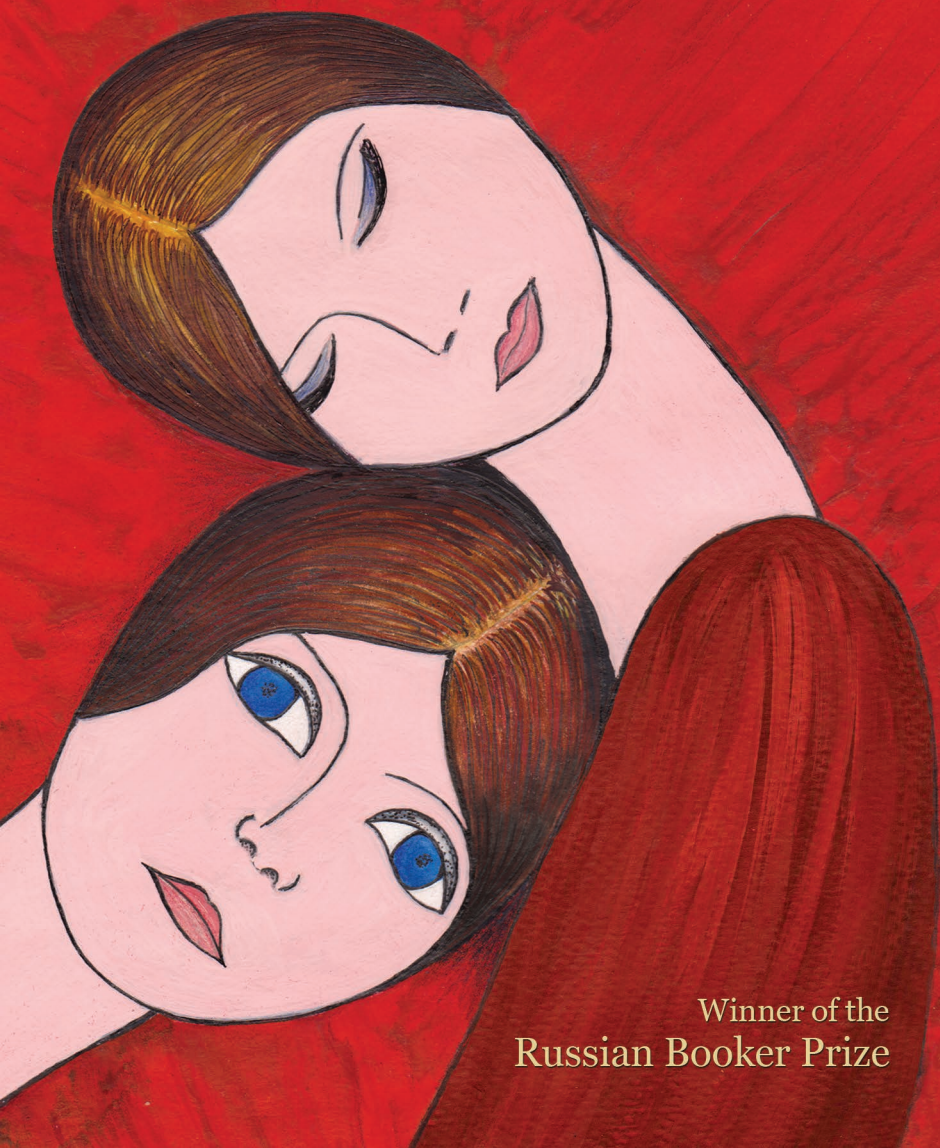


The Time Of Women

Elena Chizhova



Winner of the
Russian Booker Prize

Elena Chizhova

THE TIME
OF WOMEN

Second Edition

Glagoslav Publications

The Time of Women

by Elena Chizhova

Second Edition

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together with Nina Chordas
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To my grandmothers

My first memory: snow.... A gate, and a haggard white horse. My grandmothers and I are plodding along after the cart, and the horse is big, but dirty for some reason. And there are also long shafts dragging in the snow. There is something dark lying in the cart. My grannies say it's a coffin. I know this word, but I'm still surprised, because a coffin should be made of glass. Then everybody would see that Mama is asleep, but will wake up soon. I know this, but I can't tell anyone ...

When I was little I couldn't talk. Mama would take me to all sorts of doctors, and showed me to various specialists, but to no avail: they never found the cause of it. I didn't talk until I was seven, and then I started to, although I don't remember it myself. My grannies didn't remember either — not even the first words. I asked them, of course, and they'd say that I had always understood everything and drawn pictures — and to them it was as if I'd been talking. They got used to answering for me ... They'd ask, and then they would answer.... My drawings used to be kept in a box. It's a pity that they weren't preserved: then I'd remember everything. Because without them I don't, I don't remember anything. Not even my Mama's face.

