

Fog

Ch. XXIII

The wind died down, people calmed down, and the Korkotadz'es' apartment also calmed down and became so quiet that you'd think they had locked the door and gone away or just disappeared. Nobody now went near the telephone, although it rang and rang. Nobody answered the door any more, although the bell rang and rang, and there were periodic knocks, even banging at the door. 'Ah, they must have gone away, or vanished,' people thought. In actual fact they felt deeply hurt, deeply depressed and embittered. Apollon, Salome and Meri had each locked themselves away in their rooms, they were each grieving in their own way, mourning their dashed hopes in their own way. Apollon was ensconced deep in an armchair, with an abacus on his lap, calculating how much he had spent on birthdays and other special occasions, on wedding presents, on various gifts of food and drink. It amounted to quite a tidy sum, money that had been thrown down the drain: Apollon's eyes became bloodshot and he was choking with bile. He should have cut down on everyday expenditure, he should have sold his car, for he could no longer expect a decent job, there was no high posting waiting for him, and this destitute man could not expect anything ever again. His pride had been crushed, he was now reduced to being an ordinary building worker, an ordinary canal digger. Wasn't that enough cause for shame?! 'Ha, ha, ha...' Apollon couldn't help looking up to see who was laughing, who knew, who'd been told. He'd done what he had to: put the car on sale, first the car, then... that was all the fault of Sal... He bit his tongue, instantly, even didn't dare even think, let alone speak, a rebuke with respect to Salome; he wouldn't have dared before, either, even less so now at this time of wrath. It was long time since he had seen, if he had ever seen, Salome so furious: they'd been through some thirty years, thirty years of many joys and many griefs... This was one more grief, one more cause for gnashing of teeth: yes, Salome really did gnash her teeth, taking such deep and rapid breaths as if she had turned into a human bellows. Apollon couldn't speak, he couldn't even allow himself an unspoken rebuke: so he silently, noiselessly went back into calculating on the abacus, re-doing the sums countless times, in the vain hope that he had made a mistake, that perhaps his expenses were much less, although the extravagance of Sal... — and once again he bit his tongue, with such anxiety and such rapidity that nearly bit his tongue literally. That, more or less, was Apollon's state of mind.

Then fate brought someone who would not let go of the doorbell: it rang and rang, it rang continuously: the veranda was full of the noise, so were the rooms, and everybody's nerves. One more second and Apollon's patience would have snapped, had someone else, whose patience had snapped, not answered the door. Apollon heard the sound of heavy footsteps. 'Aha, that was Salome,' thought Apollon, holding his breath and closing his eyes as

he waited for something terrible. But nothing terrible happened: he could hear a calm, relaxed short conversation, and then the sound of heavy footsteps gave way to the former silence. 'Yes, that's what comes after a relaxed conversation,' thought Apollon, deeply ensconced in his armchair, with one hand falling back on the abacus, while he breathed on the other hand to warm it up.

But that series of exclamations and curt utterances had not been a relaxed conversation: how could there be any relaxation for Salome, who had headed for the door? There was no question of being relaxed, she had decided, she had taken a chance on whether this was someone not to be deterred, someone stubborn or obstinate, or even worse. But when she opened the door she was faced with such a trustworthy-looking old man, that she instantly clenched her lips and bit her tongue. He was smiling sincerely, as if without a care in the world, as if to say, 'Well, how good it is to find you in.' He smiled but said nothing, and it was Salome who had to speak first, asking almost angrily: 'Well, who do you want to see?'

'Let me say hello first,' said the visitor, frowning as if to say, 'What, if you recognize me, why are you behaving as though you don't?'

'What do you want?!' Salome persisted, this time angrily, implying, 'Well, I don't know you, and I never have, and it would be good of you to go away as soon as you can.'

'All I want is to say hello and wish you all the best, what else would I want?!' the visitor responded, as if to say, 'One greeting deserves another, that's all I have to say.'

