

Slav Sisters:
The Dedalus Book of
Russian Women's Literature

edited by Natasha Perova

Dedalus

in the frame was going to go viral. He couldn't help himself. His numb index finger swished through the files. There was no Commodore whatsoever on the screen. The compartment was filled with patterns of murk, like streams of soot being drawn into a vent. Looking up, Don Juan saw the same stringy darkness flowing through the door. A heavy step swelled tentatively – one, and another, definitely the Commodore, flattening the train, descending as if it were an iron staircase.

The sepulchral thunder suddenly fell away, broken off by a hollow, plaintive sound. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the train's wheels started knocking, yellow lights floated by, a well-lit construction site passed, and a town stretched out. Anya sat there, her teeth chattering, blinking senselessly. Her robe was still crushed to her chest, as if it had frozen into trickles of ice.

Don Juan grabbed Anya, pressed her close, and pressed himself to her, feeling their shared blood racing quietly.

"Yanya... Do you really need me with a dowry like that?" Anya said in a weak voice.

"Yes, and never ask that question again," Don Juan said quietly. "All kinds of things happen in life. Life's a strange thing. There can be inexplicable phenomena. We'll live as long as we live. And we'll be happy anyway. And the Commodore – well, what about the Commodore? A lot of noise, thunder, and rocks got thrown around and that's essentially it. His conscience woke up. Let him run with it a little now."

Translated by Marian Schwartz

On Tuesday, after the second lesson, five select pupils left Class 3B. All morning they had been feeling like birthday girls. They were dressed differently: not in brown school uniform dresses with black aprons, or even white aprons, but in Young Pioneer uniforms, dark below, white above, albeit without the red neckerchiefs. Silken, vitreous, rustling, those were hidden away, as yet pristine, in school briefcases.

The girls were the best of the best, top of their class, their behaviour exemplary, and had attained the necessary but not sufficient age of nine years. There were other nine-year-olds in Class 3B who, by reason of their imperfections, could never aspire to join the Young Pioneers.

Accordingly, after the second lesson of the day, the five girls from 3B plus five from 3A and five from 3C put on their coats and overshoes and lined up in twos in front of the school porch. To start with there was an extra girl, but then Lilita Zhizhmorskaya felt so nervous she went to the lavatory and was sick, and afterwards had such a headache she had to go to the school nurse who told her to lie down on a cold couch. That evened the numbers.

The parade was headed by Senior Pioneer Leader Nina Khokhlova (very pretty, but boss-eyed), Lvova (chairperson of the Troop Council, a very grown-up thirteen-year-old), Kostikova (the drummer girl), and Barenboim (a girl who had been attending the Young Bugler Circle at the Pioneers'

The Gift not made by Human Hand

Ludmila Ulitskaya

Club for a year but had yet to learn a tune and could only parp (isolated notes).

Bringing up the rear of the parade were Klavdia Dracheva, wearing not her Curriculum Manager but her Party Organiser hat; a female representative of the Parents' Committee with two black and russet vixens sprawled lasciviously over her shoulders; and an aged Community Activist, evidently able to walk on water to judge by the irreproachable black gleam of his boots despite the swirls of clinging mud.

Senior Pioneer Leader Khokhlova signalled the off, simultaneously bobbing the pom-pom on her hat and two great tassels on the furled troop flag. Drummer Girl Kostikova rattled out, "The aged drummer, aged drummer, aged drummer soundly slept." Barenboim puffed out her cheeks, produced an out-of-tune bugle blast, and they all moved off along an only slightly circuitous route, through Miussky and Mayakovsky Squares and down Gorky Street to the Museum of the Revolution. Many similar columns from boys' and girls' schools were converging because this was an operation on a municipal, indeed republican, indeed union-wide scale.

Looking more like wolves, muscular lions with rickety legs, which since time immemorial had been accustomed to survey a more select class of person, looked down from their portals with melancholy as the ranks of the best of the best, who seemed surprisingly young, marched past.

"What a lot of boys," Alyona Pshenichnikova remarked disapprovingly to her friend Masha Chelysheva.

"They're not rough boys," Masha noted.

In their warm coats, with the ribbons of their snug fur hats tied under their chins, the boys really did not look rough.

