TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



by VANECHKA

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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 20: about elegiac couplets (in a way)

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> "Outwardly charming, the birthplace. Seems motherly, yet cunning, bewitching."
> — "Between Dog and Wolf" by Sasha Sokolov

Wunst upon a time, I packed me a bundle, a right big un, laced up me lapti, nice and tight, trimmed me beard, even as can be, mustered up me courage, both holy and heathen, just to be sure and just in case, hopped on me wooden lil'steed and galloped out of Tulubaika. T'first question that popped into me head was "which road should I take?" So there I stand, in t'middle of t'village, ponderinn: should I go right, or left, or straight ahead, or even back? I could go t'betwixt directions and all, but there's only four roads — 'tis a crossroads, not an open moor, mind thee. Not a livinn soul 'bout, no un to ask, except for two magpies that been gatherinn twigs for their nest 'round these parts for ages. Folk say: go right — tha'll lose thy horse, go left — tha'll lose thyself, go straight — tha'll find happiness. But what 'bout goinn back? What's back there? No un knows what's there, either nobody's ever traipsed over or they never pitched up back to tell what's in that backness. Well, methinks,

right and left are cunninn bastards, move as tha moves. So come what may, I'll toss a coin. I reach into me pocket for a coin, realise I need two coins — there are four directions, mind thee. There I stand, countinn, workinn out me plan: two tails — I'll go north, straight ahead, two heads — south, un head, un tail — west, un tail, un head — east. I've grown weary of beinn fate's thrall, so weary that me jowls ache in t'morns when I look at meself in t'mirror, so I decided I'd rather be a thrall of chance.

Thus, by t'will of chance, 'tis more honest-like, and honesty's just what I've always been short of in life, well, not me meself, a decent chap, but me surroundings — all me days I've been beset by cheats, knaves, thieves, and murderers. Me grandfather's oak house was wunst "requisitioned" by bandits after our motherland got clobbered and turned arse over tit wunst more. Hand over thy oak house, they say, Uncle Ildar, look at that, they say, tha's grown love handles, now, they say, we'll dekulakise thee, Uncle Ildar, and build a grand communism in our bonny Tulubaika or mayhap even a grand future with free market relationships and democratic falderal like everywhere else, or perchance, see, even better, for here in Tulubaika, everything's better than elsewhere, that's t'only point on which I'm in full agreement with those comrades.

Startinn with our river, also called Tulubaika, by t'by, lookinn, honest truth, like liquid crystal, though I've never clapped eyes on crystals, except icy uns — we've got plenty of those danglinn from roofs in winter. An icicle wunst skewered me schoolmate's head clean through.

Sad to recollect such things, ‘course, but, as they say, it is what it is. Any river and any body of water is also a liquid crystal threadinn t’earth hither and thither, and ours is t’purest of all, springinn from wells somewhere deep in t’forests where ferns bloom and fly agarics grow knee-high. Tha stoops down, presses thy lips to its smooth, cold surface, drink and feel summat click inside thee, as if someone’s crankinn up t’love for t’motherland a notch, un click to t’right, or mayhap two, if not three, for sometimes tha’s so parched that for a swig of water tha’ll love not only t’motherland but its rulers, too. T’river’s swift, a whoppinn brook that doesn’t even freeze in winter and keeps hurtlinn full pelt to somewhere out there into nowhere along its path, laid, mind thee, of its own accord, not by t’will of fate, nor by t’will of chance, like me, a daft beggar, but by t’will of its own river spirit, to pour into a bigger river or straight into a sea or ocean, for none of our folk have ever found out whither Tulubaika flows and where it ends, as if it doesn’t end anywhere, makes a full loop ‘round t’earth and flows into itself.

T’name of both t’village and t’river comes from either t’Tatars or t’Bashkirs, or, accordinn to some smartarses, from t’Mongols themselves, un of whose tribes was called just that. They’ve long since vanished, some Russified[1], some blended into t’lay of t’land, and some nomaded off further beyond t’skyline, dealinn along t’way, as our late local historian San-Sanych[2] told me, in beaver pelt trade and various haulage. Only I don’t trust San-Sanych — although he was a sharp and learned chap, finishinn either three or four universities, or mayhap ten (‘tis like with children — after three tha stops counting), he didn’t mind

his tongue at all, neither what came out of his gob, nor what he poured into it, for, judge for thyself, tha can find neither a single toothy, furry wee beaver nor proper roads, t'sort where after a couple of versts[3] tha doesn't leave all thy wheels in t'ruts, even should tha look high and low.

Zinaida Semyonovna, t'local wise woman, claimed that "tulubay" means "lame" or "crooked" in t'old local languages, just like our twisty river, whose bends and turns t'whole village couldn't tally. Supposedly, first there was t'Tulubaika River, then people came here, Russians, Tatars, Bashkirs, Mari, and cobbled together a village. I, and me father, and me grandfather, who, by t'by, was a true Tatar by blood and name and, wherefore, understood summat in Tatar words, and t'rest of t'respected lads and lasses before and after him, always held a special position in t'village and thus had our own, only right version of t'name and t'history, for our surname, Tulubayev, explains everythinn, says a lot, and carries all t'needful knowledge within itself. Grandfather used to tell me that there was a chap named Tolubay, with an "o" instead of "u", who owned a good bunch of land 'round here back in t'seventeenth century or earlier, and that it means "a richly rich man", a hale and respected person, and a lad was given this name, Tolubay, if, as soon as he crawled out of his mother, it was plain that this was surely how he would end up. Only that when t'first census happened, Russians wrote "u" instead of "o" and thusly it stayed, and t'folk started sayinn it this way, too. Me grandfather, to put it mildly, disliked t'wise woman Zinka[4] and her drebbeden 'bout t'lame and crooked and ofttimes secretly called her a daft witch at home, which she most likely

was, judginn by her long history in t'yellow house but more, of course, by t'nonsense she spouted, whether tha laughs or cries.

Here's a droll case, for one: yonder in time, in summer, wunst, or mayhap twice, before everyone 'round was kindly asked to heave t'country up from its knees and shove it up into a bright future, or mayhap it was after — now tha can't even tell — when I was a wee green nipper, I met Zinaida Semyonovna amblinn along t'river in a fur coat (for t'sake of t'story I want to say beaver, but more like everyone else's — sheep), with a shaved noggin and her own pet drake named Valentin on a lead, whose purpose was fully unclear, for he neither laid eggs nor had any meat on him, just ate, shat, and quacked, and sometimes walked with his duck screwer hanging beside him. So, Zinka's zoominn along, crackinn sunflower seeds, scatterinn t'husks, and t'drake can't keep up with pickinn 'em up; I'm legginn it towards 'em with an aspen net to catch tiddlers, which used to be plentiful in Tulubaika in t'summer — tha just had to scoop up some water with t'tool to get a full net of fish, and either fry 'em for thyself on a campfire or give 'em to t'moggie at home. Zinaida Semyonovna stops, looks at me, silent, purses her lips like a duck, not movinn her face, and of a sudden asks:

— Where is tha off to?

