LIBRARY OF SOVIET SHORT STORIES

BORIS ZUBAVIN

A NEW START

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

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FAMILY CHRONICLE

Ours is a corner house, looking out over a broad highway dotted with speeding cars. Across the highway stand the beginnings of a little park, planted last year with linden saplings. As yet, the supports that stand beside each tree cast longer shadows than the trees themselves.

The park ends abruptly in a railway cut, echoing to the impatient roar of suburban electric trains and the panting of dusty expresses. From our windows we can see the rounded tops of the sleeping-cars, with their rows of mushroom-capped ventilators.

There are five of us; but we're not crowded. Mother and Dad have a room to themselves, and so have Nadyezhda—that's my elder sister—and her husband, Kondrashov; and so have I. Kondrashov monopolized the study, too, for a while—set up his draughting desk there, and spent his evenings working at it, whistling his one invariable tune—*The Wild Ducks Fly*. If I looked in, he would seize whatever came to hand and brandish it at me, with a forbidding—

"Get out! I'm busy!"

But he was ousted himself, soon enough. We bought a TV set—that was Nadyezhda's idea—and everyone agreed that the study was the best place to set it up.

The first evening, many of our neighbours dropped in. We turned out the light, and turned on the TV; and as to Kondrashov, Nadyezhda said that if he wanted to work he could take himself off to their bedroom.

"Only do your smoking in the kitchen," she added.

"Thank you kindly," Kondrashov said stiffly, offended.

Nadyezhda gave him a long look, and he wilted in a jiffy.

"Oh, all right, all right," he said and sighed, and dragged his desk out of the study.

We all settled down, our eyes on the screen, waiting to see what the TV studio had to show us. There was nothing to see, at first. And nothing to hear, either, but a booming and crackling inside the set, like the sound of a good hot fire. But finally a bluish light flashed up on the screen, and a curtain parted. Mother's hands flew up, she was so taken aback.

Then an announcer came forward and said something. But we couldn't hear what she said, because the crackling hadn't stopped. And when the announcer disappeared, out came a famous singer—the one Nadyezhda has such a crush on. He started to sing, by

the looks of it. But after we'd listened a minute, Mother said:

"Why, he seems to be whistling."

I had to laugh at that, because Mother was right. He was whistling *The Wild Ducks Fly.*

"It's Kondrashov," Nadyezhda said. "If that isn't the limit!"

She pushed her chair back angrily and went out of the room. In another minute the whistling stopped, and Nadyezhda came back, bringing Kondrashov with her.

"Tune the thing properly," she demanded. "We didn't buy a TV set to hear you whistle."

Kondrashov fiddled with the controls, and the singer's voice rang out loudly, in the last lines of a popular old song.

"There!" Mother said. "That's a different story!"

I laughed again. But—

"Lyonka!" Nadyezhda said sternly. "What do you think you're laughing at?"

She was filmed, the other day—a documentary. And ever since she's been more high and mighty than ever, with the whole family. Especially Kondrashov. She's simply got him by the gills, as Dad puts it.

Yesterday was payday. Alexei Stepanovich—that's our cashier—gave me a wink as I came up to his window, and asked:

"Small denominations, as usual?"

"That's right," I said.

He handed me two crisp new fifties and a packet of shabby threes. I tore off the paper band, and with its pressure gone the packet got so bulky I could hardly stuff it into my pocket.

I was working the evening shift, and by the time I got home it was past midnight. It was very quiet. Not a light in the flat but the one in the kitchen, where Mother was waiting up for me.

When I turned my money over, Mother looked at it as if it might bite her.

"Why don't you ask for bigger bills?" she asked.

"I did," I said. "This was all the cashier had."

Which was a lie, of course.

Mother sighed.

"You and Kondrashov," she said. "You both tell the same tale."

The linen curtain at the window fluttered. The wind from the street brought in to us the warm smell of asphalt pavements, and the night sounds of the city—a low, monotonous droning, growing steadily duller as the night advanced. The siren of a suburban train broke hoarsely into this, and the rumbling of its wheels, louder and louder. The train rushed past, and the rumbling died gradually away. And I was suddenly so sleepy I couldn't keep my eyes open, and so I didn't answer Mother.

Of a weekday, we're never all at home at once. Nadyezhda and I work different shifts, though we're on the same team. But of a Sunday the whole family sits down to table together.