"But still, there are more girls," Alyona insisted, making a point whose importance she was not altogether clear about.

They were led into the Museum and, as one, had their breath taken away by the imperial revolutionary magnificence of polished marble, burnished bronze, and velvet, silk and satin banners of every hue of hellfire.

They were conducted to the cloakroom and, in formation, took off their winter clothing: Galoshes, sashes, mittens – too much to cope with. They were confused and had not enough hands because one was holding a package with their pioneer neckerchief which they couldn't put down anywhere. Only fat Sonya Preobrazhenskaya slipped the precious bundle into a breast pocket she found on her white blouse.

Senior Pioneer Leader Khokhlova, her face in red blotches and clutching the heavy staff of their Troop's banner at arm's length, led them up a wide staircase. The carpet, held in place on each step by a brass rod, was as yielding and springy as moss in a dried up marsh.

At the rear of their column was the representative mother, who had shed an insignificant coat she had been wearing under the luxuriating foxes, her chin sinking deep into their fur. Beside her walked the ancient Community Activist in his immaculate boots, his bald spot outshining his gleaming boot tops.

"Alyona," Svetlana Bagaturiya whispered into Alyona's neck, "Alyona! I've forgotten it all, I swear by my mother."

"What?" the self-possessed Alyona asked in surprise.

"The Solemn Promise," Svetlana whispered. "I, a Young Pioneer of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in the presence of my comrades... I've forgotten what comes after that."

"...do solemnly swear to love my motherland with all my heart," Alyona prompted her loftily.

"Oh, I do remember it, thank God, I do remember it, Aly-

ona," Svetlana said with relief. "I thought I had forgotten it!"

More and more of them came in but nobody got flummoxed or ended up in the wrong place. All stood neatly in the places allotted to their schools and classes, and the whole long hall was lined from end to end with display cases of presents to Comrade Stalin. There were gifts of gold, silver, marble, crystal, mother-of-pearl, jade, leather, and ivory, fashioned from everything that was lightest or heaviest, softest or hardest.

An Indian had written greetings on a grain of rice and some other time, only not today, you would be able to look through a magnifying glass and see wavy lettering which looked like fly droppings. A Chinaman had carved 109 balls, one inside the other, and again you needed a magnifying glass to see, through gaps in the minute tracery, the very smallest, innermost ball, smaller than a pea.

An Uzbek woman had spent her life weaving a carpet out of her own hair. One end was coal-black and the other a bluish white. The middle was greying, mottled, and rather sad.

"I expect she's bald now," Preobrazhenskaya whispered.

"It wouldn't matter. Uzbek women wear a hijab," Alyona observed with a heartless shrug.

"It was only before the Revolution they went around like that, when they were backward," Masha Chelysheva interjected.

"A backward woman wouldn't weave a carpet as a present for Comrade Stalin," Preobrazhenskaya defended the venerable old lady.

"Perhaps she didn't weave all her hair into the carpet. Perhaps she left some," Bagaturiya speculated positively, touching her own long, full pigtails tied above her ears with ribbons.

"Wait a minute!" Masha suddenly gasped. "Take a look at this."

It was not much to look at. In a display case a square rag was embroidered with a portrait of Comrade Stalin, not particularly pretty, sewn in cross stitch. It did not even look much like him, although there was no mistaking who it was supposed to be.

"Well?" Preobrazhenskaya responded. "What's so special about that?"

"Yes, what is it?" Alyona enquired, concerned.

"Read what it says!" Masha jabbed a finger at the inscription. "This portrait of Comrade Stalin was embroidered, using her feet, by T. Kolyvanova who has no arms."

"It's Tanya Kolyvanova!" Sonya whispered, swooning with delight.

"Are you crazy? Kolyvanova doesn't have no arms, and with the two she has she could never embroider like that, let alone with her feet!" Alyona brought them back down to earth.

"But it says here 'T. Kolyvanova!'" Sonya persisted, hoping for a miracle. "Perhaps she's got a sister with no arms."

"No, her sister is in Year 7. She's called Lidia and does have arms," Alyona recalled regretfully. She frowned, shook her little head with its complicated rings of braided hair and added, "But we can always ask."