— Nowhere, — I tell her, — fishinn.

— What is't tha's fishing? — she asks.

— Wee fishies, — I reply.

— Don't tha dare catch froggies, — she says.

And I'm like:

— Why would I need froggies, Granny Zina?

— Our river will snuff it without froggies, dry up, a brook will flow, and even that will go underground and drag us along with it straight into t'fiery inferno, — she says and crosses herself, in t'Starover[5] way, with two fingers.

Ooh, methinks, Zinaida Semyonovna, what biblical horrors tha has in thy head and tha manages to impart such things to me laddie's mind, but she's not 'bout to button it, and says, so she does:

— It's written in thy fate, Tulubayev, to live and pop thy clogs in Tulubaika, honest truth, I'm not fibbinn. As long as tha is here, Tulubaika is here, and as soon as tha is gone, Tulubaika's gone. Wherefore, if tha wishes to leave thy homeland, nowt will come of it, Tulubaika will protect itself, won't let itself perish.

And I tell her:

— What is tha makinn up, Zinaida Semyonovna? When I grow up, I'll scarper from here wherever I want. If I want, to Vyatka, if I want, to Khlynov, if I want, to Kirov[6], if I want, even to St. Petersburg or Leningrad itself, with Saint or without, Granny Zina. It makes no odds to me what its name is now — t'main thinn is to run as far away from here as possible.

She looks at me, silent, thinkinn, and t'drake Valentin quacks nearby.

— I feel sorry for thee, fatherless lad. Tha understands nowt, — she says, shakes her head, and toddles further along t'river.

I felt sad right away and didn't feel like fishinn any more, but not 'cause of her words, which clung to me memory — though not immediately — but 'cause I remembered me dad.

He loved life, but it had to be noisier, jollier, and more varied, and he had un thing on his mind: to scarper out of t'village as soon as possible, as far away as possible. Without askinn anyone, neither his parents nor me mother, nor me, he would roll off to un city or another and vanish for a month or two, then return with returnables. Now he'd brinn a new kartuz[7], now boots, now a sack of flour, now a radio-controlled car toy[8], now a portrait of an important state figure, a sovereign, a president, or a supreme secretary, whatever un calls 'em.

Thus so wunst — but not just wunst — while Dad was shabashing[9] in Vyatka, our beloved Tsar Gorokh[10] decided it was time for war. Come on, he said, all as un, for faith, for t'motherland, for t'fatherland, to t'roar of copper pipes, to t'shouts of "Huzzah!", let's bray t'mugs of t'supstates[11]; otherwise our motherland is kirdyk, complete and hopeless slavish darkness. From such a proposal, patriotism immediately surged in me dad's blood.

— T'war suits me just fine, — he says. — I want to fight, really do, I'm already fed up with this katorgan[12] life. At least I'll get out into t'light,

see t'world, see people, and learn more 'bout meself. To hell with thee, Tulubaika!

So he left, and we stayed. Mum wept herself dry, Grandfather swore himself blue, and I stood like an idol in t'nook under t'sovereign's portrait. I looked at him — tha has no conscience, Comrade Sovereign, no shame, no common sense. Why does tha need me dad? He has a thick tache, a prickly beard, kind eyes — tha needn't those, what will tha do with him there? He should only be put in front of a camera and broadcast all over t'country on telly. And not a word from him, not a letter, no useful or useless information, and 'tis nowhere to come from, since illiteracy had not yet been eliminated[13] and at that time no un in t'village could read or write — only priests and scribes? Me grandfather could, of course, but only in Tatar. Although mayhap everyone could, me and Mum and Grandfather, in Russian and Tatar and Bashkir and Mari and in everythinn at t'same time, even in runes on birchbark[14], but they refused to write, for 'tis scary to give events form and give 'em power over time, over thyself, as if at that moment they are transferred from t'rank of an event to t'rank of history, and history, excuse me, is a treacherous cunt, with un of her pale hands she strokes thy head, in t'other she holds a knife. 'Tis better to just say it out loud, to t'empty altar of a wee church surrounded by sad icons, or to a forest full of life, lookinn at thy droopinn mug in a puddle midst t'drillinn cries of waxwings, than to say it silently, lookinn at a sheet of paper, to scribble 'bout what happened, hope no un reads thy scrawl, takes a balalaika[15] off a nail or a saw, composes a symphony or some heart-rendinn ditty,

and t'whole village will roar, grieve, ponder — well, people used to live, laugh and cry, there were calm, difficult times, but soulful, and what now? We sit and pine, remember t'past, languish in nostalgic paralysis. And would Dad have had time to read our letters? War is a busy business: here tha shoots, there tha bandages, and there tha digs a hole, where a trench, where a grave, as luck would have it.

— Perchance, — says Mum, — at least t'prayers will reach him. Goddie will send 'em to him.

— How so?

— Through t'air, directly, silly, for Goddie in heaven sees all from there. He will find thy dad among a host of such poor souls and will deliver our thoughts and prayers to him straight from heart to heart like lepestricity through a wire. So let's go and pray, son.

Well, what do I do? I go, I don't want to upset Mum, tha can see 'tis not easy for her, and here I am with me "I don't want to pray to thy Christ Jesusovich, Mum, me grandfather is a Tatar, tha knows, so I haven't decided yet who I want to pray to".

Every morn we get up before t'cockerels, an hour's walk to t'local parish. If I refuse to go, grumble at her, say me feet are frozen, numb, won't walk at all, she sits me on a sledge and pulls me. On t'hill, looms large a big one-storey stone church of red brick with two green domes, with bonny crosses and an iron fence, birch trees are planted 'round it, still young, spindly, their branches droopinn. When t'bells ring, t'chime

is heard all ‘round, all t’way to Tulubaika itself, and t’window panes and souls tremble. We go in: a hall, an altar, a choir loft, ample space, gloomy, but cosy, frescoes on t’walls, mardy icons with round haloes.

— Why, — I ask, — are they round, Mum?

— What else should they be?

— Were I a saint, I would’ve had a square halo.

She smacked reverent me on t’lips then but, mind thee, although they hurt for a long time, I wasn’t mad at Mum — round means round, I don’t argue with me elders.

There’s no un in t’church except t’sleepinn watchman and two stiffs in t’side room — mayhap they were brought in t’eveninn. It smells of wax, frankincense, oldness, death.

— Pray, — she says.

— How? — I ask.

— Repeat after me. Bow down.

— God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God, cleanse me sins and have mercy on me. Thou who hast created me, Lord, have mercy on me, Lord have mercy, Lord bless, — Mum whispers loudly, bowinn, then falls to her knees, dragginn me after her so later me knees are black and blue all over.

