the composition is better there.”

“The composition really is better there.”

“After supper, Dima.”

He put the phone face down.

“Very well.”

Requests were rarely beautiful. They needed no particular tone and did not turn an evening into a proof of closeness. Most often one person simply told the other where his presence was required and how much room it would take.

At the table Ksyusha remembered the organiser’s letter.

“I need you to look at their page today.”

Dmitry raised his eyes to her.

“Today I shan’t manage it properly.”

The answer came calmly, and Ksyusha still felt a brief inward

resistance. She was ready to say that it was only a matter of ten minutes, and noticed in time: she had already taken those ten out of his evening in her own mind.

“When will you be able to?”

“Tomorrow after eleven. I shall give you an opinion before midday.”

“I should like to answer them sooner.”

“Then look at it yourself and ask me something specific. One question I may be able to answer now.”

Ksyusha opened the page on her phone. Photographs of a small hall, posters of chamber evenings, several video recordings. She wanted Dmitry to check everything: the venue, the people, the quality of the sound, past programmes, the offer itself. The word “look” conveniently hid a whole piece of work.

“One question,” she repeated. “Does it trouble you that they did not write to you?”

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“They are inviting you.”

“We usually perform together.”

“Usually, yes. But the letter came to you.”

She put the phone away.

“Very well. The rest tomorrow.”

“If it is still needed by then.”

The refusal did not spoil the evening. It left a task unsettled, and nothing more. Dmitry was not obliged to prove his warmth

by immediate readiness, nor Ksyusha to guess his limit and keep quiet. The request had acquired a boundary, and the answer the right to be other than what she had wanted.

After supper they went back to the study. Dmitry opened the folder of photographs and, as Ksyusha had predicted, first selected twenty-four.

“You could not find twenty-seven?” she asked.

“I ruled three out immediately.”

They cut the choice down to five. In two Ksyusha was looking into the lens, in the third she was turned towards the microphone, and in two more they were standing together. For the announcement of a solo offer her portrait was the more logical, but she did not want to choose a photograph purely by function.

“This one,” Ksyusha said.

“Your hand is cut off there.”

“But the face is mine.”

“It is yours in the others too.”

“There I am trying to look at it correctly.”

Dmitry enlarged the picture.

“This one, then.”

He moved the file into the folder for sending.

The phone vibrated again. Marina was asking for a short note about Ksyusha — no more than three hundred and fifty characters.

“We have a general text,” Dmitry said, and opened the folder

of earlier materials.

“The general one is about us.”

“It can be shortened.”

“Then it will come out again that I exist after the word ‘together with’.”

He took his hand off the mouse.

“Write it yourself.”

Ksyusha opened a blank document.

The first line came unexpectedly hard. Inside the house she did not have to define who she was in music. In the studio it was understood from the work. For an unknown organiser she had to name herself in a few sentences, without claiming experience she did not yet have and without diminishing what had already been done.

She wrote:

“Kseniya Rusova — singer, participant in the authored musical projects of Nexxe.”

She read it and made a face.

“What?”

“‘Participant in projects’ sounds as though I turn up to something already made.”

“Sometimes you do turn up to something already made.”

“And sometimes I change half of it.”

“Then write that more exactly.”

Ksyusha replaced the line:

“Kseniya Rusova — singer. Works with original songs and

duet material, takes part in creating the vocal parts and the stage form.”

“Too serious?” she asked.

“Are you asking me to judge the tone or to rewrite it?”

“To judge the tone.”

“Restrained. Nothing invented.”

“And do we keep ‘singer’?”

“You sing.”

“But I am not a professional singer.”

“It does not say ‘professional’.”

Ksyusha added one sentence about the song they were releasing and stopped.

“Count the characters, please.”

Dmitry switched on the statistics.

“Two hundred and ninety-eight.”

“Read it aloud. Only read it.”

He did exactly as asked. On the second sentence Ksyusha heard a heavy repetition of the word “original” and changed it herself.

“Now?”

Dmitry read it again.

“Now we send it.”

“That is already a decision made for me.”

“Then: now the text fits, reads evenly and promises nothing extra.”

“That is better.”

Ksyusha saved the note under her own name and added it to the package. The general text stayed in the folder for other purposes; she had not had to destroy what was shared in order to name what was separate.

“Wait. Did you agree because you were tired of arguing?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Ksyusha, if the right answer has already been assigned, why ask?”

She held her hand over the mouse.

“I want to know whether you really do agree.”

“I really do agree. The cut-off hand can be dealt with by cropping. The expression matters more.”

Ksyusha nodded.

“Now I believe you.”

“And before the explanation?”

“I was checking.”

“That is a different action.”

“How?”

Dmitry moved back from the desk.

“A request makes a wish visible. A check hides the wish and assigns the right answer in advance.”

“And an order?”

“Leaves no answer at all.”

“Sometimes an order is more honest.”

“Sometimes. Especially if a person has the right to give it.”

“And at home?”

“At home we can say: I need exactly this answer just now. That is honest too. But then one should not pretend to be asking an opinion.”

Ksyusha looked at the chosen photograph.

“So if I have decided in advance what your answer should be, I am telling you your part in a scene that is already written.”

“Yes.”

“And getting angry if you muddle the line.”

“Although you never showed me the play.”

She smiled, then grew more serious.

“But surely taking part need not always begin after a request.”

“Of course not. I can notice something and offer. You can accept or refuse.”

“And if you did not notice?”

“Then you have a choice: say so, or leave me outside that task.”

The sentence came out harder than he had probably intended. Ksyusha wanted to object, but went back in her mind to the request that he look at the whole page. If Dmitry had agreed silently, she would have had help. But he would never have learned what had actually frightened her: not the quality of the venue but the possibility of standing there without the usual shared name on the poster.

“I do not want to decide about the performance alone,” she said.

“That is a different request.”

“Yes.”

“Put it into words.”

Ksyusha closed the folder of photographs.

“Tomorrow look at the materials and tell me whether you see a place for me there. Do not decide whether to accept. And do not put a programme together until I ask you to.”

“By twelve.”

“By twelve.”

“And now?”

She thought.

“Now help me finish the package. Then we both leave the study.”

They opened the list. Beside each item Dmitry put a name. The master and the technical data stayed with him. The photograph and the final answer to the organiser with Ksyusha. The text of the announcement was shared, but she was to send it. One item they removed altogether: the additional description turned out to be needed by nobody.

At the bottom of the form was a field marked “performer role”. In documents of this kind Dmitry had previously filled in the technical lines entirely: author, composer, lead vocal, additional vocal, rights holder. It saved time and almost never caused an argument.

Ksyusha opened the drop-down list.

“There is only ‘main artist’ and ‘featured performer’.”

“For this form, choose featured.”

She did not click.

“Why?”

“The release comes out under my name.”

“And the vocal part?”

“Yours.”

“Then does the form describe the owner of the release or the work in the song?”

Dmitry read the note under the field again. The wording turned out to be vague.

“The shop window, rather. If two main artists are chosen, the aggregator will create a joint release in both profiles.”

“And if featured?”

“You will appear in the title and the credits, but the release will stay in my catalogue.”

“What do we want?”

He could have answered at once. Musical strategy was his familiar territory, and every option had consequences for the catalogue. But the question was not only about strategy.

“I want the song to come out in my project and your voice to be named without any diminishing,” Dmitry said. “And you?”

Ksyusha opened the two previous entries and compared the display.

“For this song, featured performer. But in the description we write not ‘additional vocal’ but ‘vocal’.”

“Agreed.”

“And the name in full.”

“Yes.”

She selected the field herself.

The next line required confirmation of the performer’s permission for the recording to be used. Dmitry moved the laptop across to Ksyusha.

“Your confirmation goes here.”

“We recorded it together.”

“That does not cancel the permission.”

Ksyusha read the text to the end, ticked the box and entered the date.

A working request proved more exact than trust by default. Dmitry was not to assume agreement simply because a voice had been recorded in a shared song; Ksyusha was not obliged to take a formality as mistrust.

As the last line Ksyusha added: “Page of the chamber evenings — look at it together, tomorrow, 11:00”.

“Is that a request or a diary entry?” Dmitry asked.

“An agreed time.”

“Then put half past eleven.”

“Why?”

“At eleven I shall still be answering letters.”

She corrected the time.

At half past nine the package went to Marina. Ksyusha closed the mail, Dmitry switched off the monitor. On the table there remained a sheet with the tasks divided up: no arrows, no hidden expectations, no work one of them had quietly assigned to the

other.

At the door of the study Ksyusha stopped.

“Tomorrow you may say that you do not like the venue.”

“I may.”

“And that it is too early for me.”

“If that is what I think.”

“Then I may not agree with you.”

“That fits inside a request as well.”

She closed the door.

On the sheet behind her there remained exactly what they had agreed. Everything else was still to be decided.

Chapter Two

Not My Story

At twenty-eight minutes past eleven the next day Dmitry came into the study with two glasses of water.