Mother is generally the first up, on Sundays—bak-

ing pasties. This morning, too, though I woke very early, Mother was up already, chopping eggs for the stuffing. I lay listening awhile. Tap-tap-tap, her knife went on the board, like a woodpecker high up on a pine. And then I dropped asleep again. When I woke, my room was bright with summer sunlight, and dishes were rattling in the dining-room as Mother set the table.

Dad was up. I heard him stop at the door of the dining-room and say something to Mother. His voice was still husky with sleep. He'd go straight to the kitchen now, I knew, and lean out at the window, looking up and down the street. He gives the street a looking-over every morning, before he even washes up.

I climbed out of bed. On my way to wash, I looked in at the dining-room door. Mother was counting the family money. She counts it a dozen times a day, when she's alone, and she can never get it straight. Either there's more than there ought to be, or there's less. Those threes and fives Kondrashov and I bring home are a dreadful nuisance!

In the kitchen, Dad and Kondrashov were munching something hastily, so I guessed they'd had a little drink while Mother and Nadyezhda weren't looking.

"Well, where do we go today—Tsaritsino?" Kondrashov asked Dad.

Almost every Sunday, this year, we've spent at Tsaritsino—as if there weren't another decent spot anywhere near Moscow. All on account of Dad! He's

got it into his head that there ought to be a sanatorium organized in the old palace there, that was built back in Catherine's day, but never finished, and still stands empty and unused. He spends hours upon hours, stalking through the rooms like a building foreman, planning what might be done with the place if it were put in order.

At breakfast I told Nadyezhda I'd worked two machines simultaneously, Saturday. She scowled at me, and wouldn't answer. She sets herself away up above all the rest of the world, and nothing new ever seems good to her if anyone but she happens to hit on it. Especially if the anyone is me!

Our whole plant has proclaimed a Stakhanovite watch, and wherever you go you see posters announcing new highs. Our team was the first to undertake the watch, and that was when Nadyezhda got filmed for that documentary. Only—I can't see it. We'd been doing two hundred per cent before the watch, and we're doing the same two hundred now. To my mind, if you're standing watch, the thing to do is put out more than you ever have before. Like our Youth League organizer, Avdotyin. He almost doubled his output from the very first, and his teammates followed his example, and now they're each of them trying to outdo the others. And so I started thinking what our team could do to make things boil, like Avdotyin's team. Then, the other day, the girl who works the next machine to mine took sick and didn't come to work. And I thought I'd see

if I couldn't run her machine, too, as well as my own.

You have to keep an eye on the wire through the whole system of draw-plates, and keep feeding it in all the time, and replacing the coils. But I managed several times to run around and start the other machine, and, all told, I got a good hour's work out of it in the first half of the shift.

Only—when lunch-hour came our shop manager, Ryabov, called me to his office.

"What do you think you're doing on that other machine, see?" he demanded.

"Working, see?" I said.

"Working! Humph! Turning out spoilage—that's what you're doing, see? If you call that working!"

I didn't say anything, just thought to myself—"See? See?"

"Jumping around like a billy-goat, from one machine to the other," he said, and suddenly shouted at me, "Keep your hands off that other machine! It's no child's toy for you. Try it again, and you'll get an official reprimand."

"Oh, all right. I'll leave it alone," I said. I had to wipe the sweat from my forchead, though the office was cool enough. "I thought maybe I could manage two at once."

He stumped up and down the room once and again, and gave me a searching look.

"Well, don't you touch it just yet," he said, in an altogether different tone. "You've got to think things

out before you try to do them—see, my grand inventor?"

The next day he sent for me again.

"Take a look at this, see?" he said, and spread out a drawing on his desk. It was a drawing of the two machines—only one of them had its controls shifted to the left-hand side, instead of the right, so a person could stand between the two, instead of running around them.

I sprawled all over the desk, with my nose in the drawing, and Ryabov grabbed the ink-well just in time to save it from my elbow.

It all looked so simple, I almost imagined I'd thought the whole thing out myself.

"Just the thing!" I cried. "Getting rid of the running back and forth!"

"Your sister doesn't think much of it," he said. "I've showed it to her already—told her all about your bright idea."

"*My* idea, Comrade Ryabov?" I said. "Why, this isn't mine at all."

"Whose is it, then? No need to be so modest, see? Well, and now you go ahead and show your sister."

And Saturday night, as soon as the alterations in the machine were done, I went ahead with a will. Not bad, for a first try: three hundred per cent.

Sunday was warm and clear, and we kept the car windows open. It was pleasant on the highway, which is lined with young trees very much like the ones in our new park: whitewashed trunks, and a sup-

port beside every tree to help it stand against the wind. There are signs up, here and there, in huge letters on white-painted iron bill-boards. "Protect and cherish the trees," the signs appeal; "trees are man's friends." Traffic was very lively—buses and cars and, along the sides of the road, no end of cyclists.