T'floor is hard and cold. Candles flicker 'round, playinn with shadows. I see her prayinn with fervour, intent, her face brightens, smooths out, and I don't understand nowt and repeat after her like a lunatic.

As soon as dawn peeks through t'small windows, we're out of t'church, off to home. T'road there is uphill, back is downhill — easy. In winter, tha whooshes down t'icy snowdrift, snow gets into thy sleeves, down thy collar, but tha is happy. Tha has lost thy cap somewhere on t'way down, tha gets up, brushes thyself off, thy cheeks are red, burninn with fire, tha brushes thyself off, looks up, and there's Mum quietly cominn down with thy cap. Tha runs to meet her, grabs thy cap and flies down again. We go home, I'm happy, but Mum looks 'round. As un of t'schismatics, she didn't want to be seen by everyone else in t'parish — tha never knows, people can be different. Most have goodness inside, but sometimes it sits so deep that tha can't even see it under a magnifyinn glass. It made no odds to Mum which church to go to, and t'priest didn't mind either.

— Pray, — says Father Pyotr, — Marya, as much as thy soul desires. It is a good deed.

— And if someone says summat, Father?

— God is one for all, — says he.

— He may be un for all, but me grandfather has another un, — I said to him wunst, — and some, I heard, have several altogether.

— An observant young lad, — said Father Pyotr to me. — Love them too.

T'village's folk constantly whispered that they saw Father Pyotr wunst crossinn himself with two fingers when he was alone. Whether it was true or not, no un knows, but that's where their claim ended, for should they need summat — advice or a blessinn — t'loudest gossip-mongers went to Father Pyotr first. He had a large old black piano at home, on which he held concerts on holidays. I was there a couple of times, listened breathlessly, watched t'faces of t'audience melt from t'pleasantly flowinn music, although I didn't know t'names of t'tunes, but people said that t'composers were good, homegrown, both pre-revolutionary and post-, although there were more of t'former, of course. Father Pyotr was just like me Dad, a kind, affable chap with a generous beard, his face wise, young, as they say "without a hitch, without a glitch", but then, of a sudden, fast he aged, turned grey his beard, dim grew his eyes. Rumours began to creep 'round t'village that seven clergymen had allegedly been put against t'wall in t'district next-door, and in a nearby township three had been sent to katorga. Ours, not wantinn either of those, began to fear everythinn. He sat at home, peerinn out t'window with a haggard face and waitinn for 'em to come for him. Everyone pitied him, carried water and grub; t'local barber trimmed his locks wunst, and then, when t'cold came, people began to let him into their banyas to sleep and warm up, and so he went from un to t'other.

T'church was eventually closed and re-equipped for collective needs for

t'production of public goods. T'crosses were removed, and t'flags were put up, but, what's interestinn, magpies that nested under t'dome began to tear 'em off. They would hang a new one — t'magpies would tear it off, hang it — tear it off, and so on. T'local chairmen and powerlovers weren't fond of that at all and decided to close t'church for good, and to t'roar of t'youth, t'bawlinn of t'old and t'angry singinn of t'magpies, they threw down t'bells, burned t'icons, removed t'domes and melted 'em either for horseshoes or for shell casings, then blew up t'buildinn itself for bricks to later build a bright and beautiful future out of 'em, obviously. Honest truth, t'chaps who participated in that later all as un snuffed it at t'front, so they did; and Father Pyotr, havinn learned 'bout what happened, went into t'forest where no un could find him to ask advice or a blessinn. T'property from his house was confiscated. His piano was given to t'new school, but there it stood silent — no un knew how to play it.

Now, wunst upon a time, Mum dragged me to that church in secret from Grandfather and baptised me. They dipped me in t'water three times, read a prayer, and I popped back home with a wooden crucifix hanginn on me neck. Grandfather saw it, only shook his head and waved his hand. He always wanted me, his grandson, to be t'same Tulubayev — a Muslim. He had an old battered book in a leather bindinn, t'Quran written in Arabic letters, which he wrapped in several layers of gauze and kept in a chest under his bed, not lettinn anyone even look at it, let alone hold it, no un but me.

— When the right time comes, the boy will decide for himself whom to

be, — he used to say.

But t'right time was never there — I couldn't decide, so me Mum decided for me.

— Do you know, — he whispers, — grandson, which came first, Tulubayev or Tulubaika?

I hold his bony blue hand. T'smell in t'room is musty, it smells of a human, a human in bother and of bother itself, too (it has, tha knows, a particularly heavy aroma). 'Tis cold in t'wee room, gloomy. Light brazenly crawls through t'thick curtains. T'window is closed, there's no air. If tha opens it, draughts will burst in and do in t'sick man. Tears well up in me eyes, they want to in his, too, but they can't — don't have t'strength to well up. His cheeks and eyes are sunken, grey hairs stuck to his skull, lips swollen, cracked.

— No, Grandfather, — I say to him quietly. — I don't know.

Then he squeezes me hand, opens his eyes wider, is 'bout to say summat.

— I don't know either, grandson.

So he died. And who knows then, mind you, Grandfather? There on his bed I sit, pushinn t'tears back, but they keep cominn out and out, out and out. Sleep, methinks, Grandfather, you must be tired, I won't disturb you no more. I take me wooden steed, which, by t'by, he himself whittled for me (from a single piece of wood, mind thee) and I scarper.

Thus only un Tulubayev remained in Tulubaika, as if some significance had now crept into me, an unknown force, which, not havinn reached me Dad, took t'shackles off me Grandfather and put 'em on me. To hell with it, methinks, there's nowt more for me to do here, and off I gallop wherever me eyes look — straight ahead, for that's where, they say, un finds happiness. I gallop raisinn dust, I gallop for an hour, five minutes, ten — I don't remember. T'road ends, and t'forest begins. Underfoot branches crunch, slippery are t'leaves, it smells of damp, mulch; 'round me are birches, flickerinn in me eyes white walls in a black stripe, blurrinn me vision, lurinn me into their swirl.