“Early,” Ksyusha said.

“You have two minutes to change your mind.”

“I no longer want to.”

She moved over, clearing a place for him in front of the monitor. Ksyusha had already studied the page of the chamber evenings herself. She had written out the address, the names of the organisers, the length of the programmes and what remained unclear. The more she learned, the less the offer resembled a distant stage on which unknown people were waiting for a faultless voice from her. It was a small hall of sixty seats, an old grand piano, a plain poster, filming from a single camera. The audience sat close.

Dmitry read her notes, watched two of the recordings and opened the technical description of the venue.

“There is a place for you there,” he said.

“And the sound?”

“That will have to be clarified. On the old video the vocal is buried.”

“Is it too early for me?”

He looked at the screen once more.

“For a large programme of your own, yes. For two songs in an evening like that, no.”

Ksyusha took the answer without relief and without offence. He had not taken the decision off her; he had only marked out the scale on which he could see the work as possible.

“Then I shall answer today.”

The phone lying beside the keyboard vibrated briefly.

Ksyusha looked at the screen and stopped hearing what Dmitry was saying about requesting a technical rider.

The name was so familiar that at first it seemed a mistake.

Vera.

For eight years the name had existed separately from the person. It turned up on the backs of old photographs, in stories about university, in the memory of a hostel corridor and a summer bus stop beside the building. Ksyusha said it rarely, and always in the past tense.

Now under the name stood a message:

“I shall be in town on Tuesday. If you are ready, we can meet.”

No greeting. No explanation of why now. No promise that the conversation would be an easy one.

“What has happened?” Dmitry asked.

Ksyusha turned the phone towards him.

He read it and handed it back.

“That Vera?”

“Yes.”

He knew the name. Not the story. Ksyusha had shown him

university photographs, told him how she and Vera used to be late for the first lecture, shared what money they had until the grant came, copied out other people's lecture notes at night. When he asked why they had stopped speaking, she answered briefly: we went our separate ways after graduating.

Formally that even sounded true. Except that graduating had nothing to do with it.

"Has she written before?" Dmitry asked.

"Never."

"Have you?"

"Twice. But I sent nothing."

He waited for her to go on. He did not push her and did not pretend that the answer was enough for him. Ksyusha closed the page of the venue. The two subjects did not fit side by side on one screen.

"In our final year Vera wanted to leave the university," she said. "She was sick of the hostel, of the studying, of the endless rows with her parents. She was going to collect her papers and go to her aunt. She was only thinking about it. She had not even handed in an application."

"She told you?"

"Only me. And asked me not to tell anybody."

Until that year their friendship had rested not on great declarations but on daily reliability. Vera had a spare key to Ksyusha's room. Ksyusha knew where her documents were kept and whom to ring if she did not come back by night. They shared

money until the grant came, covered for each other in front of the lecturers only where it did not require lying, and could go weeks without saying the word “trust”, because it existed in the nature of things.

When Vera talked about the rows with her parents, Ksyusha never passed the conversation on. So that evening she did not have to prove separately that a secret could be left with her.

“Where did she tell you?”

“In the hostel laundry. It was noisy there; nobody could hear. She was sitting on the window ledge holding a folder of documents.”

“Had she already collected them?”

“She had only written down what would be needed. She had not even gone for the application form.”

Vera spoke not like a person who has made a decision but like one who has needed for the first time to say a possibility aloud. She went through the options: go to her aunt, take a year out, find work, finish the term and decide in the summer. Ksyusha listened for over an hour.

“What did she ask of you?”

“Not to interfere. And not to tell anybody anything until she had decided herself what to do.”

“And you decided that not interfering meant leaving her alone.”

“Yes. It seemed to me that a real friend was obliged to interfere.”

Dmitry set the water down on the table.

“And you told.”

Ksyusha nodded.

“My mother.”

“Why her?”

“She knew Vera’s parents. I thought my mother would know what to do.”

“So you wanted advice?”

“I suppose. No.” Ksyusha rubbed the edge of the phone case with her thumb. “Honestly, I wanted somebody to stop Vera. It seemed to me that she was ruining her life and I was standing beside her doing nothing.”

“Did you ask your mother to keep the conversation between you?”

“It never even occurred to me what would come next.”

Her mother rang Vera’s parents the same day. By the evening they had come to the hostel. Almost the whole floor heard the row. The father demanded that Vera pack her things; the mother wept and asked what the daughter had done this to them for. Vera was taken home; a week later she came back to her classes and did finish the university after all.

After that Vera stopped speaking to Ksyusha.

“Once I went up to her outside a lecture room,” Ksyusha went on. “I said I had been frightened for her. That I had meant it for the best. I even asked her to look at the situation through my eyes one day.”

“And did you look at it through hers?”

“Much later.”

She remembered no shouting — Vera had not shouted. She had stood by the window with the folder pressed to her chest and listened. Then she asked:

“Do you understand that I now have to explain myself to everybody, although I have not decided anything?”

Ksyusha answered that at least Vera had not made a mistake.

Vera gave a half-smile then. A very brief one.

“You have decided that for me as well.”

“After that she walked away,” Ksyusha said. “I tried to approach her several more times. She walked past. At the graduation ceremony we were in the same hall and did not even say hello.”

Dmitry did not say that they had both been young. Did not remind her how many years had passed. Such phrases might have made her shame smaller, but they would have made what Vera had lived through smaller with it.

“Do you want to meet her?” he asked.

“I do not know.”

“Then what do you want from her message?”

Ksyusha read one line again.

“For it to turn out that she forgave me long ago.”

“That is an honest answer.”

“And a bad one.”

“A convenient one for you.”

She got up, went to the shelves and took down a thin grey folder. It held old papers: a university contract, copies of a diploma, a few certificates. Between them lay two folded sheets.

Dmitry understood before she unfolded the first.

“Those letters?”

“Yes.”

“Will you show me?”

Ksyusha read the beginning herself.

“Vera, all this time I have been trying to understand why you did not give me a chance to explain...”

She stopped.

“The very first line.”

“What about it?”

“I am asking her for a chance to explain. As though the problem were that she had misunderstood me.”

Below came words about fear, friendship and the best of intentions. Ksyusha called what she had done a mistake, but accompanied every admission with a reason. She seemed to be agreeing to be guilty only on condition that the court took mitigating circumstances into account.

The second letter had been written two years later. There were no excuses in it. Instead, on almost every page, it repeated how hard Ksyusha found it to live with the loss, how often she remembered Vera and how badly she needed forgiveness.

“Here I already understand everything,” Ksyusha said. “And I am still talking only about myself.”

Dmitry took the letter only after she had held it out to him.

“You are asking her to make your past bearable.”

“Harsh.”

“Untrue?”

“True.”

He gave the sheet back.

“I can say that you have changed. I can remind her how much time has passed. I can list everything for which I trust you. But Vera is not obliged to accept my testimony.”

“I am not asking her to.”

“Not now.”

Ksyusha caught the emphasis.

“Do you think I shall ask at the meeting?”

“I think you will want to do something, anything, to make it stop hurting sooner. The question is for whom.”

She sat down again. In front of her were a message, two letters and an answer to the organiser that had not yet been sent. In the morning it had seemed to her that the hard decision would be the performance. Now it looked clear, if only because it concerned her own readiness.

“If I meet her, what am I to say?”

“I do not know.”

“Not at all?”

“It is your story with Vera. I can listen to what you want to say to her. But I have no suitable words in your place.”

“You always find words.”

“For myself.”

Ksyusha folded the letters along their old creases.

“I am afraid I shall start making excuses.”

“Then tell her beforehand: if you start making excuses, let her stop you.”

“After I broke her boundaries, am I to ask her to police me as well?”

Dmitry nodded.

“Fair. Then stop yourself, the moment you notice.”

“Exhaustive advice.”

“But the responsibility stays with you.”

She wanted to smile and could not.

“And if she has asked me there to say she still hates me?”

“Then you will hear it.”

“And that is all?”

“What else have you the right to demand?”

Ksyusha laid a palm over the folded sheets.

“Nothing.”

For several minutes they sat in silence. A washing machine was running beyond the wall; out on the landing somebody turned a key twice. The building went on with its own sounds, not adjusting itself to a message out of the past.

Dmitry was the first to go back to the computer.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Why?”

“So that you can answer alone.”

Ksyusha thought.

“Stay. Only do not read over my shoulder.”

“Very well.”

He opened the technical description of the venue. Ksyusha tapped the reply field.

First she wrote: “I have wanted to talk for a long time.” Deleted it. That sentence immediately required an explanation of why, in that case, she had said nothing for eight years.

Then: “Thank you for writing.” Deleted that too. The gratitude sounded as though Vera had already made her a present.

What was left was to name the action.

“Yes, I am ready to meet. Please write where and at what time suits you.”

Ksyusha read it through.

“Dima.”

He turned from the monitor.

“May I show you?”

She held out the phone herself.

Dmitry read it.

“There is room in it for her answer.”

