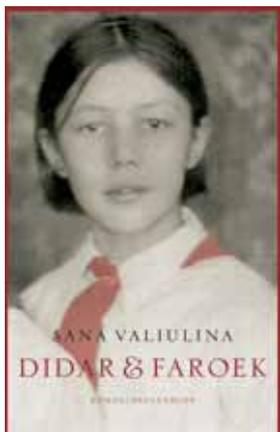


Love in the Stalin era



Sana Valiulina

Didar and Faruk

AN EPIC LOVE STORY in the narrative tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, but this time with Stalinist Russia as the vivid backdrop: *Didar en Farok*, by the Estonian Sana Valiulina, who lives in the Netherlands and writes in Dutch, is a book of international allure. Never before has this period been so

convincingly and majestically articulated in a novel.

Didar and Faruk are distant cousins from a Tartar family that was dispersed in the displacement of ethnic groups in Russia in the 1920s. Didar grows up in the town of Pushkin, near St Petersburg, and Faruk in a Muscovite suburb that is inhabited by multi-racial peoples from southern Russia. As in a fairy tale, Didar and Faruk are made for one another, and although the course of history keeps them apart for years, they succeed in keeping their love alive in their correspondence.

Didar rejects her Muslim background by becoming a model pioneer in the thirties and she is even invited to the model child camp Artek, where she receives the first glimpse of freedom in her interaction with the sons of party functionaries who enjoy themselves outside the camp.

In contrast, religious faith is alive and kicking in Faruk's family, although it is undercover. Faruk is an impressive twentieth-century anti-hero: in much the same way as little Oskar in Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* did not wish to grow, Faruk does not speak until he is eleven, as a consequence of Stalin's gaze in the picture on the wall above his cot. Moreover, like several other unforgettable figures in Russian literature, he suffers from epilepsy, and Valiulina describes his epileptic attacks brilliantly, like a constrictor coming upon him.

History sweeps across Russia. After the terror of the thirties comes the devastating Second World War, and then the horrors of the Gulag. Didar and Faruk live in a moral vacuum: while Stalin attempts to create an artificial humanity, Didar loses all faith in a communist Utopia and falls in love with a German officer, thereby surviving the war. Faruk fights for Russia against the Germans, is taken prisoner, fetches up in Normandy, and is forced to resist the Allied invasion. After the war, he is taken to a camp in England from where he is deported to Allied Russia. There, he awaits the Gulag, the bitter fate of the many others who have been in touch with the West. The Islamic faith is their only moral prop, and their love for one another their only motivation, until they see one another once more ...



photo Klaas Koppe

After her study in Moscow, Sana Valiulina (b. 1964, Tallinn) emigrated to the Netherlands. In 2001, she published her much-discussed debut *Het Kruis* ('The Cross'), on the dissipated life in a Moscow student flat. Her novella collection *Vanuit nergens met liefde* ('From Nowhere With Love') appeared in 2002. Her novel *Didar en Farok* (2006) is based on her parents' life.

In this overwhelming, empathic, anti-Soviet novel of the 1922-56 period, Valiulina portrays two people who survive the Stalinist terror, each in their own way, without losing their human dignity. It is a terrifying story in which she has processed the experiences of her parents. It is her proof of proficiency, and simultaneously a glorious settlement of her past and that of her family.

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A monumental book.

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An interview with Sana Valiulina

'Don't Take Reality Lying Down'

by Elsbeth Etty

(NRC Handelsblad, May 12, 2006)

translated by Barbara Backer-Gray

How did people live under the Stalinist reign of terror? Sana Valiulina from Estonia has written an empathetic novel about it in Dutch. "It's actually about the triumph of humanity."

Why does somebody who grew up speaking Russian, who also speaks Estonian and who studied Norwegian language and literature, write her heartbreaking novel settling her score with Stalinism in Dutch? The 41-year-old Sana Valiulina, whose novel, *Didar en Faroek* (Didar and Faruk) – imposing in size as well as content – was presented last Wednesday in the Hermitage in Amsterdam, looks at me in surprise. Why wouldn't she write in Dutch? "I have lived here since 1989, thanks to love, and I learned the language quickly. In 1995, when my daughter was five, I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. I started writing for the back page of the *NRC Handelsblad*. I wrote articles about Russia, at first in Russian. My husband, the Slavist Arthur Langeveld, translated them. But I wasn't satisfied because too much was lost in translation, as is usually the case. By the third article I thought: I'm just going to try to write directly in Dutch. It worked, and I have been writing in Dutch ever since."

Valiulina, petite and speaking passionately, grew up in Tallinn, Estonia and studied in Moscow. Her novel *Het Kruis* (The Cross) describes her student years. It caused a stir due to her characters' alcoholic and sexual exploits, and she was much praised for her command of the Dutch language and her style. Her second book, *Vanuit nergens met liefde* (From Nowhere with Love, 2002), a collection of three novellas, had the same response, although there was some criticism about the noncommittal tone of her stories.

At least the delicate Tatar inhabitant of the Amsterdam suburb De Bijlmer cannot be accused of being noncommittal in *Didar and Faruk*. In this crushing,

empathetically written anti-Soviet novel set between 1922 and 1956, she portrays two people who both survive the Stalinist reign of terror in their own way, without losing sight of their humanity. It is a terrifying story in which she has included her parents' experiences. It is her masterpiece as well as a glorious coming to terms with her past and that of her family.

Sana Valiulina not only writes amazingly well in Dutch, she speaks it fluently, albeit with an accent. "If I had written my books in Russian," she says, "I would have felt limited. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are always looking over your shoulder. That's how I was raised, always in the shadow of those great minds. It wasn't until I had finished *Didar and Faruk* that I discovered how much I've been influenced by them and how I've followed their tradition. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy wrote entertaining books, soaps with every now and then deep and beautiful parts about the human condition, and that is what I aimed for with *Didar and Faruk*. However terrible a story is, you have to write it in such a way that it remains moving."

Faruk and Didar are fictional characters but they have a lot in common with Valiulina's parents. Her father, a Tatar Muslim born in Moscow in 1922, was a Nazi prisoner of war in Normandy in 1944, and disappeared later, like two million others, into Stalin's camps for ten years. Her mother, born in 1925, grew up in Pushkin near Leningrad and lost almost her entire family in the second World War. The characters in the book have the same dates and places of birth and they experience an almost identical history. The difference between Faruk and Didar is that the former rebels against Stalin and the Soviet dictatorship as a child, while the ambitious Didar, as a convinced little Pioneer, expects salvation by the great leader.

"Faruk creates his own myth early on," the author explains. "That was the greatest act of resistance in that awful time of terror. More wasn't possible. Dissidence was out of the question, fear was all-encompassing. It was pure bloodshed and physical destruction. Faruk refuses to speak before he is eleven because he cannot get the lying language of his world out of his mouth, not until his contact with an educated person helps him discover the skies and, in particular, the sign of Taurus. Thanks to the word 'Taurus' he realizes that the universe in which he lives is not an absolute universe. That is the first step toward freedom. It means he breaks through the power of the leader. Taurus stands for

freedom, the vision that he wants to live for. At first it is the word Taurus that he loves; later in the novel that word becomes reality, the word incarnate.”

