

Children OF THE Arbat



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Translated by Harold Shukman



 LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
Boston Toronto

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FIRST ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rybakov, Anatoli Naumovich.

Children of the Arbat.

Translation of: *Deti Arbata*.

1. Soviet Union—History—1917-1936—Fiction.

I. Title.

PG3476.R87D4813 1988 891.73'44 87-33918
ISBN 0-316-76372-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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DESIGNED BY JEANNE ARBOUD

*Published simultaneously in Canada
by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

Part I





Between Nikolsky and Denezhny streets (today they are called Plotnikov and Vesnin) stood the biggest apartment block in the Arbat — three eight-story buildings, one close behind the other, the front one glazed with a facade of white tiles. Signs attached to the walls announced “Fine Embroidery,” “Stammering Cured,” “Venereal and Urinogenital Diseases.” Low, arched, iron-clad passageways linked two deep, dark courtyards.

Sasha Pankratov came out onto the street and turned left toward Smolensk Square. Girls were already strolling up and down arm-in-arm, whiling away the time in front of the Arbat Art Cinema, Arbat and Dorogomilov girls, and from Plyushchikha Street. Carelessly turned-up coat collars, lipsticked mouths, long curling eyelashes, a colored neck-scarf. Autumn chic of the Arbat. The movie was over and the audience was pushing its way out onto the street through the narrow doors, where a gang of boisterous teenagers was jostling, long-standing claimants to the territory.

The Arbat had finished for the day. Early Soviet Gaz and Amo automobiles rolled along the asphalted center of the road and tried to avoid the potholes. The area between the tramlines was still cobbled. Trams were coming out of the depot towing two, even three cars in a vain attempt to satisfy the transport needs of the great city. The first line of the Metro was being laid underground, and a steel derrick poked up into the air above the shaft being sunk in Smolensk Square.

Katya was waiting for Sasha at Devichy Field Boulevard at the Rubber Works Club. High cheek-boned and gray-eyed, she had the

look of a girl from the steppes. She was wearing a sweater made of thick country wool, and she smelled of wine.

"I had some red wine with the girls. Did you celebrate the holiday, too?"

"What holiday?" he asked.

"You mean you don't know?"

"No."

"It's . . . the Protection of the Virgin."

"Ah."

"That's it, 'Ah'?"

"Where are we going?"

"Where? To my friend."

"Should we bring something?"

"There'll be snacks there. Let's buy some vodka."

They walked along Great Savinsky Street past the old workers' barracks, where they could hear drunken voices and tuneless singing, and the sound of an accordion and a phonograph. Then down the long, narrow passage between the wooden factory fences, and finally down to the embankment. To the left were the big windows of the Sverdlov and Lever factories, to the right the Moscow River, in front, the high walls of the Novodevichy Monastery and the metal transoms of the circle-line railroad bridge, behind them the marshes and water meadows of Kochki and Luzhniki.

"Where are you taking me?" Sasha asked.

"'Where, where?' Just come. Nothing's out of the way for a beggar."

He put his arm around her shoulders and she tried to throw it off. "Be patient," she protested.

He squeezed her more tightly. "Calm down," she urged.

The four-story, unplastered cement building stood somewhat apart. They walked down the long, ill-lit corridor past numerous doors. As they reached the last one, Katya said, "Marusya's living with a friend. Don't ask any questions."

A man was asleep on the divan, his face to the wall. A boy and girl, aged around ten or eleven, were sitting at the window and turned to greet Katya. Marusya, a small woman, was busy at the

kitchen table, next to the sink. She had a pleasant, kind face and was a lot older than Katya.

"We got tired of waiting; we thought you weren't coming," she said, wiping her hands and taking off her apron. "We thought you must have gone off somewhere else. Get up, Ivan Petrovich, the guests are here."

Thin and sullen, the man rose, smoothing back his skimpy hair and rubbing his hand over his face to wipe away the sleep. His collar was creased and his tie was undone.

"The pies have dried out." Marusya took the dishcloth off a plate of pies. "This has a soybean filling, this one's with potatoes, and that one's got cabbage. Toma, bring the plates."

The little girl put plates on the table.