At this point, the whole body of children were on the move again, proceeding in orderly ranks to another hall. On one side stood the drummers, to the other the buglers, and in the middle the standard-bearers with flags unfurled. A Pioneer Leader, presumably the absolutely most senior, loudly commanded,

"Dress ranks on the banner! Attention! The mother of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and Shura will speak."

They all got in line, stood up straight, and a small elderly woman in a dark blue suit stepped forward to tell them that Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya was a Young Pioneer who set fire

to a stable block of the German invaders and was killed by the Nazis.

Alyona Pshenichnikova cried, although she had heard all this long before. At that moment all of them wanted to set fire to a Nazi stable block and even, perhaps, die for their motherland.

Then the old Community Activist told them about the very first Young Pioneers' Gathering at the Dynamo Football Stadium, when Mayakovsky recited his poem, "We will rise with rifles new. We'll put bunting on the bayonets," and all the Young Pioneers taking part in that Gathering were allowed to travel free on the trams for the rest of the day, even though tickets usually cost four, eight, or eleven kopeks.

Then all of them recited the Young Pioneer's Solemn Promise and had their neckerchiefs tied for them, except fat Sonya Preobrazhenskaya who had somehow managed to lose the one she had put in her breast pocket. She burst into tears, but Senior Pioneer Leader Khokhlova took her own neckerchief off and tied it round the weeping Sonya's neck and she stopped crying.

They sang "Campfires ablaze in the dark of the night!" and left the hall in regimented columns, quite different people, proud and ready to perform great deeds.

The next morning all the girls who were now Young Pioneers came to school a little earlier than usual. Their red neckerchiefs lit up Class 3B. Fat Sonya re-tied hers during every break between lessons. Gaika Oganesyan, who was very naughty, put an ink mark on the red corner peeping out from the collar of Alyona Pshenichnikova who sat in the desk in front of her. Alyona sobbed all through the lunch break, but just before it was over Masha Chelysheva came across and whispered in

her ear, "Why don't we ask Kolyvanova about the girl with no arms?"

Alyona cheered up and they went over to Tanya Kolyvanova who was sitting in the back row tearing pink blotting paper into tiny pieces. They asked her, without any great expectations but just in case, whether she knew a girl called T. Kolyvanova who had no arms.

Kolyvanova looked very sheepish and said, "She isn't a girl, she's a grown-up."

"Is she your sister?" the newly enrolled Young Pioneers yelled in unison.

"No, she's just a relative. We call her Auntie Tomka," Kolyvanova replied, looking down at the desk and plainly not specially proud of her famous aunt.

"Can she sew with her feet?" Alyona asked Kolyvanova sternly.

"Yes, she does everything with her feet, eating, drinking, fighting," Kolyvanova said artlessly, but just then the bell rang and they had to stop.

All through the fourth lesson Alyona and Masha were on tenterhooks, sending notes to each other and the other members of their Organisation, and when the lesson ended they surrounded Kolyvanova to continue the interrogation. She confessed straightaway that her aunt could sew with her feet and really had embroidered the gift for Comrade Stalin, only it was all a long time ago. She hadn't been a heroine in the war, and her arms had not been shot off by the Germans, she had just been born like that. She lived out at Marina Roshcha and you had to take a tram to get there.

"Fine. You are free to go," Alyona dismissed her.

Kolyvanova was only too happy to slip away, and the full complement of the class's Young Pioneer Organisation settled

down to its first meeting.

The main item on the agenda was obvious and somehow just decided itself: election of the chairperson of the Patrol Committee. Sonya took great satisfaction in writing in a notebook: "Minutes". They voted. "Unanimous", Sonya wrote, and added on the next line: "Alyona Pshenichnikova".

Alyona, in the fullness of power now bestowed upon her, took the bull by the horns:

"I move that we invite that girl with no arms, I mean that lady, Tomka Kolyvanova, to a meeting of our Patrol to tell us about sewing the gift for Comrade Stalin."

"I think I really preferred... there was a little golden table with chairs round it and a samovar on it with little cups, and it even had a little tap, and everything was really, really tiny..." Svetlana Bagaturiya murmured dreamily.