Here in t'spring, me nameless, faceless friend and I gather birch sap into bottles. Tha takes a knife, cuts t'bark, find a chip or a branch, carve a trough out of it, insert it into t'birch's wound, put a bottle, leave, come back in t'morn, and 'tis full, t'bottle. Here hares roam, various wolves and stray dogs in packs, snappinn their jaws, growlinn at us, tails tucked, fur bristlinn — demons, in a word. Hearts beatinn, begginn to break free, like a sparrow from thy hands, t'cuckoo cooinn non-stop, thy feet lead thee, carry thee at a hare's speed, over leaves, over grass, over mud, over fallen trees, and tha silently sits in thy head, not stickinn out, huddled in a nook with fear, surrenderinn to t'will of instinct and chance. Here's a ravine — and tha tumbles down, through a raspberry thicket, juniper bushes, and plops into Tulubaika, into a backwater where swim wee fishies, frogs and fry. Water striders cut t'surface of t'river, waves run away from 'em, dissolvinn in t'slow current, which in winter is covered with a light crust of ice that crunches at t'touch like a

piece of candy made of burnt sugar. Turninn ‘round, tha looks — no un, no birches, no dogs, no faceless friends. Thus tha walks along t’river on t’road home, all wet, all mucky and scratched, hands bleedinn, elbows torn, shirt left without a sleeve. So it goes — tha starts a story, and tha doesn’t know what thickets it will lead thee into, what whirlpools tha will fall into, what tha will remember, what tha will forget, what tha will make up, and t’story, t’blighter of a creature, is indifferent to thee, it lives by itself, like a river flowinn into itself, returns thee to Tulubaika, to t’beginninn. They say that blood, just like a river, flows not only in t’veins of people, but also in t’veins of time. In spring, it warms up, collects molten snow from all ‘round, overflows, takes fields and bushes, so tha can even get into a boat and sail. In summer, it dries up — in t’heat ‘tis just like a beck; tha walks ‘cross t’stones without boots, gets stuck in t’silt, gets lost in t’reeds, collects shells, waits for pearl.

Then wanders tha along t’river together with thy lovely lass. A smile on her face, a wreath of daisies and dandelions on her head, a whirlpool in her eyes, warmth inside, tenderness, heart poundinn, and echoes spreadinn from it, reachinn and capturinn thee. Tha hugs her, kisses her, carries her ‘cross t’river in thine arms. She laughs, breaks free and plops right into t’water, grabs thee and pulls thee along with her, to splash ‘round, to frolic. Tha shall find no pearls in no shells, it isn’t meant to be — there’s no such thing in Tulubaika.

T’first time I saw her, I decided to climb t’Maslenitsa pole[16]. Drunk chaps used to fall from there, break their necks and spines, but now no

un dares to climb it, neither drunk nor for a damsel, but I did, mind thee, rushed up so fast that I didn't even notice. I came down with gifts, a jar of honey, an embroidered shawl, a Dymkovo bird[17], and pagan boons. We ate blini[18] with smetana and honey together and went for a walk 'round t'village, kneadinn t'muck with our boots, smilinn, talkinn 'bout birds, arguinn 'bout what colour a bullfinch's belly is — red or raspberry — whether a sparrow is t'husband of a tit, why rooks are late that year, and what t'chirpinn of a starling is more like. Its vibrations, we thought, were akin to t'sounds of a saw when Mitka t'Little Finger plays it singinn t'aria of a sleepinn cuckoo. "Oh, cuckoo, Cuckoo, don't tha dare sleep. Sing, Cuckoo-young lass, let us weep." They said that he wunst drunk too much Petrograd beer, played saw too much and cut off his lil'finger too much, which, however, made him sing even better, a spark appeared in his head, a special depth in his voice, and a special name in his character. So there we were, standinn hand in hand, watchinn t'Maslenitsa straw effigy[19] burn, t'tongues of flame ticklinn our cheeks from afar, Mitka's tongue producinn music, his saw moaninn like a leper, but everyone havinn fun, everyone watchinn winter die and spring come.

A month goes by or two, and we're still walkinn 'round t'village, arguinn 'bout birds, like why roosters sing at dawn, hens don't fly, and magpies love all things shiny so much, flyinn 'round in magpie patrols, collectinn kopeks[20], carryinn 'em to their nest to live well, richly. We hope that other magpies don't dekulakise 'em, seeinn such riches. We laugh, hug, kiss, sit together on me wooden steed and traverse t'expanse

‘round Tulubaika. T’wind caresses me face, her warm breath caresses t’back of me neck. From foot to horizon, oats are peacefully earinn, rustlinn, swayinn in ocean waves. Rumours and legends say that somewhere beyond t’skyline, after so many versts, Tulubaika ends. If there were a tree now, I would climb it to see what’s so interestinn in that place whither everyone is in such a hurry to get.

— Let’s go, — says me blessed lass, — away, to t’city, we’ll live beautifully, see t’world, show ourselves, travel t’lands of our great country. And mountains, and sea, and steppe — there’s everythinn.

She’s smilinn, almost plaintively, without blinking. I’m afraid even to think ‘bout uprootinn me roots, raisinn t’anchor, unfasteninn t’shackles, spreadinn me wings. ‘Tis a pity birds don’t sing in t’middle of t’field, for I feel blue a wee bit, I’d like to hear some chirpinn now.

— Who, — I say, — needs us there?

— Silly. Each other.

Of wit and romantic spirit, methinks, tha has no shortage.

— How should we travel? — I query.

Trains never made it to us — rails weren’t laid and still aren’t to this day. Nobody wants to stretch railway tracks through impassable thickets to t’chort knows where.

— On me wooden steed? — I clarify.

— Aye, even on thy wooden un, — she laughs.

I draw in air, me lungs swell up, me head fills up with ponderinns.

— Aye, but I'm t'only un here like that, a combine harvester, a mechanic, — I say.

— It's all right, they'll teach someone else. Vasya over there, he's not daft at all. He'll do for a mechanic, he's got straight hands, he has. Let's go, eh? This katorgan life is sickeninn, sittinn in me liver.

Summat has clicked deep inside. Me heart aches, it starts beatinn either faster or slower, t'devil knows, but it does so differently, with a new rhythm, like t'tambourine of a Siberian shaman.

— I can't, — I say, — Tulubaika won't let me go.

— We won't ask her. She can be thy wife, I'll be thy lover.

Barefoot, we flit along t'dusty road through fields of oats. Pebbles cut our feet, Sollie cuts t'back of our necks. Me hand in her hand, her hand in mine. Don't fall behind, I say to meself, or tha will be left here alone. We sprint and sprint, me legs get heavy, as if tha is runninn knee-deep in water, then waist-deep, then t'water reaches thy very chin, and tha can't run any more. T'lovers' hands unclasped, I lag behind, I can't walk, and t'lass of me heart distances onwards, disappears beyond t'skyline, falls off its edge all t'way to Moscow itself, studies to be an engineer, gets hitched, has children, lives more happily than not, grows old, saves kopeks for a coffin from her pension, goes to t'local authorities to ask

for a spot in t'cemetery, dies in peace not reckoninn 'bout that old lad from Tulubaika.

Perchance. How would I know? She wrote letters at first, replied to mine, and then stopped, and now her yellowed writings wrapped in several layers of gauze lay in a chest under me bed. I tried to chuck 'em away several times, but I failed, felt sorry. 'Tis still a memory, mind thee, and if I chuck 'em away, burn 'em, t'words won't go nowhere, they will live and grieve without a specific place of residence, knockinn on doors at night, not lettinn me kip, gratinn in me noggin. Such a fancy name too — Ariadne. How can un forget a name like that?