Katya took off her jacket and began laying the table with knives and forks from the sideboard. She knew where everything was. She'd been here before.

"The room needs tidying," Katya observed. It was an order.

Marusya cleared clothes off the chairs. "We had a nap after dinner," she said, justifying herself, "and the kids have been cutting up paper. Pick up the paper, Vitya."

The boy crawled about the floor, picking up bits of paper.

Ivan Petrovich washed at the sink and straightened his tie.

Marusya cut the children a piece from each of the pies and set them down by the window. "Eat!"

Ivan Petrovich poured out the vodka.

"Here's to the holiday!"

"See you under the table!" Katya responded, looking around at everyone except Sasha.

It was the first time she had brought him to meet her friends. Here she drank vodka. With him it was always red wine.

"You've got yourself a nice dark-eyed one!" Marusya nodded toward Sasha with a grin.

"Dark-eyed and curly haired," Katya laughed.

Ivan Petrovich reached for the bottle. "Curly when you're young, bald when you're old." He talked as if he wanted to get acquainted, and Sasha no longer thought him sullen. Marusya gazed at them both with a look of gentle understanding.

Sasha enjoyed Marusya's solicitude. He liked the house on the outskirts, and the sound of the songs and the accordion coming from the next apartment.

"You're not eating?" Marusya asked.

"Thank you, I am eating. It's delicious."

"They're not what I would have given you, if I could have got anything to make them with. You can't get proper yeast, and what you can get . . . Ivan Petrovich brought it."

Ivan Petrovich said something serious on the subject of yeast.

The children asked for more pie.

Marusya cut them each another piece. "You think I made them just for you! You've had your feast, now go and get washed!"

She gathered up their bed linen and carried it out of the room to the neighbor's.

The children went to sleep next door. Then Ivan Petrovich got ready to leave and Marusya went to see him out, saying to Katya as she left, "There are clean sheets in the cupboard."

"What does she need him for?" Sasha asked, when Marusya had shut the door.

"Her husband won't support her. It's hopeless to chase him. She still has a life to live."

"But with the children here?"

"Would they be better off starving?"

"He's an old man."

"She's no youngster."

"Why doesn't he marry her?"

She gave him a look of distrust. "And why don't you marry me?"

"Do you want to get married?"

"Yes. Okay! Let's go to bed."

Another surprise. Usually, he had to win her as if they were meeting for the first time. But now, she made the bed herself and then undressed. All she said was, "Put out the light."

Afterward, she ran her fingers through his hair. "You're strong. I bet the girls all love you. But you're not careful." She leaned over him and looked into his eyes. "Aren't you afraid I'll produce a little dark-eyed Sasha?"

It had to happen sooner or later. Well, she would have an abortion. Neither of them wanted a child.

"Are you pregnant?"

She buried her head in his shoulder and pressed against him, as if to find shelter from the miseries and misfortunes of her life.

What did he know about her? Where did she live? With an aunt? In a hostel? Did she rent the corner of a room? An abortion! What would she tell them at home, what would she tell them at work? All of a sudden she's missing her periods? Where would she be able to go with the baby?

"If you are, have the baby and we'll get married."

Without raising her head, she asked, "But what shall we call it?"

"We'll think of something. There's plenty of time."

She laughed and moved away from him.

"You won't get married, and anyway I don't want to marry you. How old are you? Twenty-two? I'm older than you. You're educated, but look at me — only six years of school. I'm getting married, but not to you."

"Who to, I'd like to know?"

"You'd like to know? He's a boy from my village."

"Where is he now?"

"Who, where . . . He's in the Urals. He's coming for me."

"What is he?"

"What? A mechanic."

"Have you known him long?"

"I've told you, we're from the same village."

"Why didn't he marry you before now?"

"He wanted to sow his wild oats first, that's why."

"And now he has?"

"He's thirty and he's had a few girls, I can tell you."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes. I do."

"So why do you go with me?"

"Why, why, why. I also want to live. What is this, the third degree? So many questions!"

"When is he coming?"

"Tomorrow."

"So we won't be seeing each other again?"

"Do you want me to invite you to the wedding? He's strong, you know. One swipe and that'd be the end of you."

"We'll see."