"You appear not to understand," Alyona said reproachfully, "that anyone can make a little table and samovar, but you try sewing with your toes...!"

Svetlana was abashed. She had allowed her head to be turned by a miniature samovar when there was a heroine living nearby. She knitted her generous eyebrows and blushed. In fact, she was well respected in the class for her top marks and because she was more or less a Georgian like Comrade Stalin, lived in an apartment block belonging to the Communist University where her father was studying, and had even been called Svetlana in honour of Comrade Stalin's daughter.

"Right then," Alyona summed up. "As Young Pioneers we shall instruct Kolyvanova to bring her Aunt Tomka to our meeting."

Sonya rummaged around with her chubby little hand in her briefcase and brought out an apple. She took a bite and passed it to Masha. Masha took a bite too, but the apple was sour and

she was feeling an unfocused sense of dissatisfaction. The long ends of the red neckerchief lay clean and bright on her blouse, and yet something was missing.

"Perhaps we should invite my grandfather to a meeting," she proposed modestly. Her grandfather was a real admiral, as everybody knew.

"Excellent idea, Masha!" Alyona responded. "Make a note, Sonya: Admiral Chelyshev also to be invited to a Patrol meeting."

That "also" struck Masha as demeaning, but at this point the door opened and in came the cleaners with mop and bucket and it was resolved to close the meeting.

The diffident Kolyvanova suddenly dug her heels in and refused point blank, even though she could give no coherent explanation of why she didn't want to bring her armless aunt to a Patrol meeting. She continued to resist until Sonya said, "Tanya, why don't you ask your sister Lidia to ask her?"

Tanya was taken aback. How could Sonya Preobrazhenskaya possibly know Lidia was forever running off to see her aunt? She agreed, nevertheless, to ask her.

Lidia couldn't for the life of her imagine what a bunch of third years could want with her crippled aunt, and when she was told she guffawed, "Oh, that's really wild!"

The following Sunday she took her five-year-old brother Kolya and went to visit her.

All the Kolyvanovs lived in less than ideal circumstances in huts and hostels, and only Tomka lived like a proper human being, with a room to herself in a brick-built house with running water.

She was pleased to see her niece. Lidia always made herself useful when she came, and would do the laundry and cook a

meal, although not purely out of the goodness of her heart. Tomka was not short of a penny, especially in the summer, and would give her a three-or-five-rouble note.

Their age difference was not great, barely ten years, and they were more just like friends.

"Aunt Tomka, a bunch of Young Pioneers in Tanya's class want you to go to their meeting," Lidia informed her.

"What would I want to do that for? Having to travel! If they need something they can come here. What is it anyway?" she asked puzzled.

"They want you to tell them about embroidering that cushion thing," Lidia explained.

"Well, they've got fancy ideas, expecting me to tell them this and show them that. If they come here I'll show them more than they're expecting!" She was sitting on a mattress, scratching her nose with her knee. "Only it'll cost them. If they bring me a bottle of red I'll show and tell them anything they want."

"Come off it, Tomka, how could they do that?" Lidia had already undressed Kolya and was busy in the corner of the room sorting out a dirty nappy.

"Well, they'd better bring a tenner at least, no, fifteen roubles! We'll find a use for it, eh, Lidia?" She laughed, showing little white teeth.

She had a small, quite pretty face with a snub nose, only her chin was too long. She had a full head of naturally wavy hair which seemed it ought to belong to a different person.

"Idiots. Whatever next!" She shook her head but was secretly pleased that a whole delegation was coming to see how she managed with her feet. She had a penchant for showing off and surprising people. In summer she would sit on her ground floor windowsill looking out to the street,

show a needle between her big and second toes, and do her embroidery. People going by would be amazed, and the kind-hearted would put money in her white dish.

Tomka would nod and say, "Thank you kindly, my dear." They usually were old dears.

"Will you come with them, Liddy? Come and keep me company," she urged her niece.

"Of course," Lidia promised.

It was resolved that they would visit T. Kolyvanova at home. Masha had nine roubles, and the others skimped on lunch for two days. For almost a week their secret plan kept the Young Pioneers puffed up like balloons. For some reason they were convinced that young people who did not belong to the All-Union Leninist Movement of Young Pioneers must on no account know anything of the seriously mysterious life they were leading.