“Shall I send it?”

“Are you asking me or checking me?”

Ksyusha took the phone back.

“Asking your opinion.”

“I should send it.”

“But the decision is mine.”

“Yes.”

She pressed the arrow.

The message appeared in the conversation at once. Beneath it a grey mark came up, then a second.

Vera was somewhere on the other side of those marks, and was not answering yet.

Ksyusha put the old letters back in the folder. She did not throw them away: it would have been too easy to take the destruction of paper for a corrected past. She put the folder back in its place.

“And the venue?” Dmitry asked.

She opened the mail again.

“To the venue I shall say yes. Two songs. I shall propose a programme later.”

“Do you need help?”

“For now — send the technical questions. In my name.”

“I shall.”

He wrote the task down on the list.

At half past twelve Vera answered with the address of a small café and a time. With no additional words.

The meeting was set for Tuesday, six in the evening.

A minute later another message came:

“Will you be alone?”

Ksyusha read the question and felt herself automatically looking for a safe answer. She could write that Dmitry would only be seeing her there. That he would be somewhere nearby.

That Vera would not have to talk to him.

Not one of these possibilities had been discussed. Ksyusha had already placed Dmitry beside the meeting in her own mind, because bearing her own guilt was easier with him near.

She answered:

“Yes. Alone.”

“Vera asked whether I shall come alone,” she said.

“And what did you answer?”

“That I shall.”

Dmitry nodded.

“I did not ask you not to come, after all.”

“Nor did you ask me to.”

“Did you not want to offer at all?”

“I did.”

“Why did you not offer, then?”

“Because then you would have had to settle the question of my presence as well. Deal with your own first.”

Ksyusha put the phone down.

“I think I should like to know that you are somewhere close.”

“I can meet you afterwards.”

“No. That would turn the conversation into a road towards your waiting as well. I shall write when I set off home.”

“Very well.”

She opened a new document and named it with the date of the meeting.

First she wrote down everything she meant to say: that she had

been frightened for Vera, that she had been young, had trusted her mother and had not imagined the consequences. What came out was almost a third letter — more grown-up in form, but still built round Ksyusha's reasons.

She deleted the text.

On the clean page she left four lines:

"I told what I had promised to keep.

After that other people gained power over your decision.

I justified what I did by a good intention.

I am ready to hear the consequences and not to argue."

Underneath she added a separate list:

"Do not say: 'I wanted to help'; 'I suffered too'; 'at least you finished the university'; 'we were both young'."

"Are you preparing a speech?" Dmitry asked.

"Limits."

"Will you show me?"

Ksyusha turned the screen towards him.

He read it and stopped at the last line.

"Why can you not say that you were both young?"

"Because that makes what we each did equally small. And the consequences were not equal."

"Agreed."

"I shall not take the sheet to the meeting."

"Why not?"

"If I forget it all without the sheet, it means I have come to explain myself again."

She saved the document but did not print it. The preparation did not make the conversation predictable; it only removed a few habitual routes of escape.

Her mother rang the same day. Among the questions about work, food and plans for the week, Ksyusha said that she would be seeing Vera on Tuesday.

“That Vera?” her mother asked again. “You have not spoken for so many years. Has she come back?”

“She will be in town for one day.”

“And why did you two go your separate ways in the end?”

Ksyusha looked at the grey folder on the shelf.

“Mum, I shall tell you later.”

Her mother held a pause, then moved on to another subject. The question, however, remained between them and had now been given a term as well — though as yet without an exact date.

Now the past existed not only in the account Dmitry knew. It had been given a place, an hour and a person who might remember all of it differently.

Chapter Three

Not About You

By Monday the organisers of the chamber evening had confirmed two songs and sent a date.

Ksyusha read the letter in the morning, answered it herself and only then forwarded it to Dmitry. They had a studio session that evening: material for another release, long since scheduled, had to be finished. The performance had nothing to do with it as yet, but after the letter everything Ksyusha did with her voice sounded different to her. In a few weeks a recording would stop being the only place where a phrase could be put right before anyone heard it.

There were four people in the control room. The sound engineer worked at the main monitor. Dmitry sat to the right, going through notes on the mix. Marina was checking file names and the data for release. Ksyusha stood by the wall with a tablet while the last chorus came through the speakers.

On the final line she raised a hand.

“Stop it, please.”

The sound engineer pressed the space bar.

“What did you hear?”

“The end of the word fell forward.”

He took the recording back a few seconds.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

On its own the passage sounded clean. The consonants were in place, the note did not sag. There was no technical error.

“Nobody will notice it in the full recording,” the sound engineer said.

“I noticed.”

“That is a different criterion.”

“Today it is mine.”

He looked at Dmitry.

“What do you say?”

“That a new take will cost three minutes.”

“If there is only one.”

Ksyusha picked up the tablet.

“One passage. I do not promise a result.”

“Now those are honest terms,” the sound engineer answered. She went into the booth.

Unlike at the first session, nobody now asked whether Ksyusha was capable of hearing the difference. Her right to a take had become part of the work. The argument was about the cost: a few minutes, a new track, the possible need to rebuild the join. Small decisions had a price as well, and respect for a voice did not cancel a schedule.

The sound engineer switched on the talkback.

“I shall give you two bars. Off we go.”

Ksyusha finished the first new version more softly, but the middle of the line lost its support.

“One more,” she said herself.

“You promised a passage, not a take. Formally the agreement has not been broken.”

“Using the small print?”

“I learn from the best.”

The second version came out even. Ksyusha took off one cup of the headphones and looked questioningly through the glass.

The sound engineer raised a thumb.

“Come out. We shall compare.”

She hung up the headphones, closed the text on the tablet and stayed behind in the booth to answer a call. Through the glass it could be seen that Ksyusha was listening with the phone pressed to her ear, but her words were not audible in the control room.

The sound engineer saved both takes.

“The listener will not understand the difference anyway.”

“He does not have to understand how it is made,” Dmitry said.

“I am not arguing. I simply want to know how much time to allow next time.”

He zoomed in on the track and marked the end of the line.

“Does she always take that long to choose?”

The question sounded matter-of-fact. Without mockery, more the working curiosity of a man who has to budget a session. That made it all the easier to answer for Ksyusha.

“Ask her,” Dmitry said.

“I am asking about your experience.”

“My experience will not tell you her decision next time.”

“But you do know how she works.”

“I do.”

“And?”

Dmitry looked at the booth. Ksyusha had finished the conversation, put the phone away and was already opening the door.

“And she is here.”

Ksyusha came into the control room.

“What have I missed?”

The sound engineer moved back a little from the desk.

“I am trying to work out how much time to allow for your vocal.”

“For mine, or for all our decisions?”

“Just now, for yours. Do you always take that long to choose an ending?”

Ksyusha moved her eyes to Dmitry. He did not indicate which part of the conversation should be considered offensive.

“Sometimes longer,” she answered. “And sometimes the first version is exact. If you need a guaranteed figure, allow two extra takes on difficult lines. Anything more, agree with me.”

The sound engineer nodded.

“That is what I needed.”

“You could have asked before the recording.”

“I could.”

“Why did you not?”

The sound engineer did not pretend not to understand the

question.

“Because I have worked with Dmitry longer. It is simpler to check expectations with him.”

“Simpler for whom?”

“For the schedule.”

“And for the next recording?”

He looked at the two new tracks.

“For the next one your answer is more use.”

“Then let us settle it now. If you think I am holding up the session, you tell me how much time is left and what exactly has to be accepted. You do not ask Dmitry whether I am being reasonable.”

“That is not how I put it.”

“I know. But the question about whether I always take a long time choosing was no longer about the track.”

The sound engineer acknowledged that with a short nod.

“Very well. For my part: if we have agreed on one passage and we start re-singing half the song, I stop it.”

“Fair.”

“And two extra takes do not turn into an endless number.”

“Not unless we agree separately.”

“Exactly.”

Dmitry listened and became neither an interpreter nor a judge. A working rule was arising between the people who would have to keep it at the next session.

He played three versions: the original, the first new one and

the second.

Ksyusha listened with her eyes closed. Dmitry watched the timeline. Marina, who had not intervened until then, noted something on her list.

“The middle is better in the original,” Ksyusha said. “The ending in the second. Shall we join them?”

“That is what I should do,” the sound engineer answered.

“Show me.”

He moved the short passage across, aligned the join and played the whole line.

“Again,” Ksyusha asked.

The sound engineer looked at the clock.

“We listen once more, then we take a decision.”

“That suits me.”

After the second playback Ksyusha agreed. Marina was given an exact duration, closed her laptop and left. Forty minutes of the session were left. The sound engineer started the export and went into the next room to check the backup.

The two of them were left in the control room.

Ksyusha put the tablet into her bag.

“He asked you first?”

“Yes.”

“Asked you what?”

“Whether you always take a long time choosing, and how much time he should allow.”

“And what did you say?”

“That he should ask you.”

She did up the zip.

“You could have answered.”