Valiulina read stacks of camp literature to find out what her father must have endured as a prisoner-of-war in Germany and consequently in three Soviet Gulags. He seldom spoke of his experiences himself. Not until Sana was 25 and came to the Netherlands and read Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* did she realize what kind of hell her father had been through. After that she read everything she could lay her hands on and saw countless photos and watched many documentaries in order to immerse herself in the horror.

“For the character of Faruk, Georges Perec’s essay, “*Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature*”, about developing an unshakeable awareness of humanity in the most dehumanizing circumstances, helped me a lot.” She laughs shyly. “Sorry about the grandiloquent words, but that’s what my book is about: the triumph of humanity.”

And her mother? The beautiful girl in Pioneer uniform from the thirties on the cover of her novel representing Didar is not her mother, but a distant relative from a family album. “You can see,” says Valiulina, “that she is Tatar, not Russian. My mother, like Didar, came from a Muslim family, but she was not religious and I wasn’t raised religious either. The Tatar variation of Islam is anyway much lighter: no circumcision or blood feuds or burqas. I don’t feel Islam as a threat. I have no problem with girls in head scarves, although I do feel sorry for those women, and all those coverings are sometimes discouraging. On the other hand I do love the sort of diversity you get here in the Bijlmer. The Dutch talk a lot about open-mindedness and tolerance, but where has that tolerance gone? Suddenly everything foreign has become threatening.”

In *Didar and Faruk* religion is a positive influence. Didar and Faruk’s Islamic mothers derive their courage from their trust in Allah; religion is their way of resisting dictatorship and misery, their way of maintaining their humanity.

“They were already religious before the revolution and so they didn’t have to struggle with their identity. That’s the difference between them and their children who were born after the 1917 revolution. Faruk and Didar have to find their way in a completely new world. As a young girl, Didar puts her faith in Stalin; she is a Pioneer and, like my mother, this helps her a lot.”

Sana Valiulina herself grew up under Brezhnev, and also wore the Pioneer uniform and shouted communist slogans but, unlike her mother, she didn't believe in them. "It was compulsory, but I found it unbearable. It contradicted the way I was raised. Not that my father was always saying anti-Soviet things, but he exuded negativity. Thanks to my own experiences I was able to fictionalize those of my mother. Didar doesn't see the horrors of the fairy-tale Pioneer camp where she stays, although I have tried to show them, for example in the terrible slogan: 'Nobody is irreplaceable' that Didar hears when a Pioneer is murdered."

A lesser character in the novel is Faruk's little sister Zaynab, who refuses to wear a head scarf and doesn't want to marry a Tatar. She is an unconventional woman who lived in Berlin during the War and who had affairs with interesting men. She turns out to be the same Zaynab of *Het Kruis*. "She's based on an unforgettable aunt of mine, as amoral as she was irresistible. She was really a feminist and wasn't satisfied with the traditional role of Tatar woman. With her independent behavior she created a small revolution. A beautiful woman; unfortunately she's passed away, like my father who died in 1999."

It wasn't until after the death of her father that the budding writer dared to tackle the ambitious family history *Didar and Faruk*. "When my father was still alive I felt a certain embarrassment and I still do, because my mother is still alive. But I couldn't wait any longer. Unfortunately my mother can't read the book, but I am going to Tallinn and I'll tell her what it is about. And, who knows, maybe I'll translate it into Russian."

The book would no doubt create a stir in Russia where the plight of the Russian camp prisoners is still surrounded with taboos. One of Farouk's thoughts is: "Knowing, remembering, enduring, thinking, not forgiving, keeping, and passing on." Valiulina's father didn't pass his experience on. Talking was too dangerous, too shameful, too painful. Has his daughter done it for him? "I don't know." She hesitates. "I don't presume to be a Messiah spreading a message, and this book is about more than the history of Stalinism and the Gulags. It is also a light novel about belief in humanity and the pitfalls of love. Its essence is that reality can be horrible, but that you can't take it lying down. Faruk discovers that freedom is the absence of fear, and that's the lesson that I learned from my parents. With *Didar and Faruk* I want my parents to live on, in a way."

Sample Translation

Didar and Faruk

(Didar en Faroek)

by Sana Valiulina

(Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff, 2006)

Translated by Barbara Backer-Gray

[pp 28 – 44]

The Countess

“I want short hair, too, like the other girls,” said Didar to herself in a little mirror above the sewing table.

She picked up her mother’s pinking shears, took a deep breath and closed her eyes tightly. It seemed as if the braid with all its millions of hairs was resisting fiercely. The scissors got bogged down in the smooth hair that fled in all directions; her thumb and index finger hurt; she had to loosen her hand by shaking it a few times and overcome her fear that the braid may well be attached to her skull forever.

When it finally lay in her hand, still warm, Didar didn’t dare look at it. She slid the scissors under a brown piece of fabric next to the sewing machine and glanced in the mirror. The unevenly short strands stuck out from behind her ears, but her eyes looked even more militant and her nose appeared even more strong-willed than before.

Now that she had fulfilled her dream, it had to be perfected and there was only one person who could do that. But first she had to finish with that braid.

Slowly, through the flush of victory, it dawned on her that she had done something irreparable. The braid, that she was still holding tightly, was gone for good and that estranged Didar from her mother and sister, and also from her father and two younger brothers, even though their hair was short. It was as if she had broken the magic circle that was held together by strong, black, shiny braids. That feeling of uneasiness felt much worse than the familiar fear of Tatu’s iron hand. It made her small and lonely; and for a second she imagined she was no longer in their room on the Street of the 26 Baku Commissars, number 7, but in the world outside that was constantly shedding its dead, still bleeding skin like a colossal snake. Her name no longer mattered – she could just as well have been called Ira or Tanja, or not be called anything at all and go and dig around without

a name in the communist building excavation along with the other nameless Pioneers.

Didar relaxed her fingers. The braid fell to the floor and froze into the kind of shiny, pretend-dead snake that she had once seen in the terrarium at the Leningrad zoo. Carefully she touched it with the toe of her sneaker, then she picked it up and ran to the stairs.

The Countess lived on the third floor of their nineteenth-century house. It must have been ochre at one time, but now not only had it lost all of its color, it had been peeling for years. Painting it would have been a waste, though: soon all those remnants of the old world would be razed and instead they would erect glass apartment buildings that reached up to the stars.

Didar took two, three, four steps at a time to reach the Countess as quickly as possible. At one time the Countess had lived in the vicinity of the palace that had been the Tsar's residence in prehistoric summers, but after the revolution she and her son were assigned a room in the five-room apartment in the Street of the 26 Baku Commissars. It was this lightest and biggest room, which she shared with her old pug since the disappearance of her son, that Didar now entered out of breath, with her braid in her hand.

"Breathe through your nose," said the Countess as soon as she saw Didar's excited face. "Well, you did it." She clicked her tongue. "Tell your mother that your hair, unlike your head, grows right back on. And don't let her underestimate that consolation. Put that braid down for now and get the decanter from the sideboard. A present from the Red Count to the White Countess."