"Ho, ho."

"But you're pregnant."

"Who said so?"

"You did."

"I didn't say anything. That was your idea."

There was a quiet tapping at the door. Katya got up to open the door to Marusya and then got back into bed.

"Did you see him off?"

"Yes." Marusya switched on the light. "Would you like tea?"

Sasha reached for his trousers.

"You can stay as you are," Marusya said.

"He's bashful." Katya grinned. "He's ashamed to be seen with me, but he wants to get married."

"It doesn't take long to get married, or to get divorced," Marusya said.

Sasha poured what was left of the vodka into a glass and ate a piece of pie.

He felt all in all he should be grateful to Katya that things had ended as well as they had. What she had said about the mechanic was probably true, but that wasn't the point. The point was, she'd been teasing him and like a fool he had been taken in.

He got up.

"Where are you off to?" she asked.

"Home."

"What are you talking about?" Marusya protested. "Sleep here. You can leave in the morning. I'll sleep at my neighbor's. Nobody will disturb you."

"I have to go."

Katya looked at him sullenly.

"Can you find your way home?"

"I won't get lost."

She pulled him toward her. "Stay."

"I'm going. Be happy."

Still, she was a good girl! It would be a pity if she didn't telephone him and they didn't see each other again. He didn't know where she lived, she wouldn't give him her address: "My aunt

would be angry." She hadn't even told him which factory she worked at. "Be under the lamppost at the entrance."

At first, she would call him from a phone booth. They would go to the movies or the park; later, they started going into the depths of Neskuchny Park. The wicker benches appeared white in the moonlight. Katya pulled back. "What are you doing? . . . Leave me alone! . . . You think you can touch me any way you like?" Then she pressed against him, a girl from the steppes, her lips dry and chapped, and ran her rough hands through his hair.

"You know, I thought you were a Gypsy when I first saw you. We had Gypsies next to our village, and they were dark, just like you. Except that you've got smooth skin."

She came to see him in the summer, when his mother was away at her sister's dacha. Her eyes were angry and she was embarrassed by the women sitting at the entrance.

"All eyes! I'll never come here again in my life."

When she telephoned, she usually said nothing, then she would hang up and call again.

"Is that you, Katya?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Why didn't you answer when you called before?"

"That wasn't me."

"Are we going to meet?"

"Where do you want to meet?"

"Next to the park?"

"You've already made up your mind. Come to Devichy."

"At six, seven?"

"I'll arrive there at six," she said.

Sasha recalled all this now, as he waited for her to phone, and the next day he wanted to get home from the institute as soon as he could, just in case she did. But he had to stay late to get the student newspapers ready for the October holiday. And then he was summoned to a meeting of the Party committee.

There were no empty seats near the door and Sasha had to edge his way between the crammed rows of chairs, pushing through the closely packed audience and attracting an irritated look from Baulin, the Party committee secretary. Baulin was red-haired and brawny, with a round, simple, open face, and his broad chest bulged under a blue satin peasant shirt that was fastened at the neck with two white buttons. He waited until Sasha had found a seat and then turned to Krivoruchko.

“So, Krivoruchko, you have sabotaged the construction of the hostels. Nobody’s interested in your alibis. You say the funds were diverted to crash programs? You’re not responsible for building a steel plant like the Magnitka — it’s only a hostel for the institute. Why didn’t you warn us that the timetable was unrealistic? . . . Ah, the timetable *was* realistic. So why wasn’t it kept to? . . . You’ve been in the Party for twenty years? Your past services have earned our deepest respect, but we still have to punish you for your mistakes.”

Sasha was astounded by Baulin’s tone of voice. Krivoruchko was the deputy director of the institute and the students were afraid of him. People often talked about his brilliant war record, and he wore his military tunic, breeches, and boots as a constant reminder of it. He was stooped and had a long, miserable nose with bags under his eyes. He never stopped to chat, and even when greeted, he would reply with no more than a nod of the head.

Krivoruchko was leaning on the back of a chair, and Sasha could see his fingers were trembling. It was pitiful to see weakness in a

man who was usually so formidable. But the building materials had in fact not been delivered, although now nobody cared.