'Good morning to you, then,' Salome pronounced, as if the words had been forced from her.

'Well, then...' the old man said, 'Now I'll tell you what I want... I'm looking for Meri Savaneli, I've come to this address and I very much hope I haven't got the wrong place...'

Salome suddenly averted her eyes, calling, 'Meri there's someone to see you!' She then left, abandoning their visitor in the open doorway. Clearly, this was not because she was relaxed, as Apollon had mistakenly thought, nor could Meri's appearance be called relaxed, for it was characterized by astonishment and joy. 'Uncle Iliko,' she called as she embraced him, weeping silently, sprinkling Uncle Iliko with her tears... Who knows how much unspoken sorrow she was pouring out, or what was not interwoven with those tears: her husband's silence, her brother-in-law's defeat, her daughter's sadness, her sister's wrath, her own shattered ambition and vanity — everything that she felt, perceived or couldn't help undergoing, everything that could upset a human being who had thought herself of great worth and who had expected life to give her only happiness. That was more than enough to upset her. How much sadness Meri had had to cope with, how much! And she wet Uncle Iliko's chest with her tears, until Iliko said to her, 'I haven't died, I don't even intend to die, don't shed so many tears over me...' Then Meri had no alternative: she dried her tears, invited him in and besieged him with questions, not omitting anyone or anything from Orbisi, animate or inanimate, people, plants, buildings — she asked after everything and everyone.

'Everyone's well, everything's fine, everyone, everything... everyone, everything... I don't think we're missing even one gnat, it's been one of those years...' Iliko responded. 'But you are asking so anxiously, I wonder, don't you miss country life?'

'Oh no,' Meri replied in a sing-song, her eyes moist.

'Of course you don't, of course, why should I ask!' said Iliko, shutting one eye to look at her. 'Once someone has caught the scent of the city, there's no reason for them to miss the country. Every one of your heart's desires, whatever you see or want, it's all there in the city... You don't get tired, you don't get too cold, or too hot. In summer you can keep cool, in winter you can keep warm... There's trolleybuses, buses, at every step there's a taxi, every house you pass you get invited in, "Please come in and have a bite to eat," so you go in and you have a good time, you sing, you dance, you're shown things you'll never see again... You'd think that city people have nothing else to do but amuse themselves, there are so many entertainments announced on the posters on the walls and the railings, absolutely everywhere you're invited to something. So have a thoroughly good time, whatever you want, a beautiful woman or a handsome man, things as rare as hen's teeth. Whatever you long for, you get in the city, so what have you got to miss in the countryside?'

'Nothing,' said Meri, with a wave of her arm.

'Of course there's nothing,' Iliko rapidly responded. 'No question! It's a waste of time even thinking about the countryside, just bothering yourself for nothing, that's all. If you ask me, there's no need for anyone to give it a thought. Don't we have enough to think and ponder about as we are, so even mentioning the countryside is just depressing... A man should get up and go away if he is reminded of the countryside, if any mention of it gets him down, to hell with it! There's nothing better than pleasure, and there's nothing but pleasure to be had in the city! If anyone were to ask me, I'd advise them, not that anyone does ask me... they don't, and they shouldn't, I never force my advice on anyone, everyone has to find their own way and follow it themselves, they say. It's the whirlpool that drags you down, as they say, and it's no disgrace for a man if he avoids that. If a man thinks first, he won't do anything bad, but not everybody is able to think. If you're fiery, your words are fire; if you're sweet, then your words are like sherbet, as the saying goes. But here's me just talking and talking, going on about myself. Whatever anyone says, I like the city a lot, a lot, a lot!' Iliko finished his speech almost ringingly, and now shut his other eye, and looked at Meri furtively.

'It's good!' Meri agreed.

'Good?!' said Iliko, astounded. 'Very, very, very good, I said.'