Even the Countess's short grey curls began to shake slightly when Didar placed the crystal decanter with the golden brown liquid on the crate that served as a coffee table. "*Incroyable*, it's a bottle from 1884, the year that I said yes to Antony."

"Has the Red Count been to visit you?" Didar asked.

“That blackguard asked me a thousand questions about the Pogorelski lineage. He is scared to death of being found out if they interrogate him about his nobility. Pour yourself some tea, child, and come and sit here.”

The Countess looked at her pug, snoring on her lap. “Marie Antoinette wouldn’t survive without me. My poor little bourgeois dog, nobody here loves you... Your mother thinks dogs are unclean. Maybe the Red Count can take her. What a brilliant idea. That’s be one good thing he’ll have done during his life.”

The Countess shook with laughter. Marie Antoinette opened her eyes and closed them again: she was used to her mistress’s volcanic temperament. The outcrop of wrinkles on her beige forehead was soon smoothed over again by sweet pug dreams; only a few resigned little lines above her eyes were carved there permanently.

“Is he not a count then?” For an instant Didar had even forgotten her braid. The famous writer who lived in a mansion behind a tall fence, with a beautiful young wife and a lackey with white gloves, who was regularly picked up in a classy black car, supposedly to grace the dinners at the Olympus of the first proletarian state, was he not a count who had embraced the revolution? Carefully Didar placed her cup next to the overflowing ashtray and looked into the Countess’s sparkling eyes.

“Of course not, child, his father was at most a college assessor.” The Countess gestured dismissively and took a sip of brandy. “But he definitely has noble taste. Bring me your cup.” She poured some in Didar’s tea. “It will do you good.”

“But...”

“No buts, it might be the first and last time that you ever taste something like this.”

Didar didn’t know why she never minded obeying the Countess. This crazy old woman with her well-worn stole and her white curls that she cut as short as possible so as not to get vermin in “this soapless land”, who shuffled through the streets of their town in her son’s cracked soldier’s boots that she stuffed full of the *Pravda* so that they didn’t fall off, who children jeered at and called “leech”.

And then that pug. Marie Antoinette always came first. Even when Tatu brought the Countess a bowl of *kefir* soup every now and then, the dog got all the noodles. “We are both lucky,” she would say while the pug ate the dumplings. “Marie Antoinette is an omnivore, and I had a father who was an Anglophile. A gentleman, he would always say, will not be ground down; his spirit must be strong enough not to be dictated by biological laws in times of need.”

Nobody talks with me like the Countess does, Didar thought, and she swallowed the bitter tea. “But what about his name, it is Pogorelski, isn’t it?”

“What’s in a name these days?” said the Countess and she took another sip. “Strange, it means nothing anymore and yet it can cost you your head. But let’s get down to business, child. Your charming hair needs to be tidied up, I take it? Marie Antoinette, go and snooze somewhere else.”

The Countess gave the pug a light slap on its woolly back end. It dropped grudgingly to the ground, and she set her glass down. Then she stood, wrapped the stole around her neck and shuffled to her bed. She came back with a frayed old cloth, wrapped it around Didar’s shoulders and drew a pair of scissors from somewhere amongst her skirts.

After about ten minutes she clicked her tongue in satisfaction. “You’re ready to go to a communist ball, Didar.”

The Countess sat back in her lounge chair. The pug immediately stumbled towards her and nestled at her feet. Didar picked Marie Antoinette up and placed her on the Countess’s lap. The pug, whose age nobody knew, could no longer climb up by herself.

“To your new hairdo.” The Countess winked and raised her glass. “You can leave that braid here for now. If your mother gets very angry, tell her that at one time all four princesses walked around bald, and send her to me.”

Tatu’s brown shoes stood in the hall, but she wasn’t in their room. Aunt Rosa’s excited voice was coming from the kitchen. Didar took her library card and her books and was just about to sneak outside again when she heard the word

‘countess’. In Russian. She tiptoed back, placed the stack of books down gently behind the kitchen door and sat on it. Her mother was still quiet, but that wouldn’t last long.

“All Pioneers must help old people, neighbor,” said Tatu calmly, which wasn’t promising. She only used the word ‘neighbor’ when the warpath was no longer avoidable, and the same went for her emphatically calm tone. “Didar got the assignment at school to help an elderly person in her neighborhood.”

“There are enough needy revolutionaries around here, but no, your daughter had to choose an old leech,” Aunt Rosa parried.

Didar heard rummaging among pots; drawers were being opened and closed again with much annoyance. Somebody was chopping up bones with a cleaver.

“I’m trying to make brawn from these.” It was Tatu who broke the silence.

The conciliatory tone surprised Didar. Her mother seldom spoke in that manner, and certainly never with Aunt Rosa. Could her father have had a hand in this?

But Aunt Rosa seemed unrelenting. “I can’t imagine Didar being prepared to mop anyone’s floor. She’s too romantic for that.” She said the word ‘romantic’ in Russian, just like ‘revolutionaries,’ but scornfully.

“The Countess doesn’t care about clean floors,” said Tatu.

“No, she is out to contaminate our youth. Didar is there for hours sometimes. I bet that old one preaches all sorts of counter-revolutionary ideas. Didn’t comrade Jezjov say that our enemies have now opted for a different tactic? They want to ruin us from the inside and therefore they take on different forms. I’m just telling it like it is, neighbor. You know what I think? The Countess is the agent of a foreign power and if I were you I would keep Didar away from her. My Lukman says they will be taking steps.”

In Didar’s haste to get to the kitchen before her mother replied the stack of books collapsed. She rushed in and stood in unflinching Pioneer pose before Tatu.

“Didar!” cried Tatu and pressed her hand against her mouth.

Her other hand holding the cleaver remained hanging helplessly in the air.

“She didn’t even call on Allah...” Because it was raining, Didar didn’t escape to the marble girl, but to the Apollo Gallery. She sat with her back pressed against a column. High above her a remaining piece of the dome offered protection from the rain; she was trembling with cold and dismay. After Tatu hit her, Didar had run away without putting on anything extra. Her short skirt was clammy and her soaked thin uniform blouse clung to her body. Her tears, which she dried with the Pioneer tie, started flowing anew each time her mother’s face loomed in front of her eyes. Would she really have struck her with the cleaver if Aunt Rosa had not quickly handed her a rolling pin?

While beating Didar with the rolling pin, Tatu hadn’t once called on Allah. Again her face appeared to Didar, stony, with lowered eyes and tight lips. When Didar fled to the hall in tears, Tatu had run after her. “Didar,” she had said suddenly, so softly that Didar turned around just as she was about to slam the front door behind her. Something fell on the floor – the rolling pin? – and for an instant Didar thought her mother wanted to touch her, even though her arms hung down despondently.

The door had banged shut behind Didar. She had run out into the rain, as fast as she could, so that the ringing in her ears could not only rid her of the horror and pain, but in particular of the bizarre feeling she got from seeing Tatu. Had she found her mother pitiful when she spoke her name so softly, with that lost expression on her face? Pitiful? Tatu had wanted to murder her while Didar had sacrificed herself for her. She had shown up in the kitchen with her trimmed sinner’s head just in time to prevent Tatu from speaking the wrong words.