Janson, the dean of Sasha's faculty and a Latvian who was not easily ruffled, turned for support to the director of the institute, Glinskaya, and asked in a conciliatory tone, "Maybe they'll give us another completion date?"

"What date?" Baulin asked with sinister benevolence.

Glinskaya was silent. Her aggrieved look showed how she felt about having such a worthless deputy forced on her.

Lozgachev, a postgraduate student, got up. Tall, smooth, and impressive, he raised his arms in a theatrical gesture.

"They surely didn't send the shovels to Magnitka as well? Did the students dig the frozen ground with their hands? The Komsomol* organizer is right here — let him tell us how the students managed without shovels."

Baulin watched Sasha with interest as he got up.

"We didn't have to work without shovels. The storeroom was closed on one occasion, but the manager came back and issued the shovels."

"Did you have to wait long?" Krivoruchko asked, without raising his head.

"Maybe ten minutes."

Having been let down by Sasha as a witness, Lozgachev shook his head reproachfully, as if the blunder was not his but Sasha's.

"So you managed?" Baulin grinned.

"We tried," Sasha replied.

"How long did you work and how long were you idle?"

"We had no materials."

"Why not?"

"Everyone knows."

"Don't play lawyer with me, Pankratov," Baulin warned, his words strung out for effect. "It's out of place."

Averting their eyes from Krivoruchko, the committee members voted to expel him from the Party. Only Janson abstained.

Krivoruchko left the room, even more stooped.

* *Translator's note:* The League of Communist Youth.

"A complaint has been received from senior lecturer Azizyan," Baulin announced, looking at Sasha as if to say, *And now it's your turn, Pankratov.*

Azizyan had given Sasha's group a short course on the fundamentals of socialist accounting principles. He had not dealt with the subject at all, he had taught them nothing about accounting or even about its basic principles. Instead, he had lectured about people who distorted those principles, and Sasha had complained that the group should be learning something about bookkeeping as such. Cunning and unctuous, a dark, balding little man, Azizyan had laughed. *Then* he had laughed; now he was accusing Sasha of attacking the Marxist basis of the science of accounting.

"Is that how it was?" Baulin's cold, pale blue eyes were on Sasha.

"I did not say that theory was unnecessary. I simply said we weren't getting instruction in bookkeeping."

"The Party's concern with theory doesn't interest you?"

"Of course it does, but so does concrete knowledge."

"Is there a difference between the Party's concern with theory and concrete knowledge?"

Lozgachev was on his feet again.

"Comrades! When people openly preach that a science is politically neutral . . . And, also, Pankratov tried to foist his own personal opinion about Krivoruchko onto the Party committee, acting as a spokesman for the student masses. Tell us Pankratov, honestly, just who do you represent here?"

Janson gloomily drummed his fingers on his tightly packed briefcase. It wasn't right to argue with a lecturer, but still — to say that science was "politically neutral" . . .

In a voice weary from the burden of high office, and implying that this was a trivial matter, involving only a paltry student, Glinskaya addressed Baulin. "Perhaps this should be handed over to the Komsomol . . ."

Lozgachev looked at Baulin; it was clear that Glinskaya's idea did not appeal to him.

"The Party committee should not evade —"

His casual use of that one word settled the issue.

Baulin scowled. "Nobody's going to evade anything. But there is

a procedure. Let the Komsomol discuss the question. We shall see how politically mature they are."

Sasha saw the brown leather coat as he came in — Uncle Mark! His uncle greeted him. "Been having a good time?"

Sasha kissed his uncle's smooth-shaven cheek. Mark gave off the scent of good pipe tobacco and fragrant eau de cologne — "the cozy smell of a bachelor," in his mother's words. Portly, jolly, balding, and avuncular, he looked older than his thirty-five years. The sharp eyes behind the yellow-tinted spectacles revealed the iron will of a man who was known throughout the whole country as one of its industrial chiefs, almost as much a legend as his gigantic construction in the east, the new metallurgical base of the Soviet Union. Out of range of enemy aircraft, it would be the strategic rear of the proletarian power.

"I almost decided not to wait for you, I thought you might be out for the night. . . ."

"Sasha comes home every night," his mother said.