“I could.”

“You know the answer, after all.”

“I know only my own.”

“Then tell me yours.”

Dmitry turned his chair towards her.

“Sometimes you take a long time choosing.”

“How long?”

“Long enough for people to get tired of waiting.”

Ksyusha had expected a more careful formulation. For a second her face changed; then she glanced at the monitor.

“Which version is in the project name?”

“The eleventh.”

“And people do not get tired of waiting?”

“They do.”

“So in that we are alike.”

“Yes.”

“Only my eleventh version fits into three minutes.”

“Yours is in plain view.”

“And nobody saw your previous ten?”

“They saw them. They simply were not standing behind glass.”

Ksyusha sat down in the free chair.

“It comes out strangely. You agree with him, and you did not say so behind my back.”

“He was asking about you.”

“And if the answer is truthful?”

“The truth does not become my property simply because I noticed it.”

“You are avoiding an ordinary working question very handsomely just now.”

“No. He got an answer to the ordinary working question: two extra takes. That is enough for a schedule. The rest concerned your character.”

“And that cannot be discussed without me?”

“By me it can. With you.”

For a while Ksyusha studied her own track on the screen.

“We do discuss other people at home sometimes.”

“We do.”

“Then where is the line?”

Dmitry did not answer at once. A ready formula here would have been convenient and almost certainly false.

“In the purpose, I suppose. You can name what somebody did in order to take a decision. You can ask for advice if you cannot manage. And you can assemble a picture of a person while he is not there, because that is easier than asking him directly.”

“Was he assembling a picture today?”

“Looking for a short cut, rather.”

“And you?”

“Did not want to be that short cut.”

Ksyusha rested her elbows on her knees.

"If he had asked in front of me, would you have said that I take a long time choosing?"

"If you had asked for my opinion, yes."

"I have asked now."

"And I have said it."

"What else?"

"Sometimes you go on looking for a version after the problem has been solved."

She was silent, waiting for him to go on.

"Because you are afraid of letting out something that cannot be taken back," Dmitry added. "Sometimes that saves the work. Sometimes it only takes time."

Ksyusha nodded slowly.

"That was unpleasant."

"I know."

"But right."

"Possibly."

"Why possibly?"

"Because you know better what you were afraid of in the booth."

She looked through the glass at the empty microphone.

"Today — the stage."

"The one that has not even been arranged yet?"

"It has been arranged."

Ksyusha held out her phone with the letter open. The date was four weeks away.

“You answered?”

“This morning.”

“Why did you not say?”

“I wanted to get used to it myself first.”

He gave the phone back.

“Have you got used to it?”

“No. But it has happened already.”

The sound engineer came back with the drive.

“The backup is done. Shall we listen to the export?”

They put on headphones. The song ran from beginning to end.

The new ending did not draw attention to itself — it had become part of the whole, which was what it had been changed for.

After the playback the sound engineer took off his headphones.

“Do we accept it?”

He was looking at Ksyusha.

“We accept it,” she answered.

“Then I send it to Marina.”

While the file was uploading, Ksyusha wrote the date into her calendar. Dmitry saw the entry but did not propose a programme, rehearsals or a list of equipment. The day before, she had asked him not to do that without a separate conversation.

The sound engineer noticed the new entry.

“Is that the chamber evening?”

“Yes.”

“Shall I set aside a separate studio session for you to prepare?”

He was asking Ksyusha.

“A full session is not necessary. First I want to go through the order of the songs, the backing tracks and the transitions at home.”

“When?”

She opened the calendar. Earlier a question of this kind would almost automatically have passed to Dmitry: he knew the studio's workload better, and the technical scope, and the usual rhythm of the work. Now Ksyusha compared her own days with the windows on offer.

“Thursday after seven.”

“Seven is taken. I can give you from ten past eight until nine.”

“That suits me.”

“Will Dmitry be there?”

Ksyusha looked at him.

“I have an acceptance session for other material on Thursday,” he said. “I may not make it.”

She turned back to the sound engineer.

“Then we shall begin without him. We shall leave the duet song for the end.”

“Very well. Send the backing tracks in advance.”

“I shall send them tomorrow.”

The sound engineer entered the time in the studio schedule and sent the confirmation straight to Ksyusha.

“Will you really begin without me?” Dmitry asked, when the man had moved off to the computer.

“I shall.”

“And if I do not make it at all?”

“I shall go through my part. We can rehearse the duet separately.”

He did not promise that he would certainly cancel the acceptance session or find a way to come. Ksyusha did not need a proof that her first preparation mattered more than all his tasks. It was enough to know the conditions in advance and to build her own work so that Dmitry's absence did not cancel it.

“Only do not send me a list of exercises before Thursday,” she said.

“Not even one?”

“If I ask for it.”

“Understood.”

Out in the corridor Ksyusha said:

“I liked the fact that you stopped him.”

“I did not stop him.”

“Redirected him.”

“That is more exact.”

“But if you have an opinion about me, I want to know it.”

“Very well.”

“Not when somebody else asks.”

“When, then?”

Ksyusha pressed the button for the lift.

“When it concerns what we do together.”

“Even the unpleasant kind?”

“Especially.”

The doors opened. She went in first.

“Only say it to me straight,” Ksyusha added.

Dmitry went into the lift after her.

“I shall. To you first of all.”

Chapter Four

Vera

On Tuesday Ksyusha arrived twenty minutes early.

The café was on the ground floor of an old office building. Inside there were round tables on thin metal legs, a case of desserts turned slowly by the till, and music that nobody was listening to came from the speakers. Ksyusha chose a place by the wall, from where she could see the entrance.

While she waited, she opened the note three times; it held the one sentence she had written down:

“I broke your trust and took from you the right to decide for yourself what to do.”

There was nothing below it.

Dmitry had offered to listen if she wanted to rehearse the conversation. Ksyusha had refused. An apology tested in advance for how convincing it was would too easily have turned into a performance. At the meeting she had to hear a living person, not deliver a prepared text correctly.

Vera came in at six exactly.

Ksyusha recognised her at once, although her face had changed more than the photographs on social media suggested. Her hair was shorter. Her movements were calmer. Vera stopped at the entrance, found Ksyusha with her eyes and came over.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

They did not embrace.

Vera took off her coat and laid it on the next chair. She left her bag at her feet.

“Have you been waiting long?”

“Twenty minutes or so. I came early.”

“I see.”

A waitress came up. Vera ordered black tea, Ksyusha water. When they were alone again, both of them looked at the table, as though the beginning of the conversation were already lying there.

“Thank you for agreeing,” Vera said.

“You wrote.”

“Yes.”

“Why now?”

Vera ran her fingers along the strap of her bag.

“I was at my parents’. Sorting out my old things. I found a card from you and realised that I could now sit at the same table as you. That seemed enough to write.”

Not for a reconciliation. Not because it had all passed. Simply for the same table.

“I am glad you wrote,” Ksyusha said, and at once heard how the sentence pulled the conversation towards her own feeling. “But I understand that you did not do it to make things easier for me.”

Vera raised her eyes to her.

“Do you still correct yourself so much as you go?”

“Especially now.”

“I noticed.”

The water came. Ksyusha waited until the waitress had moved away.

“I want to say the main thing. I told my mother what you had trusted me with. After that she rang your parents. I broke your trust and took from you the right to decide for yourself what to do. I was wrong.”

Vera listened without interrupting.

Ksyusha could have added how often she had remembered that evening, how ashamed she had been, how twice she had written to her. All of it was true, and none of it changed anything in the act she had named.

“Is that all?” Vera asked.

“To begin with, yes.”

“Without ‘I meant well’?”

“Without.”

Vera gave a short nod.

“All right.”

Her tea came in a glass teapot. She poured a cup, tasted it and pushed the saucer away.

“Do you know what made me angriest back then?”

“That I told?”

“That too. But afterwards everyone decided the story had ended well. I stayed at the university, I got my degree. So your

panic had supposedly saved me from a mistake.”

Ksyusha remembered repeating that argument herself. First to Vera, then to herself.

“A degree justifies nothing,” she said.

“You understand that now.”

“Yes.”

“But back then you followed me down the corridor saying, ‘One day you will understand.’ My parents were already making me explain myself, and my tutor, and the hostel warden. And on top of that you demanded that I understand you.”

Ksyusha clenched her fingers under the table.

“I remember.”

“No,” Vera said. “You remember what you said. I remember what came after.”

She did not raise her voice. Because of that, every word kept its own weight.

After the scandal her parents rang Vera several times a day. Her father turned up without warning. Her mother demanded the number of every friend she meant to stay the night with. When Vera was late back from lectures, there were fresh accusations at home. The decision to stay at the university may indeed have been her own decision — only she had had to make it under supervision, among people convinced that she was ready to wreck her life.

“I stopped telling anyone anything I had not yet decided myself,” Vera said. “Even people I trusted. Because I thought:

they will take fright and start saving me again.”

“I am sorry.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“You always looked guilty when we ran into each other.”