Didar stretched her legs and pressed her feet against a column. The distance between the columns was equal to the length of her legs. The Countess had told her that the Apollo Gallery had been built by a Scottish architect in the service of Catherine the Great.

Didar rubbed the back of her head with both hands and then frowned. She had saved her mother, but who would save the Countess? After all, she had heard Aunt Rosa say that ‘they’ would take steps. Who were the ‘they’ that everybody feared, who Lukman, Aunt Rosa’s son, was now a part of? As soon as he had become ‘they’, about a year ago, he had almost immediately got a room near the Passage. The previous owner, a bookkeeper, turned out to be a saboteur who had poisoned thousands of chickens in a nearby *kolkhoz*. He had always been polite, dressed impeccably in a suit, with a briefcase, Aunt Rosa had told the neighbors in the courtyard while Uncle Hasjir had looked around even more nervously than usual. Clean as a whistle, but her Lukman had seen through all those nice clothes and found out his true nature.

But the Countess? Who did she ever harm? And what had her mother meant when she told her father that Aunt Rosa really liked the Countess’s room?

Didar knew how the Countess had come by her fancy room. Once she had nursed a soldier with a nasty, rotting belly wound. It was back in the Imperialist War, when the Countess worked at a field hospital. She spent her spare moments at his bedside, holding his hand and talking to him. The Countess didn’t know whether she did this because he resembled her son or because she was impressed by the modern English theory of Florence Nightingale’s followers, that a nurse should spend time talking to severely injured soldiers in order to interrupt their meeting with death. She often claimed not to know things. The soldier had been unconscious and delirious the whole time she talked to him. Then she was transferred to another hospital and she never knew if he had made it.

“After the revolution I had to leave my house. I stayed with my former gardener and had no idea what was going to happen to me.” The Countess talked about the past like she smoked her cigs, in a slow, contemplative, and somewhat casual manner, as if she were talking about somebody else’s life. Her words, encircled by blue smoke, were woven together in a faraway sacred reality, with the muted snoring of Marie Antoinette in the background. “I couldn’t flee because I had to wait for my son. I stayed with that good soul for two years, until

Yuri returned from the Crimean. His general had gone to Constantinople, but Yuri wanted to stay in Russia; he felt that all was not yet lost. When the gardener's sister came from Orjol with her children after losing everything, including her husband and her house, we could no longer stay. And Yuri had to hide, because every night Whites were taken away and shot. He looked emaciated, closer to death than that dying soldier. And hunger wasn't the only cause."

Didar never noticed when the Countess lit up a new cig. When an ash pyramid built up arose in the rusty can, Didar emptied it into the little stove, the Countess never interrupting her story, and then she continued to listen on the edge of her seat.

"A house... I decided to go to the highest boss, the Commissar. His staff had installed themselves in my home. A few pigs rooted around in the garden, guarded by soldiers. All the swans had been eaten. More soldiers were smoking in small groups as I walked by. On the stairs I looked around and saw my grandmother's portrait decorated with a big mustache and I felt nothing. To the salon, I told myself, that's where the Commissar would be dealing with the revolution. But they had turned it into a dormitory. I realized I had to look for a room that was guarded – the chambermaid's room.

'Three minutes,' said the armed soldier. The man behind the desk was so busy that he didn't even look up when I entered. I only saw his balding head and knotted brow.

'Who are you?' he asked while his pen continued to sign all sorts of papers.

'A person in need,' I said.

'Need is the natural condition of all objects of the revolution. What do you want?'

'A house.'

Without taking his eyes off the paper he suddenly asked me where I had been in August of 1914.

'In a field hospital near Tannenberg.'

‘Do you have any family left?’

I don’t know why I said ‘Yes, a son’ to this man who was probably signing death sentences in my house, in my chambermaid’s room.

‘You will have a house. Come back in a week.’ Maybe he looked up as I walked toward the door, but I never saw his face. Two weeks later Yuri and I got this room; I was even allowed to take some leftover furniture from my house.”

“He was that soldier,” said Didar. “He recognized your voice and he knew who you and your son were.”

The Countess nodded. “The avenging angel of the revolution became our guardian angel. Yuri must have been betrayed by somebody else later on. He would never have done it.” The Countess was silent for a while. “Commissar Szulkin’s having a chambermaid’s room didn’t augur well for the objects of the revolution. But he himself, as subject, was also being ground down by it. They have accused him of counter-revolutionary activities. I’m curious how long they will let me walk around freely...”

The idea that the Countess and Marie Antoinette would be taken away in a police van, a so-called black raven, to a place from which nobody ever returned, gave Didar a sinking feeling in her stomach. Her intention to stay in the cold and clammy park until she caught a fatal dose of pneumonia – then her mother would finally notice who she loved most – had evaporated long ago. Didar pulled in her legs. Her stockings were all wet and she wrapped her arms around her knees. The sinking feeling became stronger and cold chills ran up and down her body.

Shouldn’t she hurry to the Countess to warn her?

“Didar! Didar! Where are you?”

She jumped up and ran down the hill on which the Apollo Gallery was built. Tahir’s voice had come from near the Caprice; it made perfect sense that he was looking for her in the tea pavilion whose domed roof was still almost completely intact.

“Tahir! I’m coming!” “Where are you, Didar!” “Here! I’m here!” These sounds could be heard for a while longer in the dusky park, until two small figures united between the chubby cherub and the half-naked dryad.

“Mama isn’t angry at you any more! Her eyes were red!” Tahir said as they ran home.

“I have to go to the Countess,” cried Didar when they arrived. She couldn’t afford to waste a second now. She rang the bell and waited impatiently until one of the neighbors opened the door.

She barged into the Countess’s room and strode up to the lounge chair. “You must flee. They are going to take steps against you. You and Marie Antoinette must flee,” said Didar in one breath.

She didn’t expect what happened next. The Countess began to laugh her volcanic laugh.

Marie Antoinette woke up, looked at Didar with bulging eyes, sneezed, and fell asleep again.

“My dear child,” said the Countess and wiped her eyes, “if I wanted to flee, I would have done so long ago.” She puffed at her cig as if she were kissing her fingers; the stub was almost invisible. “Tobacco is too expensive nowadays,” she complained. “But I think the Red Count has his eye on the sideboard. If I sell it, it will take care of things for a few weeks. After that I will have nothing left but her.”

She patted the animal’s back with her yellowed fingers. “Then I will be able to enter the gates without any problems. Sit down, and don’t you dare cry. Save your tears for somebody other than an old bag like me. There’s some cold tea left in a mug. Come, I’ll pour some of that princely liquor into it.”

The Countess winked and raised her glass. “Was your mother very angry?”

Didar shrugged her shoulders.

“She is a good woman, child, even though she wants nothing to do with dogs.”

Then the Countess became serious. “Listen, Didar. Would you do something for me? An assignment. Not for the little Pioneer, but for the girl Didar.”

Didar nodded, even though she began to feel uncomfortable under her scrutinizing gaze. This was not the Countess she knew.