Gaika Oganesyan was almost sick with curiosity, and Lilita Zhizhmorskaya was darker than a thundercloud because she was sure they were plotting something against her.

Tanya Kolyvanova was strictly warned that if she let the cat out of the bag she would find herself in court. The idea of taking her to court occurred not to stern Alyona but to frivolous Sonya Preobrazhenskaya. Masha, who was the enterprise's principal funder and had thereby regained her status after the slight to her grandfather, cheered up considerably.

The expedition, arranged for the Wednesday one week after the Enrolment Ceremony, almost fell through. On Tuesday the Senior Pioneer Leader came to their class and told them not to worry, an excellent Leader had been appointed for them from

Class 6A, a girl called Liza Tsyapkina. Unfortunately she was ill but would come to see them as soon as she was well again, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, when she would help them get their work as Young Pioneers off the ground.

"So don't get demoralised in the meantime," she advised.

"We are not getting demoralised, we have already elected a chairperson," Svetlana Bagaturiya confidently informed her.

"Oh, well done!" Nina Khokhlova congratulated them, made a note in her little book, and departed.

The girls exchanged glances, agreeing without any need for words that they could do without this Tsyapkina to lead them.

The next morning they warned their families they would be late back from school because of a Young Pioneer event. They hid in the toilets during all the breaks, just in case Liza Tsyapkina had recovered and might take it into her head to start leading them today.

After school, with the full Patrol present, and augmented by non-Party member Kolyvanova, they hid behind the coal shed at the back of the school to wait for Lidia who, being older, had five lessons a day.

When she arrived they proceeded to the tram stop. Masha Chelysheva vigilantly kept look-out, as they had a feeling they were being followed.

Over the past week it had got much colder and a covering of snow had fallen, but the right tram arrived before they got chilled through. There were not many people in it, so they were even able to sit on the yellow wooden benches.

The Kolyvanova sisters felt no delight or excitement about the excursion. Svetlana Bagaturiya, even though she was from another town, was also allowed to travel around freely and even went on shopping errands to Petrovsky Arcade in central Moscow on her own. Alyona, Masha and Sonya, however, had

never been in a tram on their own before, without adults, and bought their own tickets and unbuttoned the collars of their fur overcoats so everybody could see their red neckerchiefs, which indisputably proclaimed their self-reliance.

Mariina Roshcha was far from the centre of Moscow and, despite its name, was a grove devoid of trees, overgrown by blackened weeds, and otherwise covered in shacks, dovecotes and huts, and enmeshed in stout clothes-lines from which frozen washing swung like plywood.

Alyona's self-confidence suddenly deserted her. She had never seen such a desolate place and just wanted to go home, to her trim house in Arsenal Lane, so near that palace where the lions with their frosted mains and skinny backsides sat above the gates.

"Everybody out," Lidia said, and the subdued girls clustered round the exit. The tram clattered lengthily to a halt and they had no option but to jump down from the high step.

Next to the tram stop were two two-storey brick buildings. The rest of the houses were ramshackle wooden affairs, and some way off they could see a number of real peasant log cabins that enjoyed the amenity of a well. There was no one to be seen other than a solitary, stooping old lady wearing felt boots and a large headscarf scuttling from one building to the other. Suddenly a cock crowed and another immediately responded.

"This way," Lidia said, pointing rather proudly to one of the brick buildings.

She opened the main door and they entered a dark corridor. A light bulb was shining only on the upper floor and they could hardly see.

"That way, that way," Lidia pointed, and they all stopped at a second door beyond which was another corridor with a bend.

"Here," Lidia said, banging her fist on a door and opening

it without waiting for a reply.

The room was small, long, and dimly lit. A trestle bed stood by the window and had what looked like a big girl lying on it, with a heavy blanket covering her lower body. She sat up and lowered large legs to the floor. Her dress appeared to have wing sleeves, but there were no arms beneath them. When she walked round the room she was seen to be small and skinny, and waddled unsteadily like a duckling. Her legs were set slightly too far back and her feet were abnormally broad, her toes large, fat, and splayed out.

