TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



by VANECHKA

Translation and commentary by Vanya Bagaev

Tulubaikaporia

Episode 8: about literary essays, time, happiness & unhappiness

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> "It's good where we are not: in the past we are no more, and so it seems beautiful." — Anton Chekhov

One can talk about "Three Sisters" for ages, for I am one of them and all three sisters at once, and also all the other characters at once. That's what happens when you read a book, especially one where the author isn't there. Tolstoevsky, for example, couldn't do that, but Anton Pavlovich could. The author is always there, of course, writes something, and stands in the corner of the room, watching, like Tolstoevsky for instance, but Anton Pavlovich would leave, close the door ever so quietly behind him, and leave his characters alone with themselves. For they need personal space where they could feel their life through. That's precisely why they're all always so bored, but that's how it should be, for that's precisely how it is in life.

(It's more honest this way, isn't it, Tamara Alexeyevna? Yes, you — I know what you do with my essays — you take them and send them off to all sorts of literary competitions, and then I have to answer for them

and suffer, but I write them not for someone, not for no one, not for some competition or other, but always for a specific addressee, there are three of them: myself, you, Anton Pavlovich — impersonal essays don't interest me anymore, they make me sick, so I shan't be writing any more essays that could be sent off anywhere, let alone to a competition. You'll have to keep them to yourself — that's the only way now, they won't suit anywhere else, for everyone will know who I'm writing them to, the competition panel won't have to guess and build theories. Even when I write "Dear Diary," I mean Anton Pavlovich. I don't write my diary every day, as one might think, but I always think what to write there. Dear Diary is my Roman Empire that fell apart whilst still young, but also my Atlantis, which sank having peaked.)

At any party there's always someone who leaves first, but whoever might lay claim to that noble position, Time will always leave before them, close the door, leave the rest alone with themselves and with its half-empty, half-full unfinished drink by the exit. In "Three Sisters" the same thing happens to Time. There's a lot on this matter in my Dear Diary. I don't even have to write anything, if I'm honest, so I'll just gather the essentials for you, Tamara Alexeyevna:

(1) There are those who want to speed Time up, and those who want to slow it down. Sped-up Time sort of doesn't exist, whilst slowed-down Time is sort of too much.

(2) There's a certain amount of experience one can live through in a certain period of time. One can either live through it in express mode, or

stretch out the pleasure.

(3) If one speeds up time, one must be careful with the brakes, because physics and whatnot. It's like with a bicycle — you can fly over the handlebars and scrape your elbows raw. It might heal, or it might leave scars. As my grandad used to say, "Done it before, we'll do it again."

(4) Everything is a lottery, and every action is a ticket.

(5) Strangely, as time passes, what accumulates is not only the presence of experience, but also its absence. Absence hurts more than presence. Dreams and other wants are either present or absent.

(6) Everyone wants something, even secretly. The biggest secret want is to leave Tulubaika. The only thing worse is wanting to return to it.

(7) From accumulating un-happened wants, one can get constipated.

(8) Nostalghin should be classified as a narcotic. It doesn't help with the illness. I've seen what it does to grown-ups.

(9) In the past everything's always the best, only children don't have one, which means they must run from it headlong in search of grown-up happiness.

All of these (1-9) are in "Three Sisters". In my Dear Diary there's everything, if you dig deep enough, and then some on top. I'd particularly like to note (6), which metaphorically-poetically transitions into (7), then into (5) and that's it — kirdyk, as they say, and without

(8) there's no getting by in that situation. A vicious circle, Tamara Alexeyevna.

I want to explain (6) in more detail. All the characters, including the three sisters, want to go somewhere. Where to — that's obvious, to Moscow, of course, for the work is better there, the peace of mind, and both "it was better" and "it will be better" — past and future at once. But that's not important, what's far more important is the question: where do they all want to leave from so badly? It's never mentioned, is it? The answer is simple: from Tulubaika, where else? Everyone wants to leave their Tulubaika. You, Tamara Alexeyevna, want to, or at least at first you simply wanted to, and then (6). And I want to, but I've got (3).

