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a Short History of Tractors in UKRAINIAN

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MARINA LEWYCKA

'Mad and hilarious' *Daily Telegraph*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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A SHORT HISTORY OF TRACTORS IN UKRAINIAN

'An entertaining novel as eccentric as its title and full of unlikely characters. The fusion of Ukrainian incomers with conventional English Midland life is sharply comic and the prose is lyrical' Margaret Drabble, *New Statesman*

'Most entertaining' *Evening Standard*

'Engaging . . . hilariously and affectingly records the fall-out when an elderly Ukrainian widower long resident in Britain falls for a flamboyantly busty Russian gold-digger in search of a passport to prosperity' Peter Kemp, *Sunday Times*

'Very welcome – fully deserved the attention it got' Susan Hill, *Spectator*

'A book that put and kept a smile on my face all year. The culture clash between eastern and western Europe so ripe for comic treatment is captured in this delicious story of sibling rivalry' *Glasgow Herald*

For Dave and Sonia

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I

Two phone calls and a funeral

Two years after my mother died, my father fell in love with a glamorous blonde Ukrainian divorcée. He was eighty-four and she was thirty-six. She exploded into our lives like a fluffy pink grenade, churning up the murky water, bringing to the surface a sludge of sloughed-off memories, giving the family ghosts a kick up the backside.

It all started with a phone call.

My father's voice, quavery with excitement, crackles down the line. 'Good news, Nadezhda. I'm getting married!'

I remember the rush of blood to my head. Please let it be a joke! Oh, he's gone bonkers! Oh, you foolish old man! But I don't say any of those things. 'Oh, that's nice, Pappa,' I say.

'Yes, yes. She is coming with her son from Ukraina. Ternopil in Ukraina.'

Ukraina: he sighs, breathing in the remembered scent of mown hay and cherry blossom. But I catch the distinct synthetic whiff of New Russia.

Her name is Valentina, he tells me. But she is more like Venus. 'Botticelli's Venus rising from waves. Golden hair. Charming eyes. Superior breasts. When you see her you will understand.'

The grown-up me is indulgent. How sweet – this last late flowering of love. The daughter me is outraged. The traitor! The randy old beast! And our mother barely two years dead. I am angry and curious. I can't wait to see her – this woman who is usurping my mother.

'She sounds *gorgeous*. When can I meet her?'

'After marriage you can meet.'

'I think it might be better if we could meet her first, don't you?'

'Why you want to meet? You not marrying her.' (He knows something's not quite right, but he thinks he can get away with it.)

'But Pappa, have you really thought this through? It seems very sudden. I mean, she must be a lot younger than you.'

I modulate my voice carefully, to conceal any signs of disapproval, like a worldly-wise adult dealing with a love-struck adolescent.

'Thirty-six. She's thirty-six and I'm eighty-four. So what?' (He pronounces it 'vat'.)

There is a snap in his voice. He has anticipated this question.

'Well, it's quite an age difference . . .'

'Nadezhda, I never thought you would be so bourgeois.' (He puts the emphasis on the last syllable – wah!)

'No, no.' He has me on the defensive. 'It's just that . . . there could be problems.'

There will be no problems, says Pappa. He has anticipated all problems. He has known her for three months. She has an uncle in Selby, and has come to visit him on a tourist visa. She wants to make a new life for herself and her son in the West, a good life, with good job, good money, nice car – absolutely

no Lada no Skoda – good education for son – must be Oxford Cambridge, nothing less. She is an educated woman, by the way. Has a diplǫma in pharmacy. She will easily find well-paid work here, once she learns English. In the meantime, he is helping her with her English, and she is cleaning the house and looking after him. She sits on his lap and allows him to fondle her breasts. They are happy together.

Did I hear that right? She sits on my father's lap and he fondles her superior Botticellian breasts?

'Oh, well . . .' I keep my voice steady, but rage burns in my heart, '. . . life's just full of surprises. I hope it works out for you. But, look, Pappa' (time to be blunt) 'I can see why you want to marry her. But have you asked yourself why she wants to marry *you*?'

'*Tak tak*. Yes, yes, I know. Passport. Visa. Work permit. So vat?' Cross, croaky voice.

He has it all worked out. She will care for him as he grows older and frailer. He will put a roof over her head, share his tiny pension with her until she finds that well-paid job. Her son – who, by the way, is an extraordinarily gifted boy – genius – plays piano – will get an English education. They will discuss art, literature, philosophy together in the evenings. She is a cultured woman, not a chatterbox peasant woman. He has already elicited her views on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, by the way, and she agrees with him in all respects. She, like him, admires Constructivist art and abhors neo-classicism. They have much in common. A sound foundation for marriage.

'But, Pappa, don't you think it might be better for her if she married someone nearer her own age –? The authorities will realise it's a marriage of convenience. They're not stupid.'

'Hmm.'
'She could still be sent back.'
'Hmm.'

