

TULUBAKAPORTIA



by VANECHKA

Translation and commentary by Vanya Bagaev

Episode 5: about letters & dreams

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“Ended the long-awaited summer. Came the long-awaited autumn.” — Valeria Narbikova, “The Murmur of Clamour”

Dear Grandfather,

If I’m honest, I’ve never written a letter before and I don’t know what to write, so I’m just going to jot down whatever comes into my head. This is homework, so I haven’t got any choice, have I? (They’ll give me an F, chuck me out of school and out of the house, I’ll have to live in the forest with bears, drink birch sap and eat mushrooms, which is only half bad). My teacher, Tamara Alexeyevna, was very annoyed about how nobody writes letters anymore these days, especially to Tulubaika — everyone’s on their “internets and phones”. That’s exactly what she said, and added that in the last ten years not a single word has dropped into her letterbox, as if the whole world’s forgotten her address and this entire wholeworldness has rubbed our village off the map completely, so no post comes to us anymore: no parcels, no postcards, no letters, not by train, not by plane, not even by bus. “But how can that be? We’re here, aren’t we?” I protested. “Well, there you have it,” Tamara

Alexeyevna answered me and threw up her hands. And I said to her, “Tamara Alexeyevna, but everything gets through right away on the internets and phones, no problem!” And she nearly chucked me out of the classroom — that’s how it seemed to me for a moment — but she only shrugged her shoulders. That’s all anyone does. As you know, in our village there’s nothing else to do, especially for grown-ups, particularly for elderly pensioners. All together they come out of their little houses in the morning and, to the sounds of the hissing radio, start throwing up their hands and shrugging their shoulders — one-two, one-two, left, right, left, right, one-two-three, one-two-three. The drill goes on. The radio’s ancient, and the voice in it sounds like it does in Soviet films, the ones they show round the clock on the telly, where everything seems not quite real, like cartoons, only with actual people. Tamara Alexeyevna comes out to do these exercises in front of her house too. She must be about a hundred years old. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone older than she. She shrugs and throws up her hands better than anyone, really natural like. We read “Van’ka”¹ at school today, a story by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Tamara Alexeyevna praised it ever so much. It’s about an orphan boy called Vanya who’s been left completely alone, and nobody loves him, and everyone picks on him. Because of this, he decides to write a letter to his grandfather, Konstantin Makarovich, so that he’ll come and take Van’ka to live with him in the village. He addresses the letter just like that, “To Grandfather, to the village”, and drops it in the letterbox. I didn’t understand anything at first, just felt confused and sad. But then I sort of worked it out. My situation’s really similar, but everything’s

completely the other way round: (1) Nobody picks on me (almost). (2) Mum and Dad are doing fine (they send you their regards). (3) I'm also writing a letter, just like Vanya (but I'm a girl). (4) We're both writing to our grandfather, but Vanya's writing somewhere "to the village", and I'm writing somewhere "from the village". Both of us, it seems, don't know where we're writing to. You tricked me, dear Grandfather. You said you'd never leave our village. You said there was nothing better in the world than our Tulubaika, that we've got a lovely forest, and a river, and the air, and the people are all right too. And then you went and left without warning, while I was in the city visiting the other grandparents. The holidays ended, I came back — and you were not here. Mum and Dad say, "Your grandfather's gone away to have some rest in warmer climates." And I say to them, "This can't be true, he'd never leave here." That's what you told me, right? You can't leave Tulubaika. Nobody leaves here and nobody comes here. But it turns out everything's the other way round again: (1) I left (for two months). (2) You left too (for an indefinite period). So it turns out you can leave after all, and everyone has lied to me (again). At times like these I start to understand why everyone just shrugs their shoulders and throws up their hands. I'm not stupid. All right, I'm not an A-student, but I don't even want to be. "You're too perceptive, young lady," they tell me. And I answer, "And you're not, then?" I saw you in a dream. In it I was walking through our birch forest, and only then did I notice that it's not a forest but a park (a forestpark, forepark, parkorest?). The trees in it are all identical and planted in lines, as if it all were deliberate. I went out of the house the next morning, and on the way to school I noticed that it really is like

that, as if we're living in some kind of park. In the dream I walked through the forest for ages — into Tulubaika or out of it, I don't remember — but I couldn't find the way out. And then I met you. You were sitting on a stump — a birch one too — with a basket at your feet. I asked you, "What are you doing here?" And you answered, "Sitting." And I asked, "Why are you sitting?" And you answered, "Waiting for you, granddaughter." "For me?" I asked. "For you," you told me and added, "Only you're a bit early, back you go homewards." That's what you said, and I didn't understand anything. It was a strange dream. I've got really small handwriting, like yours (I read your journal about the weather, the forest, and various mushrooms), so I'm a luckster — a lot fits on two sheets, but I need to finish now. If we're talking essentials: (1) The news is good (I'm doing all right at school). (2) The weather's good (golden autumn). (3) Everyone misses you.

Your loving granddaughter

B+ T.A.

Notes

1. Van'ka is a diminutive of Vanya, which is a diminutive of Ivan. Another diminutive of Ivan is Vanechka, which some readers may recognise. The story itself: in [Russian](#) or in [English translation](#).

Read next part

Episode 6: about syllogismatics, briefly

<https://nova-nevedoma.com/syllogismatics-briefly/>

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