"Ooh!" Svetlana Bagaturiya exclaimed.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sonya Preobrazhenskaya.

The others said nothing, and the woman without arms said, "Well, come in then, now you're here. What are you all milling around in the doorway for?"

Alyona, instead of delivering the long sentence she had practised for declaring the meeting open, said meekly, "How do you do, Aunt Tomka."

For some reason at that moment she felt more ashamed than she was ever to feel again.

"Go and put the kettle on, Lidia," Tomka ordered her elder niece, adding proudly, "We have a tap right in the kitchen. No need to go outside to the pump."

"We used to have a pump too," Svetlana said with her wonderful Georgian accent.

"Where are you from, black girl? Armenia, or are you a gypsy?" The woman without arms asked amiably enough.

"She is Georgian," Alyona replied pointedly.

"Oh, well, that's different," Tomka said approvingly. "Right then," she continued briskly, as if trying to prevent this fine Georgian thread from leading too soon to the important topic which had brought them here. "What have you got for

me? Give it here." She pressed her long chin down on to her chest and they noticed she had a little bag hanging there, made of the same green calico as her dress.

Acutely conscious that something in life was not as it should be, Alyona unfastened the catch on her briefcase, pulled out a pile of crumpled banknotes and, so flushed that sweat stood out on her nose, pushed them into the bag round the woman's neck.

"There," she murmured. "Please take this, thank you."

"Well, take a good look, take a good look now you're here." Tomka indicated a wall with her chin. It was festooned with embroidery and hung with pictures of cats, dogs, and cockerels.

"Did you do the paintings too?" Masha asked in amazement. Tomka nodded.

"With your feet?" Bagaturiya enquired rather foolishly.

"Depends what I feel like," Tomka laughed, showing a long, pointed tongue through her little teeth. "Sometimes I use my feet and sometimes my mouth."

She bent her head down to the table, wriggled her chin about, and looked up. A paintbrush was stuck in the middle of her smiling mouth. She quickly slid it from one side to the other, then sat on the bed, raised her foot, twisting her knee joint in a bizarre manner, and the paintbrush was clenched between her toes.

"I can use my right or my left foot, makes no difference." She adroitly transferred the paintbrush from one foot to the other, sticking out her tongue and performing a complicated gymnastic move with it.

The girls exchanged glances.

"Can you even paint a portrait of Comrade Stalin with your foot?" Alyona persevered, trying to channel the conversation in the right direction.

"Of course I can, but I prefer painting cats and cockerels," Tomka said tantalisingly.

"Oh, that grey cat there is so sweet. She's just like our one," Svetlana Bagaturiya said, pointing admiringly to the portrait of a cat with irregular horizontal stripes. "We had to leave Duchess in Sukhumi with my grandmother. I really miss her!"

"I like the cockerels most... that one with all the different colours," the younger Kolyvanova piped up quite unexpectedly.

"You never told me that before, Tanya," the artist exclaimed.

"But tell us about the gift for Comrade Stalin," Alyona Pshenichnikova purposefully steered the conversation in the required direction.

"Oh, you and that gift," Tomka said, suddenly almost peevis.

At this point Lidia came back in and announced, "Tomka, the stove's gone out. We're out of paraffin."

"Well, if there's none we'll do without," Tomka said, airily waving the paintbrush clutched in her toes. "Come here. Closer."

Tomka whispered something secret in Lidia's ear. She nodded, took the little bag from round Tomka's neck, and went over to the door to put on her outdoor clothes.

Settling herself comfortably, more or less crosslegged, and gesticulating with the paintbrush, Tomka began her story.

"All right then, the gift..." She gave a sly, girlish laugh. "My efforts were not wasted. It took me a long time to embroider it, a couple of months, maybe four. My neighbour Vasilisa put it in the post. I told her to make sure she paid the postage for a reply too." She laughed again, but then looked more serious.

"To tell the truth I wasn't really expecting a reply, but I got one. It was on a big sheet of paper with an official stamp at the top and another at the bottom, thanking me directly from his

Secretariat. There it was: "The Kremlin, Moscow." Right, I thought, dear Comrade Stalin, here's where you do your stuff."

The girls exchanged glances again, and Alyona looked across anxiously at Masha.