He hasn't thought of this. It slows him down, but it doesn't stop him in his tracks. You see, he explains, he is her last hope, her only chance to escape persecution, destitution, prostitution. Life in Ukraine is too hard for such a delicate spirit as hers. He has been reading the newspapers, and the news is grim. There is no bread, no toilet paper, no sugar, no sewerage, no probity in public life, and electricity only sporadically. How can he condemn a lovely woman to this? How can he walk by on the other side of the road?

'You must understand, Nadezhda, only I can save her!'

It's true. He has tried. He has done his best. Before he hit on the plan of marrying her himself, he searched all around for suitable husbands. He has already approached the Stepanenkos, an elderly Ukrainian couple who have a single son still living at home. He has approached Mr Greenway, a widower living in the village whose unmarried son visits him from time to time. (A sensible type, by the way. An engineer. Not a common type. Would be very good match for Valentina.) They have both refused: they are too narrow-minded. He told them so, in no uncertain terms. Now neither the Stepanenkos nor Mr Greenway will speak to him any more.

The Ukrainian community in Peterborough has disowned her. They, too, are narrow-minded. They are not impressed with her views on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. They are bound up in the past, Ukrainian nationalism, Banderivtsi. She is a modern, liberated woman. They put out vile rumours

about her. They say she sold her mother's goat and cow to buy grease to put on her face to attract Western men. They speak rubbish. Her mother had chickens and pigs – she never had a goat or a cow. This just goes to show how foolish these gossipy types can be.

He coughs and splutters on the other end of the telephone. He has fallen out with all his friends over this. If needs be he will disown his daughters. He will stand alone against the world – alone apart from the beautiful woman by his side. His words can barely keep up with the excitement of his Big Idea.

'But Pappa . . .'

'And one thing more, Nadia. Don't tell Vera.'

Not much chance of that. I haven't spoken to my sister for two years, since our row after Mother's funeral.

'But Pappa . . .'

'Nadezhda, you have to understand that in some respects the man is governed by different impulses to the woman.'

'Pappa, please, spare me the biological determinism.'

Oh, what the hell? Let him learn the hard way.

* * *

Perhaps it started before the phone call. Perhaps it started two years ago, in this same room where he is sitting now, where my mother lay dying while he paced about the house in an ecstasy of grief.

The windows were open, and the breeze that fluttered through half-drawn linen curtains carried the scent of lavender from the front garden. There was birdsong, voices of people passing

on the street, the neighbour's daughter flirting with her boyfriend by the gate. Inside the pale, clean room, my mother gasped for breath hour after hour while her life slid away, and I fed her morphine from a spoon.

Here are the rubbery accoutrements of death – the nurse's latex gloves, the waterproof sheet on the bed, spongy-soled slippers, a pack of glycerine suppositories gleaming like golden bullets, the commode with its functional cover and rubber-tipped legs, now full of a lumpy greenish liquid.

'Do you remember . . . ?' I recite the stories of her and our childhood over and over again.

Her eyes flicker darkly. In a lucid moment, her hand in mine, she says, 'Look after poor Kolya.'

He was with her when she died in the night. I remember the roar of his pain. 'Me too! Me too! Take me too!' His voice thick, strangled; his limbs rigid, as though gripped by a convulsion.

In the morning, after they had taken her body away, he sat in the back room with a haunted look on his face. After a while he said,

'Did you know, Nadezhda, that apart from the mathematical proof of Pythagoras there is also a geometric proof? Look how beautiful it is.'

On a sheet of paper, he drew lines and angles, connected with small symbols, and murmured over them as he unfolded the equation.

He's completely off his trolley, I thought. Poor Kolya.

* * *

In the weeks before she died, Mother worried as she lay propped up on the pillows of a hospital bed. Linked with wires to a monitor that recorded the pitiful pulsing of her heart, she grumbled about the mixed ward with only the privacy of a cursorily drawn curtain, and the intrusive noises of the wheezing, coughing, snoring old men. She flinched under the impersonal, stubby fingers of the young male nurse who came to tape the wires above shrunken breasts, carelessly revealed under the hospital gown. She was nothing but a sick old woman. Who cared what she thought?

Quitting life is harder than you think, she said. There are so many things to be taken care of before you can depart in peace. Kolya – who would take care of him? Not her two daughters – clever girls, but so quarrelsome. What would happen to them? Would they find happiness? Would they be provided for by those charming but good-for-nothing men they had ended up with? And the three granddaughters – so pretty and no husbands yet. Still so much to sort out, and her strength was failing.

Mother wrote her will out in hospital, while my sister Vera and I both stood over her, because neither of us trusted the other. She wrote it out in her quavering longhand, and two of the nurses witnessed it. She was weak now, who for so many years had been strong. She was old and sick, but her legacy, her life savings, throbbed full of life in the Co-op bank.

One thing she was definite about – it shouldn't go to Pappa.

'Poor Nikolai, he's got no sense. He's too full of crazy schemes. Better you two will have half and half.'

She talked in her own DIY language – Ukrainian sprinkled

with words like handheldblendera, suspenderbeltu, greenfingerdski.