“Don’t worry, I’m not an agent or a spy.” The Countess’s face softened again and her normal, somewhat joky expression returned. “I’m asking you because I can’t trust anybody else. It’s not difficult, but you have to do it well.” Meanwhile her fingers caressed Marie Antoinette’s neck. “It’s her... If I have to vacate this room, and I don’t expect it will be much longer, I won’t be able to take her with me. Look under the chest, will you?”

Didar stuck her hand between the slats and groped around the floor. She retrieved a small hard ball wrapped in cigarette paper, and handed it to the Countess.

“Keep it,” she said. “Hide it well and tell noone. If Marie Antoinette is left behind, give it to her. As you know, she’s an omnivore, she’ll eat anything. Take her on your lap and tickle her tummy. Make sure she eats it all, that’s very important, and keep cuddling her. I’ll also put some bones under the crate that you can give to her first. Will you remember all of this?”

An unnecessary question. The Countess knew better than anybody that Didar was blessed with a phenomenal memory. After all, she had been her first audience when she recited the Communist Manifesto that she had had to memorize for school.

Again Didar nodded her head, dejected, incapable of saying anything useful. “Couldn’t you flee instead?” she whispered and she looked away to avoid the Countess’s eyes.

“Pugs have weak hearts and their respiratory system is unsuitable for traveling long distances,” explained the Countess as if it was the most normal question in the world. “And, you understand, we would have to flee very, very far. But it’s not only the distance. It’s...” The Countess was silent for a minute while she took

a few drags. "...as if I can't abandon Yuri. When I could still flee I had to wait for him, and now he's waiting for me."

"But he's been gone fifteen years!" Finally Didar's normal voice had returned, and she felt relieved that she had found a sensible objection.

"Don't say anything, child." Slowly the Countess lit up a new cig and Didar could suddenly see how much her hands were shaking. "Old people are stubborn and foolish; they haven't studied the Communist Manifesto or the modern treatises regarding the New Man. Our books tried to teach us other things. It didn't always work, though..."

The Countess's voice was joking, but her eyes followed their own thoughts. They kept diving into places and times unknown to Didar, while her thin fingers kept tickling Marie Antoinette behind the ears.

"The other things are perhaps related to what my father often said to me. A gentleman doesn't let the laws of biology – hunger, lust, or fear – dictate to him. She stopped and shook her head resolutely. "I don't want to flee. Who then would take the road that Yuri did? I can only meet him by feeling his pain."

Didar felt cold; only her clenched fist holding the treat for Marie Antoinette was warm and sweaty.

"May I tell Tahir about Marie Antoinette?"

"If you want to... Oh yes, I gave your braid to your mother. She was here, looking for you."

"What did she want to hit me with this time?"

"Those bruises will go away, Didar. Things aren't easy for your mother either, and she's worried."

"Why? I'm top of my class, and she can't even read Russian properly."

"Top of the class," the Countess repeated. "Maybe that's why. I showed her a picture – here."

Only now did Didar notice a worn burgundy album lying on the crate. She took it carefully and opened it. She found herself eye to eye, or rather eye to eight eyes, with four young girls. All four looked at her slightly mischievously. They

were wearing simple white dresses that reached down to their ankles. All four held their right arm to the side, apparently because they had just taken off their hats with a flourish, so that their bodies were also bent slightly toward the right, following the direction of their hands. Soon Didar understood the reason for their impishness. They had bared their heads, oval and shaven, for the camera before covering them again with the little hats.

“Who are they?” asked Didar. The girls didn’t look like anybody she knew or would recognize.

“Princesses,” the Countess replied. “The last princesses of Russia. They had typhus and had to be shaved. But I didn’t tell your mother that. I only said that when the Russian Tsar – even though he had been dethroned already – saw his daughters like that, he didn’t mind, and that she should be as accepting. I think that impressed her more than my argument about your hair growing back, unlike your head. Why don’t you go home now, or your mother will worry.”

Weeks passed. Everything remained the same, only Didar’s hair grew back. She pushed the strands that kept falling on her cheeks behind her ears or kept them in place with bobby pins. Visits to the bathhouse became less dramatic and the only pain that reminded Didar of her recent torture was caused by the bobby pins that always got stuck and took along a lot of hair when they were removed.

In the meantime the Russians had shaken off the Tartar Yoke, and the Great Princedom of Moscow that was now being discussed in history class brought temporary relief. Serjozja kept a low profile, as did his followers.

Didar continued to shine in all subjects and, as the best student, she was allowed to attend a festive meeting in honor of the eighteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, in order to give a speech for the city’s prominent party council members about the importance of learning for the advancement of socialism.

Tatu had to stand in line at five in the morning for bread three times a week, but other than that they managed well enough with the food stamps that the

railway gave her father. Nasima and Didar's winter coats were handed down to Ahmed and Tahir, and Tatu was busy sewing coats for her daughters from a men's kersey coat that her uncle had given her.

Every now and then Lukman would come by with a brown paper bag under his arm. Then the whole hall and the kitchen smelled of leather and tobacco. He would place his blue-edged cap in the middle of the table and nobody dared to touch it. After his visits Aunt Rosa would make stock from real meat. She would walk by her neighbor's door a little too often, but Tatu kept quiet, until Aunt Rosa couldn't stand it any longer and knocked on the door to borrow a skimmer or some salt. But Tatu wouldn't bite; with a curt nod she would leave her neighbor behind with her agony of an unshared satisfaction.

In the meantime the newspaper and the radio couldn't handle the stream of unmasked enemies. Under pressure from the building avalanche, the *Pravda's* black letters were crooked and bent; they formed a carousel of evil mugs of enemies of the people, with long noses, warts, fangs dripping with blood, and mean little eyes. The radio's black membrane spit out hot saliva from the honest glands of the people. It demanded the death of all dirty dogs.

At Didar's school the geography and craft teachers were convicted by the school party council and fired. Shortly thereafter the chairwoman of the party council had to leave due to laxity and insufficient watchfulness. The school principal looked wan and, for hours at a time, would not leave his office. The children were told that the world revolution would be postponed and that the advancement of socialism would be limited to their country due to a growing number of invisible enemies, disguised as Soviet people, who ate away at the system from within.

That day Didar was done early at school because a replacement for the geography teacher had not yet been found. She walked along the tall fence that screened the Red Count Pogorelski's house from the muddy street. The recently painted green planks were attached so thoroughly to one another that Didar sought in vain for a

crack through which she could gape at the lackey with the white gloves. Disappointed, she decided to wait in front of the arched gateway. The home owners didn't appreciate peeping Toms, but maybe the gate would be half open and she could catch a glimpse unobserved of the immense courtyard with the birch thicket, the lackey and the naked statues.

But the gate was shut tight and there was nothing else for Didar to do than to go home. She turned the corner, onto Third Red Army Street, and almost ran into Tahir, who would have raced by if she hadn't grabbed his sleeve.

"Hey, why aren't you in bed?"

Tahir had been sick for a few days and was allowed to stay home.

"They took the Countess away!" he cried.

"When?" She was already running down Third Red Army Street without waiting for his answer, then down Fourth Red Army Street, then down the Street of the Paris Commune, then across the Square of the Ten Year Anniversary of the Revolution until she ran onto her own street and stopped, overcome by sudden fear. 'They' had been here, 'they' had walked up the stairs that she had ascended hundreds of times, 'they' had entered the room where she had sat for hours, and now 'they' were gone, together with something that had also been hers.