Ksyusha lowered her eyes.

“I wrote two letters.”

“Why did you not send them?”

“In the first I justified myself. In the second I asked you to make me feel better.”

“Good that you did not send them.”

The answer was so direct that Ksyusha felt something close to relief. Here at least nothing had to be guessed.

“I have not come to ask that we be friends again,” she said.

Vera looked at her closely.

“Then what do you want?”

It was the same question Dmitry had asked. Only now, to dodge it would mean once again filling someone else’s time with her own remorse.

“To hear what happened to you after what I did. To say that I understand my responsibility. And not to argue with whatever you decide next.”

“A beautiful answer.”

“I prepared the first part.”

“And the second?”

“The second I had to understand just now.”

Vera sipped her tea.

At the next table a man was discussing a furniture delivery on the phone. Someone dropped a spoon by the till. The waitress put a fresh plate of pastries in the case. The world around them attached no special significance to their meeting, and there was honesty in that: eight years apart did not become a solemn scene simply because Ksyusha had at last learned to say the right words.

"I do not hate you," Vera said.

Ksyusha breathed out slowly.

"But I still find it hard to trust you."

The relief broke off before it could become hope.

"I understand."

"No, you do not. Not yet. We have been sitting here forty minutes. You are behaving carefully. Perhaps you really have changed. But trust is when I tell you something unfinished and do not wonder whom you will ring once we have parted."

"I shall not ring anyone."

Vera raised her eyebrows slightly.

Ksyusha heard her own promise and corrected herself:

"That is asking you to believe me straight away again."

"Yes."

"Then do not believe me."

"All right."

There was no cruelty in the answer. Vera was simply using the permission that, back then, no one had asked her for.

"Does Dmitry know?" she asked.

“That I told my mother — yes.”

“And the rest?”

Ksyusha did not pretend not to understand the question.

“He knows that your parents came to the hostel and that after that we stopped speaking. The calls and the checking up — you told me about those today.”

“Will you tell him?”

Her first answer was “of course”. Dmitry was her husband; with him she talked over whatever happened in her life. But closeness to him did not turn Vera’s words into family property.

“Only if you allow it. Or I shall say that I have heard about the consequences and leave the details to you.”

Vera stirred her tea with the spoon, although she had not added sugar.

“About my parents you may. And that I find it hard to trust. About my life now — no.”

“All right.”

“Would you really have asked?”

“After what happened between us I am obliged to.”

“You are not obliged. You could simply have decided that a husband may be told everything.”

Ksyusha held her gaze.

“I could.”

“That is why I am asking.”

Vera put the spoon back on the saucer.

“Did Dmitry want to come?”

“He did not offer. I told him I would be on my own.”

“Was he not hurt?”

“No.”

“A convenient man.”

“Sometimes very inconvenient. Today — spot on.”

Vera almost smiled.

This short exchange did not make Dmitry a party to the meeting. On the contrary, for the first time it clearly marked the line beyond which he remained. Vera knew which of her words would reach him and which would end at this table.

They finished their tea. Then they talked about the university — carefully, choosing memories that did not demand closeness. Vera said she sometimes saw two girls from their year. She asked how Ksyusha had come to music. Ksyusha answered briefly: Dmitry wrote songs, she had been offered the chance to try singing, and in time the work had become shared. She did not turn the story into a happy biography meant to prove what a good person she had become.

An hour later Vera looked at her watch.

“I must go.”

“Of course.”

They put on their coats and went out together. Outside it was cooler than Ksyusha had expected. At the entrance people went off in different directions the moment they crossed the threshold.

“May I write to you sometimes?” she asked.

Vera thought about it.

“You may.”

“You do not have to answer.”

“I know.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“What for this time?”

“For explaining your rights to you again.”

Vera smiled for the first time. Faintly, but without the old distance.

“Now that you have got right.”

Ksyusha smiled too.

“Then I shall just write. When I have something to say.”

“All right.”

There was still no embrace. Vera held out her hand. Ksyusha shook it without trying to hold on to it any longer.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Vera walked off towards the bus stop. Ksyusha stayed by the entrance and watched her go right up to the moment she realised what she was waiting for: that Vera might look back. Then she turned away herself and set off for the metro.

At home Dmitry was working in the study. He came out into the hall when he heard the key.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

He looked at her face, took her coat and hung it in the wardrobe.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“Later.”

“All right.”

Ksyusha took off her shoes, washed her hands and went through into the room. Dmitry went back to the computer. He did not ask whether Vera had forgiven her, did not offer to go over the conversation, did not try to read her face and prescribe her comfort.

A few minutes later she stopped in the study doorway of her own accord.

“Are you busy?”

“I can finish.”

“No need. May I sit down?”

Dmitry cleared the folders off the second chair.

“She has not forgiven me,” Ksyusha said.

He saved the file and only then turned round.

“Did she say so?”

“She said she does not hate me. And that she still finds it hard to trust me.”

“Those are different things.”

“Yes.”

Ksyusha told him about the parents, the calls, the sudden visits, about how for many years the degree had been used as proof that someone else's interference had been right. Some sentences she repeated almost word for word. Others she kept to herself. Vera had been talking to her, not to Dmitry; the right

to pass things on did not arise automatically out of the closeness of marriage.

“We agreed that I may write sometimes,” Ksyusha finished. “She need not answer.”

“Will you write?”

“When I have something to say.”

Dmitry’s phone rang. The screen showed: “Ksyusha’s Mum”.

Usually she rang her daughter. If Ksyusha was slow to pick up, she would call him and open the conversation by asking whether everything was all right with them. Ksyusha took her own phone out of her bag: two missed calls.

“Answer it,” she said.

Dmitry put it on speaker only after she nodded.

“Good evening.”

“Dima, hello. Where have you both vanished to? I keep ringing Ksyusha and she does not pick up.”

“She has only just come in.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Everything is all right.”

“Did Vera come? Did they meet?”

Ksyusha closed her eyes. She herself had mentioned the meeting a few days earlier and had now forgotten that for her mother the subject was not closed.

“They met,” Dmitry answered.

“Well, and how was it? Why did they stop speaking back then? Has Ksyusha told you?”

He looked at Ksyusha.

“She has.”

“So what happened?”

“It is not my story to tell.”

The line went quiet.

“I am not asking out of curiosity, you know.”

“I understand.”

“All right. Then put Ksyusha on.”

Ksyusha shook her head and mouthed: “Later.”

“She is tired,” Dmitry said. “She will ring you back tomorrow.”

“She might at least send a message. I worry.”

“She will.”

They said goodbye. Dmitry put the phone down on the desk.

“Did you cover for me?” Ksyusha asked.

“In the last sentence — yes. You did not say you would send a message.”

“I do not mean the message.”

“Then no.”

“You did not tell her, although you know I was to blame.”

“That changes nothing.”

“Why?”

“Because it is you who must tell her what you did. If I do it, your mother will have to discuss it with me, not with you.”

“You could have said I was not ready yet.”

“I could. But I do not know whether you are ready or not. So

I spoke only about my own right: I do not have it.”

Ksyusha remembered the studio and the question asked behind the glass.

“Not speaking for someone is not the same as protecting them.”

“Yes.”

“And it does not mean hiding the truth.”

“As long as the silence does not require a lie.”

“And if Mum asks you straight out whether I told her about Vera back then?”

“I shall tell her to ask you.”

“Redirecting again.”

“It is your conversation.”

Ksyusha picked up her phone. She opened the chat with her mother and wrote: “I am home. All is well. I shall ring tomorrow.”

The message was read at once. Three dots appeared, then vanished. Her mother made do with a heart.

“Tomorrow,” Ksyusha said.

“All right.”

“Will you be near?”

“If you ask me to.”

She thought about it.

“Be at home. But I shall talk to her on my own.”

The next day Ksyusha rang her mother after lunch. Dmitry was working in the study with the door closed. Before the call

she deliberately went into the other room: close enough to know he was there, and far enough for his presence not to become a second voice in the conversation.

Her mother asked first how the meeting had gone, then what Vera looked like, how long she was in town, where they had sat and why Ksyusha had not rung back in the evening. Ksyusha did not answer everything.

“Mum, we stopped speaking because of me.”

The conversation changed at once.

Ksyusha told only her own part: Vera had trusted her with a decision she had not yet made; Ksyusha had taken fright and passed it on to her mother; from there it had reached Vera’s parents.

“But I wanted to help,” her mother said.

“I know.”

“You were so upset. I thought her parents ought to know.”

“We both decided for her.”

Her mother was silent for a long time.

“Has she forgiven you?”

“I do not know. And I do not want to speak for her now.”

“And will she talk to me?”

“I shall not ask her to.”

“I could apologise.”

“If Vera wants, I shall pass on your number. I shall ask her first.”

It was hard for her mother to leave an action unfinished.

Several more times she came back to the fact that they had meant well, that Ksyusha had been crying back then, that Vera really could have dropped out. Ksyusha did not argue with the intentions and each time brought the conversation back to the act.