There was a bottle of port on the table, choice pink sausage, sprats, and some cakes — the kind of delicacies that Mark always brought when he visited. There was also the traditional pie that his mother always baked for Mark. He must have let her know he was coming to Moscow.

"Are you here for long?" Sasha asked.

"I got here today and I leave tomorrow."

"Stalin summoned him," his mother said.

She was proud of her brother and proud of her son. She had nothing much else to be proud of — abandoned by her husband, a woman on her own, small, plump, though her white face was still pretty and her gray hair was thick and wavy.

Mark pointed to a parcel on the divan. "Undo it."

Sofya Alexandrovna tried to untie the knot.

"Give it here!" Sasha said, cutting the string with a knife.

Mark had brought his sister a length of cloth for a coat and a downy shawl and for Sasha a suit of dark blue wool. The slightly creased jacket fitted him perfectly.

"Like a glove," Sofya Alexandrovna observed with approval. "Thank you, Mark, he has absolutely nothing to go out in."

Sasha looked at himself in the mirror with satisfaction. Mark's gifts were always just what one needed. When he was a child, his uncle had taken him to the shoemaker to have a pair of tall, soft leather boots made for him. Nobody, neither in the apartment building nor at school, had boots like those. He had been very proud of those boots and could still recall their smell and the sharp scent of hides and tar in the shoemaker's tiny shop.

Several times that evening Mark was called to the phone. In a low, firm voice he gave instructions about the allocation of resources, budgets, special trains, and he warned that he would be spending the night in the Arbat and that his car should be there at eight the next morning.

He came back into the room and cast a sidelong look at the bottle.

"Hmm!"

"*'Drink, comrade, wherever you can, to drown life's sorrows.'*" Sasha sang Mark's favorite song. When he was still a child he used to hear Mark singing it.

"*'Softer, softer, all our worries will go tonight.'*" Mark picked it up. "Is that it?"

"That's it!" And Sasha piped up again.

*Maybe this time tomorrow
The Cheka* will get here,
And maybe this time tomorrow
We'll execute Kolchak . . .*

He got his voice and his ear from his mother. She had once been asked to sing on the radio, but his father wouldn't have it.

*Maybe this time tomorrow
Our comrades will arrive,
But maybe this time tomorrow
They'll take us to be shot.*

* *Translator's note:* Cheka, from the initials for the Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Terrorism, founded in December 1917, was the security police organization of the Soviet State.

"It's a good song," Mark said.

"And you can't sing it properly," Sofya Alexandrovna said. "Like a choir of blind men."

"A duet of blind men," Mark said, laughing.

A bed was made up for Mark on the divan and Sasha slept on a canvas camp bed.

Mark took off his jacket and shirt, and, in his undershirt, which was trimmed around the neck and the sleeves in pale blue, went to the bathroom.

Lying with one arm under his head, Sasha waited for him.

When he had gone downstairs after the Party meeting, Janson had run past and given him a pat on the back as he did so. It was the only good, encouraging gesture shown to Sasha, and it emphasized the sense of emptiness he now felt. Everyone else suddenly seemed to be in a great hurry, either to get home or to the canteen. He walked to the tram stop along the dirty road of the straggling suburb and was passed by a large black car. Sitting in front was Glinskaya, who was turning around to say something to the other passengers. The way they were talking and laughing and driving right past him, without the slightest awareness of him, again aroused the feeling of emptiness and of sudden, unjustified rejection.

Sasha had known Glinskaya since his schooldays. He had noticed her at meetings of the parents' committee, and he had been in the same class as her son, Jan, a gloomy, taciturn youth who was interested only in mountaineering. She was married to a Comintern official, and her Polish accent gave her categorical pronouncements a note of falseness. Even so, he had not expected her to keep quiet at the committee meeting. After all, she was just as responsible as Krivoruchko for the construction of the hostels. Yet she had remained silent.

Mark returned, washed and fresh, took a bottle of eau de cologne out of his toilet kit, and patted some on his face. Then he lay down on the divan, twisted around to make himself more comfortable, took off his spectacles, and sought myopically for somewhere to put them.

"Shall I turn out the light?" Sasha asked.

"Yes."