"They came when everyone was gone. I looked through the window and saw the black raven. The Countess talked to Marie and left her in front of our door, and she had nothing with her, and when they were gone I went downstairs and brought Marie in with me," Tahir related, out of breath.

"Breathe through your nose," said Didar, and pulled him inside.

At home they found Tatu, who was staring desperately at the little dog that had installed itself on a piece of cloth.

"Allah great and good! What am I to do with that animal?"

She was holding a little pouch that was tied with a piece of string. "This was hanging under her belly."

Bones, Didar inferred.

While Marie Antoinette went for the small bones with bubbling abandon, the lines in her forehead rippled incessantly, as if the gnawing was accompanied by a large variety of contemplations. Now and then she would raise her bulging, ever doleful eyes before lowering them again to dedicate herself to her last dog supper.

Tatu watched the pug with a mixture of disgust and fascination. Before she left, she muttered that this creature was the ugliest dog she had ever seen and that the Countess was truly blessed with a heart of gold to be able to love something like that.

“Still, some people are dirtier than dogs,” she added suddenly, and left.

Marie Antoinette fell with the same greed on a small bone that Didar had saved for her. When she was done, she stuck out her pink tongue a few times and laid her woolly head on her crossed paws.

“Now,” Didar said. She held out one hand while patting the dog on her back and behind the ears with the other, like the Countess always did.

Tahir placed the little ball in the palm of her hand and squatted down.

The pug raised her head, licked the ball and went back to sleep. Her body, satisfied by the bones, felt pleasantly heavy in Didar’s lap.

When she held the ball in front of her nose a second time, Marie Antoinette changed her mind and gulped it up all at once, and again laid her head on her thin paws.

Didar and Tahir looked at each other fearfully, but nothing happened. The pug’s ears trembled softly, as well as her tail, but apart from that she seemed to have simply dozed off.

After having remained motionless with her hand on Marie Antoinette’s neck for half an hour, Didar felt that something had changed. The dog’s small body lay just as heavily on her lap as before, but it felt different, not as comfortable. The tasty bones, the Countess, the silly snoring that had accompanied her most of her life, the gentleness, laziness and gluttony that characterized the pug breed, everything that had filled Marie Antoinette’s round little body until now had changed into a strange substance that was pressing more and more heavily on

Didar's thighs. And still she didn't dare get up or take her hand from the dog's neck, as if this simple movement would put an end to the casualness with which Didar and the world had until recently faced each other.

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4.

Not a Horse Thief

Because Faruk's mother was not a worker, she didn't have the right to give birth in an operating room. From the moment he saw his first rather dull light of day in the hall of a maternity clinic, there was confusion concerning his person. When Adlifa came to, she found a small, wrinkly being with a mean, distorted little face and a mess of black hair lying on her belly. A girl, that started screaming instantly. Adlifa thought she could even see a row of sharp teeth in her open mouth. It couldn't possibly be her child. Besides, two Moscow mullahs and a sage from her hometown had all predicted independently of each other that she would have a boy. And hadn't she heard the nurse who helped with her labor mention "a boy", just before she fainted from exhaustion? From her bed Adlifa started pulling at the sleeves and hems of all passing white coats. "This is not my child!" Some looked at her sternly. "Civilian, you are crazy. Stop this nonsense at once and take care of your child."

After trying in vain to find somebody who would listen, Adlifa decided to find the maternity nurse who had helped her. She got up with difficulty, stuck her feet in her felt boots and went stumbling through the crowded hall. The baby girl that she held against her bosom was squirming and mewling like a cat. That took away Adlifa's last doubts about the strange ethnicity of this baby. All the nurses she encountered looked different than the woman whose freckled face had bent over hers and who had even made the sign of the Cross. As she passed by the long row of beds, she stopped at every newborn. But her heart was racing so much that she couldn't trust it.

The hall had come to an end and Adlifa now stood on the landing. Because she couldn't go back without finding the freckled nurse, she ascended the wide

staircase and found herself in another hall, light and empty. The arcades of the doors reached up to the high ceiling and it smelled very clean.

Adlifa was slightly taken aback after the muted bustle downstairs, but her desperation gave her new strength. She pulled at the shiny doorknob and stepped inside a room that was so large that the walls and the ceiling were far beyond her range of vision. Even the baby seemed impressed and kept quiet. A group of people in white coats broke up in surprise.

“What are you doing here?” a man’s voice asked.

“It’s not my child!” Adlifa cried and rushed toward the people to see if the nurse was not among them. But before she got that far, she felt iron hands on her shoulders, and somebody took the baby away. “Civilian, you are not supposed to be walking. You need to rest and nurse your baby.” Her legs got so weak that they could no longer carry her torso. “Postnatal fever... they are all healthy Soviet babies...”, Adlifa heard. The voices floated further away until she finally collapsed.

Adlifa had already come to, but she wasn’t opening her eyes. Even though it was quiet around her she knew she was not alone. Then she turned her head to the side, and saw a baby. He had calm, blue eyes and his eyebrows, or rather the little arcs that would one day be covered in short hairs, were shaped like a roof, which gave his face a vulnerable quality. Gratitude toward Allah came over her like an ocean wave. She dove into those paradisiacal waters and could only open her mouth wide and shut it again, open and shut, instead of whispering God’s name in the minuscule ear, the first thing her child should hear on this earth.

“He has been found.” The Russian nurse with the freckles bent over Adlifa and made the sign of the Cross above the baby’s head. “A gypsy woman had switched him with her baby. She needed a son, but when she had a closer look at his little hand, she didn’t want him anymore. It won’t be a good horse thief, she said. And he will die more than once.”

It was the beginning of April and there was still frost in the air, but the sky was already lighter. Black birds clashed in midair and swarmed around in dizzying, death-defying loops. The rooks have arrived, Adlifa thought, half an hour after leaving the maternity clinic.

The frantic dance took place above the soggy streets, the bleached church domes and the Muscovites' weary heads. The rooks shook the thousands of kilometers off their small bodies by diving in these loops, so that they could dedicate themselves to their next life purpose lightly and blithely later on.

As Adlifa gingerly avoided the dirty, slippery islands of snow, she pressed Faruk firmly to her bosom. Her husband Zaher carried a bundle containing her bloody nightgown and other used rags. Since Faruk had been returned to his mother, he had slept for almost forty-eight hours; even food hardly interested him, as if only sleep and dreams could erase the nastiness of his first odyssey. Even when Adlifa swaddled him tightly in a blanket, so that only his little nose and eyes remained uncovered, and took him outside in the cruel April air that even made her recoil briefly, and when the rough index finger of his father, stinking of tobacco, sealed his cheek, Faruk didn't open his eyes. And now those eyes were wide open. Adlifa stopped to receive his gaze, but it wasn't to be caught. It followed its own way and didn't meet hers. Adlifa looked up and understood that it was the birds that kept her son's eyes spellbound. There was a kind of ecstasy to be seen in his little face, which emphasized his vulnerability as something underlying, and she realized it was not just his eyebrows. Her two daughters never looked that way, nor did her nephews. Her heart contracted, she held him even more tightly against her and brought his face up to hers. "Faruk, Faruk, look who's here," she stammered. "It's your Mama who is back."