“Mum, I was the first to tell. It is my responsibility.”

By the time the call ended it was already getting dark outside. Dmitry did not come out straight away. Ksyusha sat alone for a while, then opened the study door herself.

“Done?”

“For now.”

“How is she?”

“Trying to understand how a good intention could do harm.”

“And you?”

Ksyusha stayed standing in the doorway.

“Trying not to demand that everyone understand it in one day.”

The phone vibrated in her hand.

A message had come from Vera:

“I got back safely. Thank you for not explaining yesterday.”

Ksyusha read it twice. She did not answer at once.

“Thank you for telling me everything straight.”

She added no question, no invitation, no promise to become a different person. She sent it and put the phone face down.

Two short sentences had appeared in the chat. It was too little for the old friendship and enough for a next message — if one were ever needed.

The following evening Ksyusha went back to the promise she had made to her mother.

She opened the chat with Vera and looked for a long time at the last messages. To ask about a conversation with her mother meant once again bringing Vera a task born of someone else's guilt. But to keep silent after a direct promise was not possible either.

Ksyusha wrote:

"I have told Mum my part of that story. She wants to apologise to you. I have not given her your number. If you ever want to talk to her, tell me. Nothing needs to be decided now."

Before sending it, she showed it to Dmitry.

"What am I checking?" he asked.

"Whether I have shifted onto Vera the job of calming Mum down."

He read it.

"The sentence 'Nothing needs to be decided now' still tells her how to take the message."

"Take it out?"

"I would."

Ksyusha deleted the last line and read it through again.

"Now it is just information and a possibility."

"Yes."

She sent it.

The answer came in the morning:

"Thank you for not giving her the number. I do not want to,

for now.”

Ksyusha wrote: “All right” — and stopped there. She rang her mother herself.

“I asked Vera. She does not want to talk now.”

“Did she say so in those words?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps if I wrote something short...”

“Mum, no.”

“I would not justify myself.”

“The question has been asked. The answer has been given.”

There was a pause on the line.

“All right,” her mother said. “Then I shall not.”

The agreement cost her an effort, but she did not ask for the number in secret, did not try to find Vera through acquaintances and did not return to the subject again that day.

Three days later Vera sent a photograph of the university courtyard. In the picture the old fence was being replaced; beyond it stood the building outside which they used to wait for each other after lectures.

Under the photograph it said:

“They got rid of it after all.”

Ksyusha could have answered with a dozen shared memories. She chose one:

“We used to say it would outlive the university.”

Vera replied with a laughing face.

The conversation ended.

This brief exchange confirmed nothing. Vera might write again the next day, or never. But for the first time there was a memory between their messages that demanded neither judgment nor forgiveness.

Chapter Five

Our Sunday

On Friday Ksyusha's mother rang her at half past seven.

The conversation began with a question about whether she was disturbing her, and before Ksyusha could answer it had moved on to Sunday, a new recipe for a pie, the neighbour upstairs and a box of old photographs found in a cupboard. Ksyusha listened, sitting on the edge of the sofa. From the study came the uneven tapping of keys: Dmitry was finishing the description of a release.

"By two?" she asked. "Mum, I shall talk to Dima first."

On the line there followed an explanation that the invitation was of course meant for them both, that nothing special would be cooked, although Ksyusha knew perfectly well that it would, and that they could come at any time, but by two would be better all the same.

"I shall answer this evening. Yes, today. I promise."

She ended the call and did not go to the study. The door was ajar, but an open door did not mean a free person. Ksyusha put a question mark in the calendar beside Sunday and got on with her own things.

At about the same time the sound engineer wrote to Dmitry:

"The studio is free on Sunday. From twelve till four we can finish the edit in peace and check the master on the big monitors.

Does that suit?"

Dmitry read the message, opened the calendar and saw an empty line.

It was empty only to an outsider's eye.

A few weeks earlier they had agreed to keep one Sunday free of separate work promises. Sometimes they went away, sometimes they stayed at home, sometimes each of them got on with their own things in the same flat. The point was not a compulsory programme. The day belonged to them both in advance, and so neither could dispose of it alone.

"I shall answer this evening," Dmitry wrote.

At eight he came out of the study. Ksyusha was sitting at the table with the calendar open.

"Mum has invited us on Sunday," she said. "By two."

"I have been asked to the studio. From twelve till four."

"Have you said yes?"

"Not yet."

"Nor have I."

Dmitry sat down opposite her. Between them lay a Sunday that had not yet been promised to anyone and was already no longer free.

"Do you want to go to your mother's?" he asked.

"I do. We have not been for a long time. And she has found the photographs. That is evidently an event in itself."

"Judging by the length of the call, a state occasion."

"You heard?"

“Only the intonation.”

Ksyusha smiled.

“And do you want to go to the studio?”

“Yes. There the work can be finished in one session. Otherwise we shall have to look for a window again.”

Both wishes were real. So neither could be declared a trifle for the sake of an easy decision.

“We could go to the studio first and then to Mum’s,” Ksyusha said.

Dmitry opened the route. From the studio to her mother’s house was a little over an hour.

“If we finish at four on the dot, we shall get there after five. If we run late, she will spend the whole day waiting and warming up lunch.”

“Even for two o’clock she will start warming it up at twelve.”

“All the more reason.”

“I can go on my own.”

“You can.”

Ksyusha waited for him to go on.

“But?” she asked.

“No ‘but’. You can go on your own.”

“I wanted you to be with me.”

“Then that changes the problem.”

“Why did I have to say it separately? She invited us both.”

“Because your mother’s invitation and your wish are different things. To the first I can answer out of politeness. To the second

I answer you.”

Ksyusha looked at the calendar.

“Very well. I want us to go together.”

“I want to go with you too.”

“And the studio?”

“I shall ask about Saturday.”

He picked up his phone but did not write at once.

“Only let us not have a beautiful sacrifice,” Ksyusha said. “If Saturday does not work, we shall decide again. I do not want to find out afterwards that the work was put back a week because of a Sunday lunch.”

“And I do not want you to go alone just because my schedule seems more important.”

“Sometimes it objectively is more important.”

“A particular piece of work — perhaps. My time in general — no.”

Dmitry wrote:

“I can come on Saturday after four. If the studio is taken, we shall keep Sunday and I shall confirm separately.”

The answer came a few minutes later. Saturday suited; they could start at half past four.

“Is that all right for you?” Ksyusha asked.

“Yes. On Saturday I only have some work at home in the morning.”

“Then shall we answer?”

Dmitry confirmed the studio. Ksyusha rang her mother.

“Mum, we shall be there by two.”

She moved the phone away from her ear and looked at Dmitry.

“No, we shall not bring anything. Mum. Mum, I know. All right. Tell me what you need. No, we are not bringing three bags either.”

Dmitry listened with the unruffled expression that appeared on his face whenever a conversation could no longer be steered and could only be lived through.

“What did she say?” he asked after the call.

“That nothing is needed. Then she listed butter, apples and some baking tin she left with us.”

“We have her tin?”

“Apparently we do now.”

He entered the studio on Saturday. Beside Sunday Ksyusha wrote: “Mum, 14:00”.

The rest of the day was left without a programme.

On Saturday morning each of them got on with their own things.

Dmitry prepared the session for checking: he put together the master, an alternative version and several short fragments on which the differences could be heard best. Ksyusha went through her vocal exercises, finished the text of her introduction and sorted out the clothes she meant to try at the next rehearsal at home.

At half past three they had lunch.

“What time will you be back?” Ksyusha asked.

“If there are no surprises — by nine.”

“And if there are?”

“I shall write.”

“All right.”

She was not going to wait by the door, and she did not ask him to guarantee a time he could not control in the studio. All she needed was a clear line of contact so that she could plan her own evening.

The professional studio came free twenty minutes late. The musician before them was listening through an export and twice sent the sound engineer back to the ending of the track. Dmitry did not hurry them. His session began later than planned, but it remained separate working time, not a continuation of the shared day at home.

In the control room he laid out the files in the order they were to be checked.

“Let us start with the two masters,” said the sound engineer. “Then we shall see whether there is time for the experiment.”

“The experiment is not essential. The main thing is to sign off this version.”

The first listen went through without stopping. On the big monitors the difference that at home was noticeable only in headphones became clearer: in one version the bottom of the arrangement sounded denser but took space away from the voice; in the other the vocal stayed freer, though a few beats seemed weaker.

They played the fragments one after another.

“On small speakers the dense version will win,” said the sound engineer.

“And as a whole?”

“As a whole it will tire people sooner.”

Dmitry asked him not to explain any further and listened to both versions again. He chose the second.

“Then let us bring the punch back a little in two places,” he said. “Not the whole low end.”

The change took less than ten minutes. The second check revealed another flaw: in one transition a short sound that had been almost inaudible at home stood out sharply here.

“On a quiet Sunday session we would have found that at once,” the sound engineer remarked.

“We have found it now as well.”