Her father, an exiled historian, was an interestinn chap, with a broad outlook, probably, for he knew such a name, and a sharp mind, for there was summat to exile him for. Whether he was a White, a kulak, or an anti-Soviet dissident[21], or some other chap of "extremist" beginnings — history modestly keeps mum, eyes on t'floor, hands behind t'back, cheeks blush, but it doesn't matter — t'main thing, as they say, is that they didn't do him in, and that's good, and livinn a year or a hundred in Tulubaika is not so bad, and there is someone here to teach history to, for only bandits are left, and ignoramuses, and me — also far from an academic. Besides, there's t'birch forest, t'river, fresh air, tranquillity, and boredom too, but such a kind, measured boredom that doesn't harm t'brain, which withers from t'city exhausts. Here thoughts can play, run, circle; tha can wake up and chancily scribble a book, add a philosophical reflection to it, stick it in t'right folder for t'censor while he's kippinn, and someone might read summat favourable, be surprised

at how unusually t'words've lain and want to come here, to Tulubaika. Well, why not? Forest, river, fresh air, tranquillity, and oat fields, lots of fields — pure splendour.

I don't remember when we started sowinn oats, but they planted such quantities that there was no un to reap 'em. Here, comrades, listen up, they say, a collective farm directive: we need, that is, volumes of oats, t'more voluminous t'better. Why? What for? 'Tis necessary, they say, 'tis necessary, don't ask extra questions, comrades, there are people up there, people of science, agronomists, who can think without you lot and your provincial thoughts. So, pickle 'em and put 'em in t'cellar, deeper, to t'rest of t'same thoughts, let 'em wait their hour in salt, garlic, and dill in sterilised jars. Well, thank thee very much, respected comrades.

Here's a machine for thee, kind chap, called a combine harvester, a most powerful thing, named after His Majesty Leader, a great gadget for turninn thy labours into straw and grub. Here's t'manual, eighty-eight pages, read to thy heart's content, sit down, steer, reap. Well, no hands were up, other kind chaps all vanished somewhere, some scarpered, some snuffed it, some drank it, and I, un of t'few responsible fellas, an avid tractor driver, mind thee, looked at t'damned machine, scratched t'back of me head, and thought, "well, to chort with it". I sit down, I steer, I reap. It seems to be goinn well, and t'work is right cushy — tha sits, steers, reaps all by thyself, hums a melody, ponders Istina. In spring, tha ploughs, sows, in summer, tha shepherds, mows, in autumn, tha is on t'combine, in winter — all sorts of wee things: choppinn wood for

some, slaughterinn a pig for others. Tha rises in t'morn, drinks a glass of water, has some bread, and off to t'field, grafts until eveninn, and then 'tis time for bed, and so tha spins like a Sisyphkin in a wheel.

I'm drivinn along on t'combine wunst, reapinn oats. T'noise of t'engine in me lugholes, t'noise of thoughts in me head, I'm angry at t'surroundinn reality, I don't accept such a sloppy, immoral, indifferent attitude towards meself, damn it. Who am I? A tremblinn creature? A thrall of fate?

— You, Tulubayev, calm down, — Bogdan, an old gypsy, forgotten in our village by his camp after t'war, a big chap with a black beard and long black-grey hair, says to me.

We sit with him in our un and only snifter shop, sippinn cognac in shots — a bonus for our labours and services to t'motherland, three stars, not some hoo-ha — a disgustinn thing, I must say, though better than rotgut. Yet it doesn't help to calm down at all, even though 'tis made accordinn to t'genre canons and GOST[22] and plays beautifully in t'glass, refractinn light like liquefied amber. Tha drinks and feels thy brain liquefyinn too, but only t'positively woven convolutions, so to speak, and t'negative uns remain, occupyinn t'vacated hut.

— I don't want to calm down, Bogdan, — I say. — Me life is worthless, tha wouldn't wish such a life on an enemy. I've buried me relatives, me friends have scarpered, gone to jail, become drunks, me missus has walked into t'sunset, and I'm still here, in me motherland, or she's on me, ridinn on me hump, whisperinn in me lugholes, "go, love, go."

— One doesn't choose one's mother... — says Bogdan, hiccupping, — land...

— I adore it with all me itchinn, sorrowinn heart. 'Tis written in me fate in large letters. Zinka assured me, and her drake only agreed. "Quack," he said, "quack, comrade, don't squirm, fate is what it is, there is no other and there can be no other."

— See? Wise was the duck. Accept your lot, and don't be stroppy. Rejoice that you have a motherland, I, a gypsy, don't have one. When the whole world is your home, you have nowhere to run.

— Thanks, — I say, — Bogdan, me fabulous friend, for thy deep thoughts. A lifesaver, truly.

— You are welcome, Tulubayev, mate, come to me if you need to unravel any secrets of the universe — I'm always at your service, just bring cognac.

— Aye, of course. Better tell me, why is thy wee universe such an evil cunt?

— It's because you are angry, Tulubayev. Don't be angry, and she won't be.

— Noted-understood, as they say, tha should go straight to t'academia with this insight.

Overwhelmed by a dark emotion, I am. Well, to chort with thee,

Tulubaika, I'm leavinn right now, right now, I'm gettinn on me combine, and I'm rollinn and rattlinn off to t'skyline, I'm ramminn it with me machine, mayhap I'll break through t'blockade. Get ready, cosmos, I'm on me way.

I grip t'steerinn wheel tighter, frown, grind me teeth and set off. Buzzes t'combine, whistles t'breeze, rustle t'oats, chirps t'grasshopper. It smells of diesel fuel, exhaust fumes, me cognac-soaked sleeve. I'm drivinn, massaginn t'vast expanse of me wee motherland, and I see a sign with big letters in t'open field, far away, blurry — t'modest moon gives almost no light. T'headlights on, I drive towards it. It declares "Tulubaika" crossed out with a thick red line. Well, methinks, here I am, close to t'denouement, to t'red line. No crossroads, no ravine, no thicket here, nowt, just an open field. Right here, midst nowhere, Tulubaika ends. Should I go straight, I shall find happiness.

Give it gas, I do, but this bastard goes and conks out. I start t'machine up — it won't start. I get out, scratch t'back of me head, check everythinn, swear, spit under me feet, read t'manual in t'beam of t'headlights, swear again ("Bloody 'ell!"), read again. Well, methinks, come what may, woe is me, ay up. I take off t'protective cover, climb inside, poke summat there. Sweat runs down me face, me heart beats like a piston, I feel sick, me fingers shake, and then summat clicks, t'engine starts, splashes of oil fly in me face, sparks, other hot unpleasant matters. Left no chance to shout, I cover me face with me hand and fall down on t'ground, unconscious.

Comes t'moment next, I'm lyinn on a cot in a square room that smells like a medicine box. Everythinn's floatinn, hardly visible, green walls 'round. That's something, tha knows, they're not yellow and that there are any walls at all.