For Olga, Tulubaika has mosquitoes and cold, for Andrei — no ambitions and no decent restaurants, for Irina — absence of romance, for Baron Tuzenbach — absence of prospects, even for half-deaf Ferapont — there are no newspapers in Tulubaika because nothing literally happens. In Moscow everything's better and everyone's happier than in Tulubaika, and they haven't even thought about the rest of the world, but if they had... Only Vershinin believes that happiness doesn't exist in principle, even outside Tulubaika, be it Moscow or elsewhere, it simply hasn't been invented yet, but will definitely be invented in the future, and the unhappy past will all be forgotten. Ugh, unhappy past, just ugh! But like everyone else, Vershinin's Tulubaika lacks what he would want, too. He says it himself: "The other day I read the diary of a French minister, written in prison. The minister was convicted for Panama. With what delight, what rapture he mentions the birds he sees

in the prison window and which he never noticed before, when he was a minister. Now, of course, when he's been released, he once again doesn't notice birds. Similarly, you won't notice Moscow when you live there. We have no happiness and there isn't any, we only desire it." But I disagree with him, for he, like the rest, does nothing, just waits, philosophises, dreams, gets bored. Time simply comes and goes, by invitation and without. They've all got a full (5), and the solution seemingly exists, it's right on the surface — just go and do it, what's stopping you?

I would have already fled Tulubaika, but I need to finish school first. I'll finish, get into university — I'll flee immediately and will never want to come back. Perhaps I'll become sweet-happy, perhaps sour-happy. Did you know, Tamara Alexeyevna? That happens too. My Dear Diary has something on this as well:

(10) One can want strongly, or one can want even more strongly, and if one wants so much that one actually wants to do something about it, then perhaps it will happen. If one does nothing, it won't happen, and if it didn't happen, it means one didn't really want it that much.

(11) One must want so hard that everyone tells you to bite your tongue, whilst they themselves chew theirs off (from envy).

(12) If you dream hard enough, any want will come true.

(13) Fulfilment of wants leads to happiness, or maybe it doesn't, but more likely it does, at least temporarily.

(14) Happiness is somehow connected to gooseberries, haven't figured out how yet. (And here I added later in red pen, when I did figure it out: gooseberries can be sour, sweet, and bitter, green and red, but they're all hairy, and the branches are prickly. Brrr...)

(15) A girl can want a doll for her birthday, and they'll buy her a dress, and even if they do buy the doll, she'll realise she wanted a teddy bear — that happens too. When I remember it, everything inside me clenches.

(16) Pushkin said: "a delusion that exalts us is dearer than a host of low truths".

(17) Chekhov said: "case-bound life" (no comment).

(18) Also Chekhov's character: "to my thoughts about human happiness there had always somehow been mixed something sad".

(19) My grandad used to say: "Make hay while the sun shines."

Anton Pavlovich wrote about this in "Gooseberries" — there everything's the other way round, not like in "Three Sisters," the main character isn't thought-paralysed in his Tulubaika, but goes towards his dream and after a lifetime finally gets what he strove for, but in the end everyone's still unhappy, that is (18). Perhaps that's why you don't like Chekhov, Tamara Alexeyevna, perhaps that's why he's boring for you, whilst for me — the opposite, and for Tolstoevsky too, by the way — he really liked "Gooseberries", he wrote to Anton Pavlovich and said so himself. In the story, the main character had a very strong (14), so much

so that he even reached (10-12), but in the end first came (13), and then (15), and all because of (16) and (17). Such is the maths, Tamara Alexeyevna — we don't live by literature alone, as they say. To (14) I would add that gooseberries shouldn't be preserved but eaten, otherwise, say, you'll make jam, it'll sit in your cellar for a decade, lucky if it doesn't go mouldy, but it'll turn out to be either sourish (sourhappiness), bitterish (bitterhappiness), sweetish (sweethappiness, the cloying kind, as if sugar were grating on your teeth). One needs (19), in a word, probably. I don't know yet, I'm still young, inexperienced, but I wrote it down something like this for myself:

(20) Sometimes understanding comes in time, and yet action seems meaningless, but sometimes understanding comes when it's already too late to act. In both cases, nothing to be done.

(21) If Time pops into your party, you absolutely must chat with it, entertain it, introduce it to the guests, or else it'll get upset from loneliness and leave.

That won't happen to me, Tamara Alexeyevna. I promised my Dear Diary.

B-

we are not doing maths here!

Read next part

Episode 9: about meeting strange ravens in birch groves

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