The remark did not defend the decision about the family day. Dmitry simply saw no point in turning the schedule into a conversation about right and wrong sacrifices.

By seven they had a new version ready. It still had to be checked on the second pair of monitors and in headphones. After that they could either finish or open a test project for new equipment that made it possible to control the depth of different groups of sounds separately. It was for the sake of that test that the sound engineer had originally suggested Sunday.

“We have an hour or a little more,” he said. “If we are quick, we can try.”

Dmitry looked at the checklist.

“Export and backup first. If there is time left — we shall try.”

He wrote to Ksyusha: “I shall be late. Probably till half past nine.”

The answer came almost at once: “All right. Then I shall finish my sheets. Write when you leave.”

Ksyusha did not ask whether the delay meant they had been wrong to choose the Sunday visit. Dmitry did not add that he was working longer “because of Mum”. They had agreed the Saturday session together, but inside the studio responsibility for how it went belonged to him.

The export turned up a click. It was not in the project, and it had not been in the previous version. They exported the file again — the click was still there.

The sound engineer checked the edit point.

“Not here.”

They switched off the groups of tracks one by one until they found an effect automation that fired a fraction of a second early during export. They fixed it, exported the file again, listened to the passage, then to the whole track.

The clock showed 20:47.

“We are not testing the new equipment now,” Dmitry said.

“We could at least load the project.”

“Then we shall start and stop halfway.”

“On Sunday we would have had four hours.”

“We would.”

Dmitry saved the list of future checks. The opportunity had not disappeared, but it no longer fitted into this session. He accepted the limit without irritation at the family, the studio or himself.

The finished master was copied to two drives and to the working storage. Dmitry checked that the file sizes matched, and only then closed the project.

He wrote to Ksyusha from the corridor: "Out. All finished."
She answered: "Waiting at home."

When Dmitry came back after nine, Ksyusha's printed introductions lay on the table with her own notes on them. She had not spent the evening waiting on his work, nor had she left her own tasks undone as proof of devotion.

"Did it all work?" she asked.

"Yes."

"The experiment?"

"No time. We shall reschedule it."

"A pity?"

"A pity about the time. The master is ready."

"Then the main thing is done."

Ksyusha did not say, "But tomorrow we are going to Mum's." That would have set one important thing against another and turned a shared choice into an exchange of debts.

"So tomorrow you will not be going back to the tracks in your head?"

"I shall. But I shall not open them."

“Accepted.”

On Sunday they arrived on time. Her mother opened the door before they rang, as though she had been standing in the hall all along.

“At last. I was beginning to think you had got stuck again. Dima, come in, do not just stand there. Ksyusha, why no scarf? There is a wind. I told you it would turn cold towards evening.”

She hugged her daughter, then Dmitry. She took the bag from him, looked inside and at once discovered that they had bought more apples than she had asked for.

“Why so many?”

“You said to get a kilo,” Ksyusha answered.

“This is clearly more.”

“Dima chose them.”

Her mother looked at him.

“Then they are good ones.”

“I did my best,” Dmitry said seriously.

Ksyusha took off her jacket and asked quietly:

“Why do I never get let off like that?”

“You are my own. More is expected of you.”

The table was already laid with dishes about which her mother had said in advance: “Nothing special.” She sat them down and in the first ten minutes managed to tell them about the repairs to the stairwell, the new cashier at the shop and a woman who had taken the wrong bus but had met a school friend because of it.

Dmitry ate and listened.

Dmitry would put a short question, and the story at once grew new details. He did not try to bring the conversation back to the point, and he did not let it be seen that there were too many details. Ksyusha's mother talked the way other people lay out family photographs on a table: without separating the main thing from the trifles, because for her it all belonged to one life.

Ksyusha knew that by the end of the visit Dmitry would be tired. He did not like to stay long inside an unbroken stream of someone else's speech. Yet he never once showed it to her mother. It was thanks to this woman that Ksyusha had come into the world. That alone was enough for Dmitry always to treat her with respect.

"I have talked your ears off, the pair of you," her mother said at last.

"That is what we came for," Dmitry answered.

"There, you see," she said to her daughter. "And you are always hurrying me."

"I do not hurry you. I sometimes remind you to breathe."

After lunch her mother brought a cardboard box from the other room. On the lid an inscription in blue felt-tip had faded: "Photos. Do not throw away."

"Here," she said. "I found it on the top shelf. I am not sorting this out on my own."

Ksyusha took off the lid. Inside lay envelopes from photo labs, several albums, school certificates, postcards and a small bag of negatives.

"It is all jumbled together."

"That is why I did not touch it. I might spoil the order."

"What order?"

"Mine."

Dmitry took one envelope and looked at the date.

"The negatives are better digitised separately. The photographs can be scanned at home."

"Do you have something to do it with?"

"We do."

"Then take the box."

Ksyusha at once put the lid back on.

"No. We are not taking it today."

Her mother took offence — not seriously, but noticeably.

"Why not?"

"Because this is not a bag of photographs. This is several months of work."

"I am not saying it has to be done in one evening."

"Tomorrow you will say, 'Well, how is it going?'"

"I shall not."

Ksyusha looked at her.

"All right, I shall say it in a week."

Dmitry ran his palm along the edge of the box.

"Let us choose one album first. We shall see how long the processing takes. Then we shall decide how to take the rest."

"There. Dima knows how to come to an agreement."

"Dima has just suggested the same as I did, only more calmly."

“Then learn from him.”

Ksyusha opened her mouth, but Dmitry was already taking out the top album.

“This one?”

Her mother sat down beside them.

“No, not that one first. Ksyusha is little in it, but the photographs are bad. Take the green one. Though wait, in the green one half the captions are muddled...”

For the next forty minutes they chose one album. Behind every photograph there turned out to be a person, a story or a detail without which her mother refused to let the picture go into the unknown. Dmitry started a note on his phone and wrote down names with dates. Ksyusha laughed at first, then joined in too: some places she remembered, others she had never seen.

In a picture by a river her mother was younger than Ksyusha was now. She stood barefoot on wet sand, holding the hand of a girl of about five.

“That is not me,” Ksyusha said.

“Of course it is not you. That is Lena.”

“Which Lena?”

The answer took another ten minutes.

When they got ready to go home, the green album lay in a separate bag. On the inside of the cover Ksyusha had stuck a sheet with the words: “To be returned. Not to be sorted without Mum.”

“Will you bring it back next Sunday?” her mother asked.

Ksyusha looked at Dmitry. He did not answer for both of them.

“First we shall see how much we can get done,” she said.
“Then we shall set a day.”

“Only do not drag it out.”

“Mum.”

“That is it, I am saying nothing.”

She went on talking all the way to the door.

Outside Ksyusha took Dmitry’s arm.

“Tired?”

“A little.”

“Why do you not tell her there is too much information?”

“Because she is your mother.”

“That is exactly why you can tell her straight.”

“It is not a question of whether she would understand. I do not want to re-educate her.”

“And can you tell me?”

“You I can. It was rather hard going.”

Ksyusha pressed against his shoulder for a few steps, then let go.

“Thank you for coming.”

“It was our decision.”

“Thank you all the same.”

In the evening they put the album by the scanner. They did not open it and did not turn the rest of Sunday into one more job. No note saying “family archive done” appeared in the calendar. Only

a new line appeared in the following week: "Assess one album."

One shared day had given rise to an obligation that had not existed that morning. But the obligation had not come into their life at the cost of time taken without asking. They had made room for it themselves.

The next evening they did open the green album after all.

It turned out to hold a hundred and eighty-four photographs. Some were held by old corner mounts, some were glued down for good. Under the pictures there were captions without a year, dates without names and names Ksyusha was seeing for the first time.

Dmitry examined the mountings.

"We take nothing out of the album until we understand how the paper is holding."

"Can we scan it a double page at a time?"

"We can. Then process each photograph separately."

"How long?"

"For this album — several evenings. If we do it carefully."

Ksyusha rang her mother and put her on speaker.

"Mum, there are almost two hundred pictures here."

"I said the album was big."

"You said, 'Take one.'"

"It is one."

"We shall do a trial ten photographs first. Then we shall decide how to go on."

"And when does it have to come back?"

Ksyusha looked at Dmitry. He shook his head, suggesting she should not name a date before the assessment.

“We shall tell you after the trial.”

“I just need to know.”

“So do we.”

Her mother wanted to go on but stopped.

“All right. Only do not lose the slip of paper between the pages.”

They found three slips.

After the call Dmitry created folders for the original scans, the working copies and the captions. Ksyusha started a table: page number, name, place, date, questions. In the first hour they processed eight pictures and realised that the main work would be not the scanning but the restoring of context.

In a photograph of a summer table Ksyusha's mother was young. Beside her stood people Ksyusha did not recognise.

“We shall have to invite Mum here,” she said.

“Or write down every question.”

“She will answer with twenty-minute voice messages.”

“Then better here.”