Zaher didn't recognize his resolute wife, she who juggled her children like a circus artist at home, and he stood speechless beside her. The ecstasy slid from the small face, which suddenly wrinkled and reddened as the baby started to cry and the tight little bundle squirmed. The brown fabric swelled more and more, no

longer capable of holding the desperation, until Adlifa pulled back her face, shocked, and Faruk could calm down under the open sky.

It was not only hunger that made Adlifa decide to travel to her village with Faruk. Her oldest daughters, six-year-old Hadija and four-year-old Zaynab, were to stay with their father, or rather in the care of her sister-in-law, who lived in the center room. She was the wife of Adlifa's oldest brother, who had owned the wooden two-story house in the Samotechnaya Alley before the revolution.

Shocked by the revolts throughout the country and in order to combat the destructive hunger, the communists had made a deal with the farmers. Taxes in kind replaced the complete confiscation of agricultural products, and the emaciated farmers could temporarily catch their breath. Even city dwellers became hopeful, awaiting the cornucopia. But it was not only the hunger, in fact it wasn't the hunger at all, that made Adlifa travel to Aktukovo, nor was it so that her mother could hold the first grandson in their family, even though Adlifa pretended that it was. The real reason, which Adlifa told nobody, was to visit the sage who had once predicted, just after she had been married off, that her third child would be a son. She knew that he was still alive; the communists had left him alone because he wasn't an official mullah. Before the revolution his fame had reached far outside the Tatar villages of the Urazovski district. Tatar merchants from Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan came to him, even Bashkirs from Ufa. Everybody could count on his advice for a few coppers wrapped in a piece of cloth or a small bowl of kefir soup with dumplings placed in front of his hut on departure. It was said that the sage had studied in Istanbul and had worked at the printer Shārāf Bros. in Kazan, who printed not only religious books but also travel accounts, plays, and scientific treatises. The worldly insight into the human soul was therefore not alien to him. As long as Adlifa could remember, he would sit in his hut on the outskirts of the village in the summer, and during the winter one of the villagers would take him into his home.

What Adlifa wanted from him now was not practical advice but comfort, to heal the heartache that had been giving her sleepless nights ever since Faruk's birth. It was as if her feelings for her little son existed independently of her and were therefore vulnerable to all blows from outside. If only her love for Faruk could return to her and become a part of her organism! Then Adlifa would not suffer so and she would be able to protect him with the force of her body, as she could Hadija and Zeynab. At night she would wake up all the time, and because she didn't quite trust her eyes, she would place her ear right above her son's little nose. "Oh Allah," she would pray, "For him I would happily have a round belly for the rest of my life."

She was so weakened that Zaher, who usually submitted quietly to all his wife's decisions, began objecting to her trip to the east, while Adlifa only became more rushed, afraid that the wise man would die in the meantime.

Adlifa boarded the passenger train to Nizhny Novgorod grim faced, in her a sign of utmost determination. The train had recently started leaving twice a week from the Kazan Station. Zaher's worried expression had begun to irritate her so much that she sent him away. Now that she had found a spot on a bench between a soldier and an old man with a caved-in nose, her only care was to protect Faruk from the evil eye. She placed a chintz cloth over his face and felt for the hundredth time under her garter-belt to check that the little silver spoon was still there, her most valuable possession after Faruk. The spoon that had been given to Hadija at birth and had survived the revolution, the civil war and the famine, and now it was meant for the saving words of the sage, who would not only soothe her heart but also her trembling hands, so that they could resume their task and underskirts and men's white shirts would flow on the floor from the shiny black Singer as before.

Despite all her sleepless nights, it was not hard for Adlifa to stay awake. If everything went well, the train would reach Sergach station early in the morning, and from there it was a mere fifteen kilometers to her village. Without saying a word to anybody, Adlifa kept a sharp eye on the passengers in the carriage. Faruk

never made a sound all this time. Only when dusk fell and most of the passengers had dozed off with their caps over their faces did she take away the little cloth to nurse him. She ate a few tasteless barley cakes herself, whispered a lullaby in Faruk's ear and continued her night watch.

When the train came to a standstill with much shaking and puffing, she felt no fear, even though the stories about gangs of thieves around the railway were still fresh in her memory. She covered Faruk's little face with the cloth again, just in case, and put the spoon in her coat pocket so she could immediately give it up if need be.

But the trip was uneventful, apart from a few tirades which sounded weary rather than threatening, as if even evil had to take a break after the wretched war. For the rest there was no shooting, no screaming, there were no delays due to brigades searching for counter-revolutionaries. However involved she was with her little son, Adlifa did not forget to quickly thank Allah and to ward off the shaitan before leaving the sleeping train. She went to the station building hoping to find a horse and cart.

On the surface the sage had hardly changed: the same prominent, blushing cheekbones, the same blue eyes with the transparent layer over them that made his gaze unfathomable, the same trembling reddish goatee that Adlifa had always wanted to pull as a child. Only his skin, that had always been very thin, was stretched even more tautly across his bones, giving the impression that he could tear at any moment, with the nasty result that the wise man's insides would be exposed.

It was the lower lip that brought the final blow to the sage's honorable appearance. She spoke to him of her heartache; she even shared with him her anxiety about the gypsy woman's predictions which at first she'd wanted to keep to herself, because it was unseemly for her, a good Muslim woman, to believe the talk of a heathen. But she could not keep her eyes off his wet, pouting mouth. First Adlifa only saw that stretched piece of flesh that seemed completely locked

in its own foolishness, but the more her story advanced, the more it became a part of his face, giving the sage the appearance of a wronged child.

But that was not the worst of it. It was merely a sign of what would come. Or rather of what would not come, because after her animated account it became deathly quiet in the hut. Not a word, no advice, only the silence that became more and more empty. At last the sage rubbed his cheeks with the palms of his hands and started praying. It was as if he hid his face not only from Adlifa, who continued to look at him with Faruk on her lap, but also from himself, from his third wise eye, with which he used to be able to fathom invisible matters.

When he was done, the sage shuffled toward Adlifa and, without looking at her, he took Faruk's head in his hands. In the short prayer that he mumbled with eyes closed, he asked Allah to show mercy and to ward off shaitan. In short, he did the same that Adlifa had done constantly since the birth of her son. When he was silent, he removed his hands and sat back on his little stool.

Adlifa understood that it was time to leave. She thanked him, walked out, and placed the spoon in its piece of cloth between two beams by the door.

At home Adlifa heard from her mother that the sage hadn't spoken since the revolution. Not out of fear for reprisals: he still did burials since the village Mullah had been taken away and the other from the nearest village of Kuzueh had died of starvation, along with his entire family. How the sage had survived the hunger years was a mystery, because he had never sown anything or kept any animals. Like the others who were weakened by hunger, he simply stayed in his hut for weeks. But when the survivors crawled out in search of young stinging nettles, they saw the sage sitting cross-legged in front of his door. Since then nobody had heard him talk; he only mumbled. Sometimes someone would put a piece of bread or a dried fish in front of his door, and so the old sage kept going, brittle and careful, like a shadow that became more detached with every passing day from the new life in which Adlifa would have to manage without his comfort.