We soon reached the park, and stopped the car behind the palace. It seems very beautiful from a distance, surrounded as it is by summer greenery. But when you get up closer the effect is spoiled, because there's no roof, you see, and no glass in the windows. Burdock and nettle grow inside, on the heaps of rubble and broken brick, and here and there tiny, twisted birches have sprung out from the walls. But the walls themselves are solid enough. Dad went in on a new tour of inspection. Mother stayed by the car to wait for him, but the rest of us ran down the hill to the pond, for a swim.

As we were climbing out of the water some young fellows came along the bank—three of them, all carrying cameras. They turned out to be the very ones that had filmed Nadyezhda at the plant. They seemed glad to see her, too. Just now, they were doing a film about the environs of Moscow. But after we'd talked awhile they asked Nadyezhda if she wouldn't do another bit for the documentary—just a short bit, right where she was, beside the pond.

"We'll fit the two together," they said. "Show you at work at the plant, and then out here in the country."

"That would be fine," Kondrashov said. "Let's do it."

But the cameramen only gave him a look, and turned back to Nadyezhda, waiting to hear what she would say.

She thought it over, and finally agreed.

They had her pose under a willow, right by the water's edge; and as for Kondrashov and me, we were to get into the pond again and splash the water over one another.

After ten minutes or so of this, we tried to beg off. The water was too cold. Kondrashov stopped splashing, and hugged himself as tight as he could, trying to warm up.

"Shall we call it a day?" he asked the cameramen, hopefully.

But they got angry, and shouted down at him from the bank.

"Can't you do what you're told?" they wanted to know. "Or haven't you ever been taken for the films?"

Well, as a matter of fact, we never had. And so shivering, we went on splashing that cold water over one another. In the end, I got sick of it and started shoving Kondrashov. He lost his balance and went under, with a weird swan cry; and for an instant there was nothing but bubbles.

"Good! Good!" the cameramen called down to us, as he came up again.

They finished finally, and let us climb out. The film would be ready in about three weeks, they said.

and they'd let us know when we could see it at the studio.

Kondrashov and I tumbled into our clothes and ran a race around the pond to get a little warmth into our systems. As we were climbing the hill, afterwards, to join the others by the car, Kondrashov remarked that there was one consolation, anyway—we'd be able to see ourselves on the screen.

At the top of the hill we found those cameramen again, talking to Dad and Mother. Whose car, they wanted to know.

"Ours," Dad said, and smoothed his moustache. He always fiddles with his moustache when he wants to show off.

The cameramen started begging Nadyezhda to pose for them again, with the old folks.

"Such a splendid catch!" they said, simply bubbling over with enthusiasm. "Girl Stakhanovite in the country with her parents! All you have to do is drive down the path, and then stop the car and get out. Come, let's get started!"

"Now, this palace here," Dad said, as he got into the car. "It could be made into such a sanatorium! We ought to write to the TU Central Council, or to our Ministry, maybe. . . ."

But the cameramen weren't interested in sanatoriums. They had no time to spare. All they would say was, "That's so, Dad. Come, let's get started!" And so Dad got in, and they got to work.

Kondrashov and I decided to stay out of it—not, true enough, that anyone asked us to join in! We

lay down in the grass, where the sun was hottest, and watched the fun.

They were at it an hour or more, filming Nadyezhda with Dad and Mother. Made them drive down the path, and out to the road, and back again, a dozen times; and get in and out of the car, and in again, and out again, until Dad asked—wouldn't it ever end?

"That's nothing," Kondrashov said to me, crinkling his face in the sunlight as if he were going to sneeze. "You and I had it worse!"

And we got to talking about the cinema, and what a hard time the actors must have when they're doing their films.

On Monday, Ryabov said to me:

"You'll have to take command of our first two-machine team, see? Your sister says she won't have anything to do with it."

I remembered how, a year ago, Nadyezhda said she wouldn't have me on her team, because we were relatives; and I said family feeling was a purely domestic matter, and had nothing to do with work, and she could throw me out any time if I didn't do my work properly. But she was very stubborn about it. And then Kondrashov spoke up for me. Nadyezhda would have to take me on anyway, he said, whether she liked it or not, because if she didn't I'd never give the family any peace.

"That's so, too," Mother said then. "Once Lyonka gets an idea into his head, there's no shaking him off."