'Very, very, and again very, good!' Meri laughed. 'Now what?' she asked her Uncle Iliko, her brow now unfurrowed, her gaze clear. 'Now I'll say that if I like it this much, I'll stay on in the city, and I shan't think of anything to make anyone angry, I shan't mention Orbisi, I'll wipe out the very memory. Let's assume I'm a sensible woman, now I've seen my husband

off to the country, then that's the last I see of him, I'll separate, and we can each go our own way...' Then, after a brief interval for thought, Meri added, 'That's how it is.'

'Of course it is!' Iliko immediately conceded. 'That's how it is, there's no more to be said, once that's how things stand... Words are strange, though, they get tacked together of their own accord. Thoughts are odd, too: they try to get at all sorts of things, stick themselves into things, aim at things, they won't give up! Anyone trying to do something good comes up against big barriers, gets hit hard in the head; quite apart from anything else, the order of the world is being broken, and a barrier is a barrier, and a head is a head... But why am I going on like this?' he suddenly stopped, hesitated and then asked: 'Where is Eteri? I wish I could see her! My old woman gave me some *churchkheldas* and other sweet things to pass on to her.'

Having said this, he stood up and went out onto the veranda, where Meri had made him leave his coat, took two packets out of the pockets and brought them into the house. 'Eteri used to be very fond of my *churchkheldas* and grape-and-almond *pastila*; if she still likes them and has a longing for them, if she still remembers them, my old woman told me to pass them on to her.'

'Of course I will, of course!' Meri responded with a smile, but unsure of herself. Unsure, because she didn't know how or when she could talk to her daughter about Orbisi and its inhabitants: where was there time for that, and where had that time vanished to? 'Certainly, of course,' she said a third time, hoping to sound more convincing, as if repetition were the same as affirmation. 'She's not at home at the moment, but she'll be very pleased, very pleased, very, very... She's got married to Givi, Givi's going back to Moscow today and is visiting all his relatives and friends to say goodbye... They may have gone to the cinema, to the afternoon showing...'

'Ah, the cinema, and the afternoon showing... Hm!' Iliko exclaimed, blinking. 'They've thought up even more fun and games and anyone who wants to can go to the cinema in the afternoon, too... All thanks to city life, the city!'

'Ha, ha, ha, you really have fallen in love with the city!' Meri laughed, as if she had not a care in the world.

'Very much so, very much so!'

'Ha, ha, ha,' Meri laughed again, but this time it seemed to be a forced laugh; she opened the offering and responded with genuine pleasure, 'Oh, how nice!'

'Oh well,' Iliko grimaced. 'No city person would think much of it, they're used to better things. I was telling my old woman, "Spare me, don't make me take it, our *churchkheldas* will look ridiculous to them, I'll look a real fool... Eteri used to like them, but then Eteri used to like Orbisi, but Meri didn't like them, and Eteri is now becoming like her mother." But she reminded me that Eteri was fond of them, and she made me take them. Anyway, there's no need to dwell on the past, just tell me what you need. If you don't want them, then you don't have to want a souvenir, you should get rid of souvenirs, you should free yourself of them.'

That's my advice, if anyone were to ask me, I'd advise the same, but nobody asks me for advice and I keep my mouth shut... Talking a lot doesn't mean you say much; sometimes silence is more expressive. People say one thing and others take it another way, as they say. Your own bad ideas seem good to you, as the saying goes. A man is a balm to another man, a word is a surgeon to another word, they say... If you ask me... but who asks me anything!' Iliko concluded regretfully.

'That's not true, not at all,' Meri expressed amazement, or condolence. 'People in Orbisi always come to see you for advice... That's how it was when I was there.'

'People in Orbisi...' said Iliko irritably. 'Orbisi is just a spot on the map, a village: I need a city to ask for my advice, I need to be an adviser in the city, the whole world should be seeking my advice, then I'd have something to boast about!' Iliko laughed.

Meri too was laughing.

'In the city?!' she asked him. 'Well, I've asked for advice, so what do you advise me?'

'You?' Iliko pondered, and was plunged in thought.