When it was clear that there was nothing more they could do in hospital, they discharged her to die at home in her own time. My sister spent most of the last month up there. I visited at weekends. It was some time during that last month, when I wasn't there, that my sister wrote out the codicil dividing the money equally among the three granddaughters, my Anna, and her Alice and Alexandra, instead of between my sister and myself. My mother signed it, and two neighbours witnessed it.

'Don't worry,' I said to Mother before she died, 'everything will be all right. We'll be sad, and we'll miss you, but we'll be all right.'

But we weren't all right.

* * *

They buried her in the churchyard in the village, in a new plot that bordered on to open country. Her grave was the last in a row of new neat graves.

The three granddaughters, Alice, Alexandra and Anna, tall and blonde, threw roses into the grave, then handfuls of earth. Nikolai, bent with arthritis, grey-skinned, vacant-eyed, clung to my husband's arm in tearless grief. The daughters, Vera and Nadezhda, Faith and Hope, my sister and I, prepared to do battle over our mother's will.

When the funeral guests come back to the house, to pick at cold refreshments and get tipsy on Ukrainian samo-

honka, my sister and I confront each other in the kitchen. She is wearing a black knitted silk two-piece from some discreet little second-hand dress agency in Kensington. There are small gold buckles on her shoes and she carries a Gucci handbag with a little gold clasp, and a fine gold chain hangs around her neck. I am wearing an assortment of black garments I found in Oxfam. Vera looks me up and down critically.

'Yes, the peasant look. I see.'

I am forty-seven years old and a university lecturer, but my sister's voice reduces me instantly to a bogey-nosed four-year-old.

'Nothing wrong with peasants. Mother was a peasant,' four-year-old retorts.

'Quite,' says Big Sister. She lights a cigarette. The smoke curls upwards in elegant spirals.

She bends forward to replace the lighter in her Gucci bag, and I see that on the gold chain round her neck hangs a little locket, tucked away inside the lapels of her suit. It looks old-fashioned and quaint against Vera's stylish outfit, as though it doesn't belong. I stare. Tears are in my eyes.

'You're wearing Mother's locket.'

It is Mother's only treasure from Ukraine, small enough to hide in the hem of a dress. It was a gift from her father to her mother on their wedding day. Inside the locket, their two photographs smile fadedly at each other.

Vera returns my gaze.

'She gave it to me.' (I cannot believe this. Mother knew I loved the locket, coveted it more than anything. Vera must have stolen it. There is no other explanation.) 'Now, what exactly do you want to say about the will?'

'I just want things to be fair,' I whine. 'What's wrong with that?'

'Nadezhda, it's enough that you get your clothes from Oxfam. Must you get your ideas there also?'

'You took the locket. You pressured her into signing the codicil. Split the money equally among the three granddaughters, instead of between the two daughters. That way, you and yours get twice as much. Greedy.'

'Really, Nadezhda. I'm shocked that you could think this way.' Big Sister's groomed eyebrows quiver.

'Not nearly as shocked as I was when I found out,' Bogey-nose bleats.

'You weren't there, were you, my little sister? You were off doing your wonderful thing. Saving the world. Pursuing your career. Leaving all the responsibility to me. As you always do.'

'You tormented her last days with stories of your divorce, of your husband's cruelty. You chain-smoked at her bedside while she lay dying.'

Big Sister flicks the ash from her cigarette and sighs theatrically.

'You see, the trouble with your generation, Nadezhda, is that you've just skated over the surface of life. Peace. Love. Workers' Control. It's all idealistic nonsense. You can afford the luxury of irresponsibility, because you've never seen the dark underside of life.'

Why does my sister's upper-class drawl infuriate me so much? Because I know it's fake. I know about the single bed we shared and the toilet across the yard and the squares of torn newspaper to wipe your bum. She can't fool me. But I have my ways of needling her, too.

'Oh, it's the dark underside that's bothering you? Why don't you go and get some counselling?' I suggest slyly in my best professional let's-be-sensible voice, my look-how-grown-up-I-am voice, the voice I use with Pappa.

'Please don't talk to me in that social-worker voice, Nadezhda.'

'Get some psychotherapy. Get to grips with that dark underside, flush it out into the open, before it eats you away.' (I know this will infuriate her.)

'Counselling. Therapy. Let's all talk about our problems. Let's all hug each other and feel better. Let's help the underprivileged. Let's give all our money to the starving babies.'

She bites fiercely into a canapé. An olive hurtles to the floor.

'Vera, you're going through bereavement and divorce. No wonder you're feeling under stress. You need some help.'

'It's all self-delusion. Underneath, people are hard and mean and out for themselves. You can't imagine how I despise social workers.'

'I can imagine. And Vera, I'm not a social worker.'

My father is in a rage, too. He blames the doctors, my sister, the Zadchuks, the man who cut the long grass behind the house, for causing her death. Sometimes he blames himself. He slopes around muttering, if this hadn't happened, if that hadn't happened, my Millochka would still be alive. Our little exile family, long held together by our mother's love and beetroot soup, has started to fall apart.

Alone in the empty house, my father lives out of tins and eats off folded newspapers, as if by punishing himself he will bring her back. He will not come and stay with us.