Spellbound as she was by the feelings that had rushed over her reason like a wave, Adlifa had forgotten to register her son in Moscow. So she decided to do that in the village. She carried Faruk to the small Records Office that was established in one of the rooms of the former mekteb. A red flag, planted on the gable, hung listlessly down. Above the door, a grubby cloth banner with clumsy black Russian letters spanned the width of the house front.

“Enter, comrade woman!” she heard from the small upstairs window.

Adlifa opened the door. The male voice turned out to belong to a woman sitting at a table, under a picture of a sly-looking Lenin. The woman’s hair was uncovered and short-trimmed and she wore a khaki shirt that was stretched taut around her waist by a soldier’s belt. She threw a cigarette stub on the floor and crushed it with her boot. “I’m listening.”

Adlifa took her identification from her pocket and handed it to the official. “Can I register my son here?”

The woman took a piece of paper from a drawer and dipped her pen in a small ink pot.

“Your name, nationality, date and place of birth, marital status, social class.”

“Adlifa Bedreddinova, Tatar, born in 1897 in the village of Aktukovo in the Urazovski district, housewife, married to Zaher Sadreddonov, Tatar, born in 1893 in the village of Kuzueh in the Urazovski district, worker...”

The scratching pen stopped and was dipped in the ink again. “Date of birth of the new civilian.”

“April 3rd,” said Adlifa.

The woman raised her head and stirred the pen in the ink pot. She seemed overcome by a thought that prevented her from doing her duty properly. The pen simply refused to leave the pot before something was cleared up that now darkened the official’s face like a cloud. “But it is May 3rd now.”

Adlifa couldn’t deny that, and because she didn’t know where the woman was going with this, she remained silent.

“Sit down, comrade woman.” The official indicated a small bench by the door. “I can’t think like this.”

She turned around and looked up briefly at Lenin. Then she shook her head in despair, stood up and strode from the window to a safe and back.

Suddenly she stood before Adlifa. “Could you hold him by the window? I need to have a good look at him. You don’t have any certificate proving he was born on April 3rd?” she asked as she devoured Faruk with her eyes.

Adlifa took a few steps back to where it wasn’t so light, just in case.

“He is so small... he could be born today. You see, I can’t have him being born on April 3rd. I wasn’t there and you have no proof. I only want the truth, the absolute truth. There is no room for lies and deception in our new world.” She tugged resolutely at the hem of her khaki shirt. The greenish fabric stretched even more tightly across her bosom. Then she gave Lenin a bright look.

“Faruk Zaherov, May 3rd, 1922, the village of Aktukovo, arrondissement Sergach, Urazovski district, Nizhegorod region, Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.” She followed her busy pen out loud. “Those who are not with us are against us!” she added while she handed the paper to Adlifa. “Good luck, comrade woman.”

Well, I suppose he was born twice then, Adlifa thought as she looked tenderly at her little son, who had meanwhile fallen asleep. She walked the dusty road – it hadn’t rained for weeks – to her mother’s house.

The following weeks in Aktukovo were marked by unexpected and violent thunderstorms that lasted for hours, so that the villagers had to relieve themselves in a bucket; you couldn’t even stick your nose in the vegetable garden; the soggy hikes to a neighboring village where fishermen traded prickly pikes for buckwheat grits or tobacco; the daily fanatical scrubbing of the floors by Adlifa’s mother, so that she would especially remember her unforgiving butt, as if the floor had to suffer since she couldn’t attack her husband any longer because he was dead; the ever bubbling kettle with Faruk’s dirty diapers; Faruk himself, who tried to catch the sunbeams with his little hands; and the deserted streets of the

village, cleared of gossipmongers and nervously clucking chickens since the civil war and the famine. Life was hiding elsewhere and didn't show its face. It was as if a fifth, yet unknown season had arrived. While Adlifa walked out, holding Faruk against her bosom – she had forgotten how it felt to just walk with her arms by her sides – her head rang with the laughter and jeering of the children who, for lack of parents, could never be born.

The horse butcher with his sloppily boarded up gate, the mosque with the minaret that stuck up in the air, surprised, like a goose neck, the empty marketplace with a brown puddle in the center... even the young, still slippery alder and birch leaves seemed hollowed out and depressed the spirit.

Adlifa barely managed to force herself to visit her father's grave at the cemetery that, according to Tatar custom, was located on a hill with a birch thicket. Between the white tree trunks she saw the praying sage. According to her mother he came here every day and when he was done with the dead, he also prayed for all those who had disappeared or had starved to death and who had been buried elsewhere or not at all, because during the famine people could barely stand on their swollen legs, let alone handle a shovel. And then the sage would begin all over again, with the longest dead.

Now the sage stood motionless before a grave with his face buried in his hands, only his reddish goatee trembling slightly. Adlifa was sure he had seen her, even though he screened himself from the world with his penitent hands. She didn't dare look at him, afraid even with her look to come between him and that to which she had no access, that which overpowered all her fears for Faruk.

When Adlifa left the cemetery she looked back briefly and saw his bowed head among the iron half moons, and she automatically began to walk faster.

Faruk began to cry and Adlifa realized she had already passed the market place and had run the whole way, away from the cemetery and the weeping sage who washed his emaciated hands in guilt, so that she could return to Moscow with a lightened heart.

From that day on Adlifa began to get better. She learned to walk with her arms down again and trusted Faruk to her mother for the first time to go fishing with the village women.

Adlifa was just about to leave for Moscow; a train was expected at the Sergach station in two days. While she was changing Faruk's diaper, she found the little silver spoon with the blessing that curled up along the handle, hidden in the cloth in which Faruk was wrapped. The sage had returned his reward. Not to Adlifa, but to Faruk, who would need his belated blessing more than anyone else.

And so Faruk was born for the second time in Aktukovo, with a silver spoon almost in his mouth. His official date of birth would forever be May 3rd.

On the way back, in a freight car, squeezed between soldiers who hoped to see and hear Lenin in Moscow and learn to understand communism even better, Adlifa thought back to the words of the gypsy woman. Somebody who would die more than once was headed for immortality, she decided, and that was a bonus in these uncertain times.

Because it was stuffy, somebody had opened the sliding door a little and Adlifa could see the blue of the sky and the green of the earth, two simple stripes framed by the wooden door beams, which combined into something so astonishing that Adlifa even forgot her little son for a moment and stood staring out with open mouth. For the first time since the birth of Faruk and maybe for the first time in her entire life she thought of Allah outside of prayers, celebrations, mumbling mullahs, caps, head scarves, cleansings, graceful ligature and his sixty-six names, outside of everything He needed to keep his face hidden from the people.

And He also thought of her, because what she was seeing now was Him, briefly sliding apart the palms of his hands. And wasn't it He who had kept the sage alive, so that he could continue to pray and to wash his hands in guilt, for these soldiers, too, who could build communism with bloody hands but with languishing hearts.

Adlifa sat down cross-legged. She placed Faruk on his back between her thighs, so that his little head could rest on her belly and his face was in the sight of Allah.