So the family archive gained not only a place in the calendar but a future way into their home. Not for an indefinite circle of relatives and acquaintances — for her mother, without whom the photographs remained a collection of faces.

At ten in the evening they closed the album. The table had eight rows filled in and twelve questions. Dmitry made a backup,

and Ksyusha wrote to her mother that the trial was finished.

The answer came at once:

“I told you there was a lot of interesting stuff in there.”

Close behind it came the first correction to the third photograph.

Chapter Six

A Day Without a Result

Two weeks later their free Sunday was already taken again before breakfast.

This time no outsider laid claim to it. Dmitry had drawn up the list himself.

Check two versions of the master. Sort out the folder of drafts. Prepare questions for the next studio session. Look through the scans of the green album. Answer three letters that could wait until Monday but had better not.

Ksyusha came into the kitchen with her own list on her phone. She had to choose clothes for the performance, learn two short introductions, sort the photographs after scanning and watch a recording of someone else's chamber evening that the organiser had sent.

They sat down opposite each other and almost at the same moment laid their lists on the table.

"We have a day off," Ksyusha said.

"That is exactly why it all fitted in."

"It fits in on weekdays too. Only not within twenty-four hours."

Dmitry turned his notebook round towards her.

"What is superfluous here?"

"Wrong question."

“Then what is the right one?”

“Which of these did you promise to other people?”

He looked over the items.

“The master has to be checked by ten on Monday morning. The letters — one before lunch. The rest I promised no one.”

“How long will the master take?”

“An hour. Less, if the differences are clear.”

“Check it now. Send the letter. Then close the list.”

“And yours?”

Ksyusha opened her note.

“The introductions are needed by Friday. The recording is only a recommendation. The photographs are awaited by Mum and by common sense, but we gave no exact date. The clothes can be chosen in half an hour this evening.”

“In half an hour?”

“Do not start.”

“I said nothing.”

“You looked.”

“I have the right to look in my own home.”

Ksyusha put her phone away.

“I shall read the introductions once. The rest I shall leave.”

They did not cancel obligations to other people for the sake of a pretty idea of spontaneity. Dmitry listened to the two masters, chose one and sent his notes. Ksyusha checked the names in the introductions, corrected the stress in a surname and noted down a question for the organiser. By half past ten the necessary things

were done.

Everything else remained.

“What now?” Dmitry asked.

“Nothing from the list.”

“That is not an answer.”

“I have no other yet.”

He closed the notebook but laid the pen on top, as though the plan might be needed at any minute.

Breakfast stretched out. They talked not about work and not about the two of them, but about a man in the house opposite who came out on his balcony at exactly the same time every morning and studied the courtyard for a long while through opera glasses.

“Perhaps he watches birds,” Ksyusha said.

“There are three pigeons in the courtyard.”

“Perhaps he has feelings about each one personally.”

“Then he knows more about constancy than we do.”

“Why?”

“Because he comes out every day, and the pigeons do not.”

Ksyusha laughed. The conversation moved on to the habits of the city that two people notice day after day and never discuss. By the time the dishes were cleared it was almost twelve.

“Shall we go?” she asked.

“Where?”

“Downstairs.”

“A most substantial route.”

“Enough to begin with.”

They went out without the equipment cases, without the bag with the family album and without a goal that would have to be achieved. At the front door Ksyusha suggested walking to the nearest stop and getting on whatever came first.

The first to come was an old tram.

“Where does it go?” Dmitry asked.

“We shall find out.”

“We could look at the route map.”

“We could.”

She did not.

The tram passed through the familiar centre and turned into a district where they rarely went. Beyond the window stretched the brick blocks of former workshops, small courtyards and the long fence of the railway. Little by little the carriage emptied. At the terminus an elderly woman with a shopping trolley got off with them, and a young man holding a dismantled desk lamp.

“Where now?” Dmitry asked.

“There should be an old park here.”

“So there was a plan after all.”

“A memory. I am not sure the park has survived.”

It had survived, though it had grown smaller. Part of the grounds had been taken by a new road, and where the summer stage had been there now stood a gym pavilion. Deeper in there remained an avenue of lime trees, chess tables and a round paved area with a fountain that did not work.

They walked to the end of the avenue. Ksyusha recognised

only one turning.

“I used to come here with Mum,” she said. “The park seemed enormous to me.”

“You were shorter.”

“Very funny.”

“Geometrically correct.”

By the fountain they were selling pastries and hot berry drinks. They each took a cup and sat down at a chess table. Scratched initials could still be seen on its surface.

Dmitry ran a finger over the squares.

“We could film a short fragment here.”

“No.”

“I was only saying.”

“In your head you have already set up the camera.”

“One.”

“Today the park is not our material.”

He put away the phone he had not yet had time to take out.

“All right.”

A few minutes later Ksyusha did photograph the empty fountain after all.

“So you are allowed?”

“It is for me.”

“A convenient system.”

“You can take one for yourself too.”

Dmitry did not. He watched the wind chase a few dry leaves across the empty basin. On an ordinary day such a shot would

almost at once have demanded a continuation: a rhythm, a text, a note, a title at least. Today Dmitry let it end inside his gaze.

The phone vibrated.

The sound engineer wrote that after three he would be alone in the studio. If Dmitry sent the material now, they could quickly check it on the new equipment and not wait until Tuesday.

The opportunity was useful. There was no urgency.

“Work?” Ksyusha asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you need to answer?”

“I do.”

He typed: “Thank you. I shall not send the material today. We keep Tuesday.”

“You will not even ask how long it would take?” Ksyusha said.

“If I ask, I shall start working out whether there is time.”

“And is there?”

“Certainly.”

“Then why not?”

Dmitry put the phone away.

“Because we have already chosen this day.”

“A choice can be changed.”

“It can. I do not want to.”

Ksyusha accepted the answer without thanking him. He was not giving her a present and was sacrificing nothing. He was simply refusing to exchange time already being lived for a more convenient work schedule.

They walked back. A few blocks on they found a bookshop set up in what had once been a chemist's. Dmitry chose a study of the history of writing, Ksyusha a collection of essays on stage speech. At the till it turned out that the shop had a small reading room.

They spent more than an hour there.

Each read their own book. Now and then Ksyusha marked a paragraph in pencil and turned the book towards Dmitry. He ran his eyes over the text, nodded or quietly disagreed. Then he went back to his own page. Time together did not require an unbroken exchange. It was enough to know that the other person was a few steps away and that their attention belonged not only to you, but did not shut you out.

They got home after six.

Ksyusha opened the wardrobe and looked at the choice of clothes for the performance.

"Half an hour," Dmitry reminded her.

"I do not want to any more."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow will be tighter."

"It will."

"You could have sorted out the questions for the studio today as well."

"I could."

They stood before the price of their own choice. It was not dramatic: no one had lost a contract, let a team down or broken

a promise. A few things had simply moved to the next day and made it more crowded.

“Let us not blame Sunday afterwards,” Ksyusha said.

“Or each other.”

“Especially each other.”

She did not choose the clothes in the end. Dmitry did not open the folder of drafts. They cooked supper, each told the other about a few pages of the book they had bought, and after ten they checked the calendar for Monday.

The morning demanded precision.

Dmitry got up earlier to prepare the questions for the studio before ten. Ksyusha chose an outfit for the performance between two work calls. At eleven her mother asked whether the scans were ready. Ksyusha answered that she would send the first part by Wednesday — and at once put the date in the calendar.

At half past twelve Dmitry discovered that one of the drafts he had put aside was needed for an afternoon conversation.

“I could have sorted it out yesterday,” he said, looking through the folder.

Ksyusha was fastening an earring in front of the mirror in the hall.

“You could.”

“And it would be easier now.”

“It would.”

She did not say that it was he who had chosen to stay. Dmitry did not remind her that the idea of setting off without a route

had been hers. They knew where this rush had come from and did not use it to keep score.

“Shall I help you with the files?” Ksyusha asked.

“No, I shall manage. And you?”

“So shall I.”

At one the work conversation began. In the third minute the sound engineer asked him to open the draft with the notes on the second part of the arrangement.

Dmitry found the folder, but the file he needed turned out to be named with a date and nothing else. Inside there were three almost identical versions.

“I shall need ten minutes,” he said.

“We agreed to go through this now,” came the answer from the studio.

“We did. I did not prepare the file. In ten minutes I shall send the right one and ring you back.”

He did not plead the day off, the outing or the need to rest sometimes. The other man had taken no part in their Sunday decision and should not have to pay for it by waiting.

Dmitry ended the call, opened the versions one after another, compared the dates of the changes and found the right one. It took fourteen minutes. He came into the second conversation with the answer ready and began with an apology for the delay.

Ksyusha heard only part of the conversation. Meanwhile she was comparing two stage outfits. One required shoes that she had yet to find; the second was made up entirely of things already

in the house.

A suitable pair could not be delivered in time for the rehearsal.

“I shall take the second,” she said after the call.

“Because of the deadline?”

“Partly because of that.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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