Meri had given him a genuine pretext for laughter.

'You see, I've spoken to you, and you can't give me any advice, nothing.' Meri exclaimed, laughing.

'Wait a bit, wait,' Iliko said, as if emerging from deep thought. 'Wait... Aha... Yes, yes, aha: if I were in your shoes and if I had a grudge against the countryside and was separated from my husband, then I'd take a break, I'd take a break and I'd leave it at that. I'd just get divorced... Just say you agree, and...'

'What?!' Meri exclaimed in a deep, suspicious voice.

'Say you agree...'

'To what?'

'To a divorce!' Iliko quickly responded and laughed heartily. 'So you see what advice I had on the tip of my tongue... You see, I can give advice, off the cuff, without preparation; if you give me just a little time, who knows what else I'll come up with?.. Ha, ha, ha... But don't take offence, or... nothing Uncle Iliko says is worth taking offence at!'

'Nothing,' Meri smiled coldly, as she stared at him: she covered her eyes and wiped them. She was pretending that Uncle Iliko had blurted out his words accidentally, as if it was just a simple exclamation, given as an example. But who knew: perhaps the topic had just arisen, but to what end, if it hadn't been pre-planned. Probably the whole village was talking about Meri's and Lado's divorce. It had been a bad winter, and what else was there to talk about? Lado himself probably had a hand in spreading the gossip. Nothing that this angry, outraged man did or thought up would amaze her, but quite possibly somebody else was involved, and there might well be something or someone behind it all, apart from Lado's anger and outrage; was that so very astounding?! No, there was nothing to be astounded by. Someone or other had turned up and spread rumours about Lado getting divorced, wanting to be free of Meri... This thought somehow disheartened her and a slightly deeper depression came over her: in

fact, she felt so embittered at the thought of this depression, that she gasped for breath for a moment, and quivered as she gasped; then all the melancholy of recent times was concentrated into one great pool of fury. Meri became imbued with rage, but she managed to control herself for now, however hard it was. Only an aura of dammed-up fury hung over her final words:

‘I’ll go away,’ Meri exclaimed.

‘Where to?’ Iliko responded with amazement or fear.

‘To the country!’

‘To the country?!’

‘Certainly, well, why are you so surprised?’

‘I’m not surprised, and nothing will surprise me...’ Iliko tried to laugh. ‘But... the fact is that there’s deep snow and you know what deep snow means... travelling is difficult.’

‘I’m quite used to that...’ Meri interrupted him.

‘Well, I don’t know... No, what do I know?..’ Iliko was lost for words, once something unexpected had happened. ‘This a second defeat, two defeats, one after the other,’ Iliko thought. ‘You’ve aged, you’ve aged, Uncle Iliko, you’re holding up well, but the fact is, you’ve aged...’ Whatever else he thought or said to himself, he no longer spoke up, he wouldn’t be listened to; you want one thing, but get another; two people take opposite views. Solo had asked for the lad Lento to be brought back home to him: ‘I like your tone, dear, say it as best you can, say it, and convince people, convince people and then ask.’

‘I’ll do everything I can, I don’t come to the city any more, I don’t bring anything with me, I don’t send anything there,’ he had thought. He was just stubbornly wandering about, empty-handed, outlandish, wandering about. ‘Your words are coming home with me.’ He couldn’t get the boy to go back home, no, never. He’d spoken and failed to get him to understand; nothing had come of it, Lento had thrown a stone and aimed it at his head. He had said he would definitely not go, why wag your chin for nothing? He says, ‘Typical! If you want, give me the money, and tell my father to send me some...’ ‘Your father is elderly,’ Iliko had replied. ‘He can’t manage anything, we’ve both aged, and we’ll both be dead very soon, how are we going to help you, which one of us is going to feed you, or clothe you. It will all be wasted when we’re no longer there. Who’s going to do the work when we’re dead and buried? Don’t let yourself worry too much, we shan’t die while you’re around; as long as you’re there, you can ask us to give you a hand, money, money, money... just for two days...’