"At that time we were living in the Nakhlov huts. One wall was solid ice and if they heated the place properly the water would drip down, and there were six of us living in a room like that: our mother, who was just a yokel; my sister Marusya, who was a drunken deadbeat, a complete asshole; and her snot-nosed little bastards..." Tomka looked sternly at the spotlessly clean girls, who were rivetted to the spot. "They hadn't an ounce of sense between them. They were incapable of looking after themselves, let alone me with no arms. Anyone God has given no brains to is in big trouble, say I. Anyway I took that paper in my teeth and went to the Housing Department."

Svetlana Bagaturiya had propped her chin on her fist and was so engrossed, she was gaping. Sonya was wide-eyed, while Masha Chelysheva, reluctant to breathe in the bad air, was even more embarrassed to breathe it back out.

"When I get there there's a queue for the office, and hold as brass I kick the door open and go right in. When they see me, they can't believe it." She sniggered with self-satisfaction. "Anyway, I plonk that paper down on the biggest table I can see," she belched robustly, "and I says to them, 'Well, what do you think of that, then, here's the great Comrade Stalin, the father of all the peoples, knows my name, and he's writing to me, humble as I am, to thank me for working hard for him with my feet, and the place I'm living in is so small there isn't room for a pisspot. What kind of hard work have you got to show? How many times have we come in here begging and begging. Well, now I'm going to go and complain to Comrade Stalin

himself? You get the picture, then, do you, Young Pioneers? This pad I'm living in now I near enough got from Comrade Stalin himself personally!"

She twisted her mouth and wrinkled her nose in a grimace. "You don't see it, do you, you sad little wet knickers. Well go on, put your coats on and just piss off!" she added with unexpected vehemence. She jumped off her mattress and started singing in a loud, reedy voice, hammering her bare heels on the floor and swivelling her hips, "Cu-cumbers, red tom-atoes..."

The girls retreated to the door, hastily tucked their fur coats under their arms and spilled out into the corridor. From behind the door they could hear Tomka shouting, "Tanya! Tanya! Where do you think you're going?"

But Tanya Kolyvanova pulled on her coat in solidarity. Bumping into each other, they ran down the bending corridor and, all squeezing through the outside door at the same time, poured into the street.

It was already completely dark. There was a smell of snow and smoke, and the quiet stars of the countryside twinkled in the blackness of the heavens. They ran to the tram stop and clustered round the metal sign. Sonya and Svetlana were unaffected but Masha was wheezing, suffering the first asthma attack of her life, of which there were to be many more. Alyona had tears streaming from her thick eyelashes which were sticking together in the frost.

She was unbelievably upset but could not have said why.

"What a vile, repulsive cheat," she thought. "And she doesn't love Comrade Stalin."

"I'm going to be in trouble when I get back home," Sonya said, taking it all in her stride.

Two women in rustic half-length fur coats came to the stop

and stood there. It was a longer wait this time, but eventually in the distance they heard the wonderfully welcome ringing of the tram bell as, with its one clear eye, it came into sight round the bend in the road. They were already climbing in when Lidia appeared, having run her errand for Tomka and in a rush to catch up her sister.

Tomka, meanwhile, with a bottle of wine in her neck knapsack, not bothering to put on her ankle boots, went up to the second floor and hammered with her bare heel on the brown door. Getting no reply, she turned round, took a step backwards, nimbly pushed her foot into the door handle and, staggering, opened the door.

It was dark inside but that didn't worry her.

"Yegorych!" she yelled from the doorway, but nobody replied. She moved deeper into the room. A mattress was lying in the corner and Yegorych was lying on it. She knelt down. "Yegorych, feel what I've brought. Take it, will you? Come on, then!" she urged him.

Yegorych, still half asleep, raised his dishevelled head from the big greasy pillow, stretched out a gnarled fist to Tomka's knapsack and said in a sleepy, good-natured voice, "You always want it. What's that you've brought me?"

He was her pal and she had brought him a gift. She could drink a little herself, but didn't really like getting drunk. Any more than she really liked Comrade Stalin, as a tearstained Alyona Pshenichnikova had ascertained.

Translated by Arch Tait