— Ooh, love, tha's made a right mess.

I hear t'voice of Galina Grigoryevna, our doctor, a woman of broad soul and stature, soft looks and soft hands. I realise that only un of me eyes can see now, t'other un is pitch dark. Me left hand is burninn with fire, all in brilliant green, me fingers don't bend. She sighs, tautly smiles, adjusts her white cap.

— Lucky thee, — says she.

— What sort of luck is that, Galina Grigoryevna, with un eye missinn?

— Tha should be thankful that at least un is left, and that tha is alive at all. T'lads somehow found thee in t'field, dragged thee here — I almost fainted from t'sight of thee face. Where else in our village would un see such a horror?

— Thanks, — I say, — Galina Grigoryevna. For thy revelations and support.

— Aye, welcome, — she says, — lie down, get better, get treatment, recover. For where would our Tulubaika be without thee?

— It wouldn't, Galina Grigoryevna, apparently, it wouldn't be

anywhere.

Thus I stared at t'ceilinn for a week or two or a month — all like un day: an empty room, an empty head. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner — overcooked porridge without butter, a glass of pitch-black chai with plenty of sugar, no visitors, not even Bogdan, only Galina Grigoryevna bustlinn 'round, changinn bandages, dousinn me with brilliant green and iodine.

— Swear to Hippocrates that tha will cure me, I want to admire t'bonny expanses of our village with two eyes again.

— I'll swear, Tulubayev, but there's a problem — Hippocrates snuffed it long ago, he's unlikely to help us.

— What do I do now, a man like this?

— Where there's a will, there's a way, as they say. There's a place for anyone here. But they definitely won't take thee to the war now.

— What war? — I ask.

— Oh, t'supstates attacked us! So all t'chaps were loaded into wagons and off to t'front.

— Tha's pulling me leg! To t'front?

— Just like that, — she shrugs.

— I want to go, too.

— Whither?

— To t'front. To see t'dead foes.

— What will tha see there, Tulubayev? With un eye.

— Well, just a peek, — I say. — I'm sick of layinn here, I can't look at all this any more, even with half me sight. I can be a sniper — one eye's enough. There's nowt more for me to do here.

— Tha, — says Galina Grigoryevna, — will now be "a home front worker".

Thus war never reached us, it always happened somewhere outside, beyond Tulubaika, and only manifested itself in ink in newspapers, screeched with menacinn voices on t'wireless, glowed grimly from telly, lived in people's minds and on their lips, glared like t'northern lights from far away, until it took every single chap, leavinn only women, children, decrepit old folk, and me. To t'front, everyone to t'front, and tha, Tulubayev, sit here, tha isn't goinn nowhere, we'll put thee in a barn, tie thee to a post, and tha'll sit there, bitinn t'rope with thy teeth, sniffinn hay and muck, lookinn through t'cracks how Sollie rises and sets, listeninn to t'plaintive mooinn of cows and bleatinn of lambs, which from starvation give neither milk nor meat, and whose skins are gnawed by clegs, wolves, and mange. 'Tis alright, Tulubayev, don't fret, feed t'widowed, orphaned, aged, with spuds and oats, if there's no drought and no fires, if there's no plague, hungry deserters and brutalised and maddened war-crippled veterans, if there's strength in

thy soul and body, tha'll break through, Tulubayev, tha'll definitely break through. A healthy all-round good bloke has gone extinct in our parts — he's now like an unknown wee beastie. Now is women's time. Cherish women, take care of 'em, Tulubayev, mothers and grandmothers are holy, our land stands on 'em. Together you'll plough, sow, mow, prepare firewood, stoke stoves, bake bread, raise agriculture on your wee boundless patch of land, chew resin, cheeks, lips, nails, elbows, doubt Istina, as if there has ever been summat to doubt. Together you'll gather mushrooms, berries, oats, wheat, spuds, brew acorn coffa, drink linden chai, and do all other useful things for bodily and mental peace, for survival. Together you'll grieve, sort death notices, together bury t'old, forget faces, dress children in hand-me-downs, teach t'young everythinn you know, village things, simple things, be it handlinn a horse, sharpeninn an axe, choppinn wood, t'insides and outsides of a tractor, and how to tell where north is by t'stars. They wander, scrawny, skin and bones, through villages, between Bultyshka, Bekarikha, Orekhovshchina, and others, ragged, hungry, t'younger uns sit at home with a host of wee brothers and sisters, t'older uns roam from village to village, from village to village, begginn for alms, askinn for a piece of bread, a couple of eggs, or summat else to eat. We'll weave thee a basket, Uncle, or chop some wood, we're so hungry, and we have wee brothers and sisters sittinn at home. All we have left from daddy is a tunic with medals, they're very bonny, want to trade? 'Tis too big for us, look, Uncle, it just hangs, t'sleeves drag on t'ground, we have to roll 'em up, inconvenient, in a word, but it should fit thee, tha is a home front worker, tha doesn't have

and never had thine own tunic, no epaulettes, no medals, no orders, nowt to trade or sell, but in t'city, they say, they take 'em well, especially those for valour. Where are tha going? Wait, Uncle, don't scarper. We're not scary at all, and we're not sick. Knock-knock. Sorry, we promise not to knock on windows and doors any more, we won't scare thee, we just need a place to stay overnight. We're not askinn for t'stove, we can just lie in a nook, far from t'door or window, 'cause 'tis terribly draughty. We promise we won't nick owt, and does mister even have owt to nick? Our daddy is shell-shocked, he talks all sorts of drebbeden and crapola, he's boarded up t'windows with sacks, we feel sorry for him, 'course, but he's no help whatsoever. No, we don't want to go to school, we'd rather herd cows, we need to earn grub, even if 'tis milk and meat — it's better that way. As soon as September hits, t'rowans will flare up with berry ruby fire, and then they'll brinn a lot, a lot of grain on tractor sledges, and then everyone will have a hunk of bread, we needn't owt else but that, bread is t'most important thinn, as they say, tha doesn't need a fortune-teller to know that.

— Shan't you cross my palm with silver? — asks a gypsy lass, black-haired, black-eyed, in a red frock, either old or young — tha can't tell right away, and I'm just a wee nipper, I can't tell ages, for me, there's no difference between old and young. There are people taller than me, and there are people shorter. Those who are taller would be older — they should be respected. But I'm afraid to respect t'gypsy lass. See, I'm afraid of gypsies. Mum joked that she would sell me to t'gypsies if I misbehaved, which made me scared, I shut up, sat down on a chair, kept

mum, walked t'line, behaved decently, but if I had known then that if I had got into a gypsy camp, and they had taken me away from Tulubaika, I would have definitely done t'most mischievous mischief, but no, me head was daft, and t'ups and downs of life were unknown, not like now — I'm filled up, I'm beginninn to understand what goes where and why, how things are arranged in this life, where its carburettor is, where t'battery is, where to pour t'diesel, and where from t'exhaust laughs. And t'stench, 'course, even if tha plugs thy nose and just sits there until tha gets cramps in thy lungs.