Iliko laughed at the thought of those ‘two days’. Lento had lost his temper and left, grumbling and threatening. Iliko was heart-broken, God knew what he was going through, he might well be starving. Iliko had walked and walked, he searched the whole city, and only by luck did he find him in a little room stuffed with books. ‘You’re not the owner or the person who reads these books,’ Iliko told him. ‘Somebody has given you shelter... You’re a burden on your own people and you’re a burden on strangers. Just tell me, lad, why? Have

you no sense of shame? Are you out of your mind? Come to your senses, come on out, lad, I said!

‘Leave me in peace,’ yelled Lento. ‘How did you find out I was here?! Leave me in peace! I can’t come, I’d be the laughing-stock of the village!.. I’ll do things my way, for sure, for sure. And then we’ll see my respectable father’s face when he sees me, when he sees that I’m doing well.’

‘Don’t believe it, don’t believe it, don’t believe it,’ Uncle Iliko pleaded with him. ‘I’ve never offered to help an idler, nobody’s yet made a world where idlers are helped. Come on, come on, we’ve got a lot of things to do, we’re not getting anywhere, don’t waste your time, don’t!’ Iliko told Lento, and told him many other things, but whether it was proverbs, good ones or bad ones, with any amount of pleading or scolding, none of it had any effect. But nevertheless, he left him some money: a man who has nothing is capable of doing anything, they say; poverty is the executioner of conscience, they say. Those thoughts led Iliko to leave Lento some money. All in all, he’d failed all round. Solo had asked him to bring Lento home, and he couldn’t bring him...

‘As long as she doesn’t want to, she needn’t think about the village, I rely on your words, get her to agree to a divorce,’ Lado had asked him. He had failed to get her to agree, he was taking an enraged woman with him. So everything had been turned upside down. At what point had he gone wrong, had his words taken the wrong path? It had seemed that everything was in order, he’d approached the subject tactfully, gently, equivocally, he’d taken her lead, gently led her on, smiled and smiled, laughed and laughed, agreed with everything, yet suddenly she said ‘I’m going off!’ He should have asked, ‘Where to, why, since you didn’t stay when you were needed, so why are you going back now, what for?’ But such an obvious counter-attack was impossible, the woman was worked up as it was and would have become even more angry. So he stayed lost for words. What was there to be gained by being tongue-tied? At least he had argued with her, rather obliquely and equivocally approaching the subject, although he sensed that nothing would come of it. Meri had nothing more to say. ‘You’ve aged, you’ve aged, Uncle Iliko, you really have aged,’ he repeated sadly. What else could he have said, what reason could he have brought up, what did he know: the greatest diplomats are confounded if the circumstances are wrong.

‘Let’s both go together,’ Meri said just as brusquely. ‘I think I’ll go tomorrow, or even today.’

‘Tomorrow! No! The day after! No, the day after that! Hee, hee, hee... My old woman gave me so many things to do, I don’t know how I’ll fit them in, when I’ll manage them. After than, I’ll go... I’ve got to carry them out, I’ve got to carry everything out... Hee, hee, hee... An old man’s love is the sweetest, ha, ha, ha!’ he laughed again, getting angry with himself for laughing so inappropriately, as if something about this arrogant woman embarrassed him. ‘But it’s a pity about the lad, a real pity...’ he thought.

‘And when I get it all done, I may have to wait for the snow to go. I’ll stay; if I stay there, who’ll put me up? I can probably find someone in the city to take me in. Yes, why not?’

‘Why not?’ Meri exclaimed with the same anger.

‘Ah, I’m grateful, very grateful! But I’ll still be on my way... It’d be best for you to stay here, stay for good: what have you got left in Orbisi?’ Iliko told her and stared stubbornly at her.

The woman’s eyes were more stubborn and furious.

‘I’m coming!’ she announced firmly, with a threat in her voice.