— I see deep roots, I see high branches, — whispers t'gypsy lass, strokinn me palm, runninn her fingers over t'lines. — I see a river that flows into itself, I see a bird that knows no nest. I see a wheel that rolls but doesn't budge. I see a rider on a rocking horse.

I look into her eyes, and they are black, passionate, burninn and round like coins of t'highest denomination.

— Why is tha tellinn me riddles, love? I'm a tractor driver, not an academic. I'd like it on a silver plate, if possible. With honey. I like honey. Linden one.

She takes me palm and presses her long nail right into t'centre. Hurt, I pull me hand away, and she smiles, so menacingly, so deviously, like Baba Yaga[23].

— You will run from your planida, but it will catch up with you.

Well, methinks, that, love, I already know. So I sit in silence, quietly suppressinn a smile.

— Does it have long legs? — I ask.

— Long, long legs. Like a giraffe's. Have you seen any?

— Sure. In our Tulubaika, there's nowt we don't have.

T'gypsy camp is quartered in a glade by a post mill surrounded by willows. Inside t'crumblinn buildinn only birds live, and t'millers among 'em are, as known, so-so. T'wind whistles, t'horses neigh, t'mill wings creak, plaintively, as if they want to fly away but can't, for they're old now, they have no strength. A fire burns, logs crackle, a guitar twangs, adults dance, sparkle in bright get-ups, sing summat 'bout love, children scurry 'round, play tig, laugh. Stars sparkle in t'sky, a million carats each. They say un can read his fate from 'em, like from t'palm of his hand, only those who could aren't 'round here no more, so all that's left is to lie in t'meadow with thy un and only beloved, thy soul and heart, look at these distant lights and make up stories 'bout what this or that star is called and how our fates are intertwined, wound into a clew. I like watchinn kittens play with a clew — what a hoot! Hop-skip, t'ball rolls, t'thread stretches, under t'table, 'round t'legs of t'stool, to t'open door, outside, step-by-step down t'porch, along t'road and into t'woods, into t'thickets, to fall from t'skyline and — **poof!** — it's gone.

Thou shalt not desire thy neighbour's fate, as they say, but here I am, stand shyly to t'side, watchinn, lookinn at gypsies with envy. Here they

come and go, whenever they want, wherever they want. Their fate, t'place they were born, grew up and died, aren't in t'eighty-eight-page manual book written before they are out of t'womb. They are free, they flow here and there like a river, of their own accord. T'chance and fate are their thralls, not t'other way 'round. Lucky is un who believes in luck. Thus, quite by a lucky accident, a curly lassie with pink cheeks legs it up to me and hands me a couple of coloured ribbons.

— This is for you, boy, for good luck, when you grow up, tie them to a horse and off you go wherever. You won't get lost, — says t'lassie, giggles, and jumps off, and I don't even have time to squeeze out a proper thanks.

Well, methinks, if I'm to be a thrall to chance, then all t'way. I pack me a bundle, a right big un, lace up me lapti, nice and tight, trim me beard, even as can be, muster up me courage, both holy and heathen, just to be sure, and just in case, tie t'ribbons to me wooden Bucephalus behind his lugholes, jump on t'handsome's back and gallop off. I'm ridinn, chewinn a straw, glancinn from side to side. Tulubaika, me love, has become quite shabby, peelinn, both in soul and body. Year after year, everyone's gone: young folk with their children — to t'cities, old folk — to t'cemetery, those who stayed — turn into old folks or drunkards or both and then also to t'cemetery. Un by un, t'houses emptied, t'streets lulled shut. All quiet now, even t'wind is afraid to fool 'round, chases no newspapers, whistles through no chimneys. T'wee old huts have become ramshackle, grey-haired, lopsided, overgrown with moss. Inside, under t'collapsed roofs, behind t'broken windows, blackness has settled

and sits there tight, day and night, maliciously gapes, silently groans, guards t'halted cuckoo clock. T'carved platbands[24] fell off windows. Porches, yards, veg patches, orchards, and fields are ridden with weeds and stinginn nettles. No cat meows, no dog barks, no cockerel yells. Along t'road, not a rut, not a trace, not a car, only a rusty tractor stands, rooted to t'ground. A bucketless chain is down t'well where blooms t'algae. Shout or cry, even t'echo won't peep back. Ah and merry livinn in our paradise it is, if only there were folk to do it! Without me, no un will even remember that there is still such a village in our hinterland, or was, or mayhap there never has been un, and I made it all up — no un will check. I'm t'last un here, but 'tis time for me to go, too, whither say t'coins: two tails — north, two heads — south, mixed — east or west. To chort with it, do what tha must, be what will be, I say to meself, take a lungful of our balmy air, and toss t'coins up. They fly and fly, then fall and while they fall — **whoosh*, *caw-caw** — a magpie bastard grabs un of 'em and bolts off! Just like that!

Ah, methinks, sod it. We'll have a bash another day.

Notes

1. Russification is the process whereby non-Russian peoples within the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union gradually adopted Russian language, customs, and identity. Sometimes the assimilation happened peacefully through intermarriage and economic integration, but often it was accelerated by state policies such as mandatory Russian-language education, restrictions on native languages, and settlement of ethnic Russians in non-Russian territories. The process affected countless ethnic groups, from Tatars and Bashkirs mentioned in the story to Ukrainians, Balts, Caucasian

peoples, etc. During the Soviet era, the state simultaneously pursued "friendship amongst nations" and policies that privileged Russian as the language of interethnic communication. Today, demographic Russification continues, though now often contested by resurgent ethnic nationalist movements.

2. San-Sanych is a common Russian nickname for Alexander Alexandrovich. Russians commonly create such diminutives by combining the first syllables of one's first name and patronymic. Such nicknames / diminutives are an integral part of Russian colloquial speech, signalling warmth and familiarity (e.g. Volodya for Vladimir, Sasha for Alexander, Vanya / Vanechka for Ivan), unlike the formal "full name + patronymic" combination used in professional or official settings. San-Sanych specifically has become somewhat of a stock character name, often used for an archetypal older man everyone knows.
3. Verst (or versta) is an obsolete Russian unit of distance, roughly equivalent to 1.1 kilometres or some corresponding amount of miles.
4. Short for Zinaida.
5. Starovers (literally "Old Believers") were / are adherents of Russian Orthodox traditions who rejected the liturgical reforms implemented by Patriarch Nikon in the 1650s-1660s. When Nikon revised religious texts and practices to align with contemporary Greek Orthodoxy (including changing the sign of the cross from two fingers to three), conservative Russians saw this as blasphemous corruption of true faith. The Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated those who refused to adopt these changes, leading to a profound schism (Raskol) in Russian society. Old Believers faced brutal persecution — thousands were executed, others self-immolated rather than surrender their beliefs, and many fled to remote regions of Russia. This persecution continued to varying degrees until 1905, with Starovers facing double taxation, restrictions on worship, and social discrimination. Despite this, they maintained distinct communities characterised by strict adherence to pre-reform traditions, preservation of ancient icons and manuscripts, and often remarkable entrepreneurial success — many prominent merchant families were secretly Starovers. Today, several million Starovers continue their traditions in Russia and émigré communities worldwide.
6. Kirov, Vyatka and Khlynov are three names for the same city that is located about 900 kilometres northeast of Moscow. The city has historically been a provincial centre and a place of political exile

(now known for corruption and kvass). It was founded in 1181 by Novgorod colonists and called Khlynov. Fast forward five centuries, Catherine the Great renamed it to Vyatka, after the main river of the region, as part of her administrative reforms. The city kept this name throughout the Imperial period until Bolsheviks renamed it after Sergei Kirov (likely assassinated on Stalin's orders). Interestingly, after the collapse of the USSR, unlike many cities that reverted to their pre-Soviet names (such as St. Petersburg, etc.), Kirov retained its Soviet name. Shame!

7. Kartuz is a type of cap with a round crown and a visor popular in the early 20th century and is, in a way, a visual symbol of the time.
8. Radio-controlled car toy is a miniature vehicle operated by a handheld transmitter that sends signals to a receiver in the car. The receiver translates the signals into motor commands, allowing the user to steer, accelerate, and brake the car.
9. To shabash (шабашить) is unofficial work or moonlighting outside one's official employment. The term "shabashka" described these often semi-legal side jobs that became an essential economic survival strategy during the Soviet era and beyond. Workers would travel to other regions during holidays or leave periods to earn extra money through construction, agricultural labour, or other manual work.
10. Tsar Gorokh, a name that literally translates as "King Pea", is a mythical ruler from Russian folklore, often evoked to denote a bygone era, similar to "once upon a time" or "in the days of yore", but with more comical and absurd connotation, such as when referring to something exceedingly old and forgotten or belonging to an almost legendary and non-existent past.
11. Supstate (супостат) is an English rendition of an archaic Russian term for "enemy" or "adversary" that carries strong biblical and folkloric overtones, invoking not just military foes but existential enemies of the Russian people and Orthodox faith. The original etymology goes back even to the Devil / Satan. Soviet propaganda could use it when official rhetoric needed to evoke patriotic historical memory. The term has an archaic vibe and connotations of foreignness and evil that simple translations like "enemy" or "foe" won't do. Its use in modern contexts often creates an ironic effect.
12. Katorga (каторга) was a brutal system of penal labour that existed from Imperial Russia through the Soviet era. It's a borrowed word from Byzantine Greek "katergon" (κάτεργον, galley), as condemned criminals were first sentenced to row in war galleys. Russian meaning extends it to hard labour in mines, roads, and fortresses across the country, especially Siberia, where political and common

criminals endured backbreaking work in chains under savage conditions. Katorga became embedded in Russian consciousness as the ultimate punishment short of execution, synonymous with suffering and exile in the abysmal weather conditions of the remote corners. The Soviets maintained and expanded the system, rebranding it as the Gulag (GULAG — abbreviation for a forced labour camp system).

13. Literacy campaign (Likbez or liquidation of illiteracy) was a major initiative launched in 1919 under the slogan "Literacy is the path to communism" (hard to say it was). Lenin's government established a network of "likbez" centres targeting Russia's predominantly illiterate peasantry. The campaign, however, represented both genuine educational advancement and ideological indoctrination. By the 1930s, literacy rates had dramatically improved from pre-revolutionary levels of 24% to over 75%, though rural areas (like Tulubaika) often lagged behind.
14. Birchbark was a common writing surface before the widespread use of paper. The inner layer of birchbark, smooth and light, could be easily inscribed with sharp tools. Many historical documents, particularly in Russia, have been found written on birchbark.
15. Balalaika (балалайка) is a triangular-bodied Russian folk string instrument with three strings, dating to the 17th century. It used to be associated with peasant culture and often dismissed by the aristocracy as primitive but later was elevated to national symbol status.
16. Maslenitsa pole is a tall, greased wooden pillar erected during Maslenitsa celebrations dedicated to the end of winter, Russia's pre-Lenten festival with pagan roots. Climbing this slippery pole became a central competition testing young men's strength and agility, with prizes (often boots, textiles, or food) hanging at the top. Success brought not only material rewards but also community prestige and enhanced marriage prospects.
17. Dymkovo bird (or dymkovo toy) is a brightly painted grotesque yet charming clay figurine from the traditional Russian folk craft originating at least in the 17th century in the village of Dymkovo near Vyatka, traditionally made by women. They're characterised by bold geometric patterns including circles, checks, and dots in vibrant colours against a white background. The craft nearly disappeared in the late 19th century, but was revived during the Soviet period with the establishment of an artel (cooperative workshop). Now they are recognised as quintessential Vyatkan souvenirs.
18. Blini (блины) are traditional Russian pancakes made from yeasted

batter, thinner than American pancakes but thicker than French crêpes. They hold particular significance during Maslenitsa when they symbolise Sollie's return after winter. Consuming blini with various toppings is quite fabulous and highly recommended.

19. During the Maslenitsa celebration, a large straw effigy, often representing winter or Marzanna (a Slavic pagan goddess associated with winter and death), is constructed, decorated with clothes and ribbons, then paraded through the streets before being burned in a bonfire.
20. One hundredth of a ruble, Russian currency.
21. Soviet "enemies of the state". "White Guards" fought against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, representing the defeated monarchist / anti-communist forces. "Kulaks" were relatively prosperous peasants targeted during Stalin's collectivisation campaign (see also, "dekulakisation"), with millions deported to remote regions or sent to labour camps. "Anti-Soviet dissidents" emerged primarily during the post-Stalin era and included intellectuals, artists, religious leaders, and human rights activists who challenged the Soviet system through samizdat publications, activism, or merely possessing forbidden literature. Internal exile to remote villages had always been a common punishment for those deemed politically unreliable but not sentenced to labour camps, creating scattered communities of educated exiles who often significantly influenced local cultural life despite their outcast status.
22. GOST (ГОСТ) is an abbreviation meaning "State Standard" in Russian. These were a set of technical standards originally developed by the Soviet Union to ensure quality and consistency across various products.
23. Baba Yaga is Russia's most iconic witch-figure from Slavic folklore — an ancient, bone-legged crone who flies in a mortar, steers with a pestle, and dwells in a chicken-legged hut that rotates at her command. She is neither purely evil nor good: sometimes devouring children, other times offering cryptic guidance to worthy seekers.
24. Decorative ornamental window frames, among the most beloved features of Russian traditional wooden architecture.

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Episode 21: about the danger of wicked tongues

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