Grandma Glikeria said we used to have a photo, a small passport-sized photo, and it got lost when they ordered the portrait. A metal one, for the cemetery. It got lost too. Maybe my stepfather never got around to going there, and Zinaida threw it away — along with my drawings.

I didn't like winter for a long time after that: I'd get anxious when it snowed. I thought about Mama... I worried that she'd get cold — in her summer dress... Later I got over this, but the anxiety remained, as though in my childhood, which was erased from my memory, something horrible had happened, and I would never find out what it was...

I

THE MOTHER

I chop the onions and nod: the old ladies know better whether it's time. What can you say to them? They're strict. Who am I against them?...

I'd lived in the dormitory¹ long enough, and there it was the more the merrier — there were eight beds in the room. And now I've got plenty of space... Thanks to the local committee... Like Zoya Ivanovna said:

“Not much you can do now, is there?... Is it the kid's fault? Once you've given birth, you can't shove the child back inside. How is it with us, after all? The mother is most important: she gives you food and drink. Who cares if you have no husband? Even people like you get help and respect nowadays. Sytin, the foreman from the sixth, has a new baby: they have two now. So they'll get a two-room flat. And you can move into their place instead.”

Nine and a half meters — and I'm my own mistress². If only my late mother could see me...

They don't care:

“You're not the first, and not the last. And remember, the kid is ours, it belongs to the factory. That means it belongs to everybody. The authorities don't have stepchildren. So don't

you worry: there'll be a nursery, a kindergarten and a summer camp when she's older. And you're not alone, you're part of the collective³. And there's no need to shield him. After all, it didn't come out of nowhere. We'd sure put the screws on him if we found him!"

I didn't say anything. They didn't ask anymore.

I thought that it was a good thing that I was in a city. There are thousands and thousands of them out there walking the streets. Not like in the countryside. They'd know all about it there — men are few and far between...

Maybe if he were from the factory, I would have told them... Zoya Ivanovna is so kind. But he isn't from the factory, so what I can say? All I know is his name. Not even an address or surname...

Yevdokia lifted an eyebrow:

"We're running out of vegetable oil."

I look at the bottle, running out is not the word... There's nothing left. A few drops on the very bottom. Do they drink it or something? I only got it last week.

"What about the onions?" I look around. "I've got to brown them, don't I?"

"Use margarine," she advises me.

He was handsome, and well-built. But I couldn't quite figure him out. He expressed himself strangely, like city people do.

"Have you been waiting long, young lady?" he said to me. I nodded, and didn't say anything: it's awkward with a stranger. He looked polite enough, but you never know. He was silent for a while and then asked: "Are you on your way to see Santa Claus?"

"What do you mean?" I said in surprise.

"Your bag," he says, nodding his head towards it. "It's big. Is it for presents?" How silly. "What presents?!" I smile. "I'm going to the market to buy potatoes." He lifts his eyebrows: "To the market?" he asks. "With a bag?"

“It’s Sunday,” I explain. “I’ve got to get potatoes for the whole room.” — “For the room?” he shakes his head. “And what about the hall? Is it going to starve? Or is your room kind enough to share with everyone?...”

I brushed the onion tears away with the back of my hand. I smiled to myself.

I stir and stir... The margarine is not so good. It spatters everywhere. My hand is scalded already. Yevdokia has some advice for that too:

“Rub it with laundry soap.”

He stood there for a few moments, then went over towards the street-lamp. His legs were long, like a crane’s. He walks around, stamping his feet. He looks at his watch; “Now how much longer do we have to wait?” He’s lost all his patience, he must be freezing. And his shoes are very thin, with no warm lining. “It must be soon,” I try to comfort him. “I’ve been standing here for quite a while now...”

“No, no. It’s hopeless,” he looks around. “We wait and wait, and nobody comes.” — “But everyone’s asleep.” — “Asleep?” he echoes. “That’s right. That’s what I should be doing, silly me...”

Yes, I think to myself. And his face does look a bit mangled. Must have been out drinking all night. Doesn’t reek of alcohol though. Our guys always do till lunchtime the next day.

“And you,” I plucked my courage to ask, “up so early... Got to be somewhere?” — “Of course...” — he narrowed his eyes. “I woke up and went off to the market. To buy potatoes.” — “Oh!” — I brighten up. And he looked me over from head to foot, and says: “You surprise me, young lady. Did you study in America or something?”

“Why,” I was frightened, “Why in America? In a village. Malye Polovtsy.” He furrowed his eyebrows: “In a Soviet village? But you don’t remember the most important thing: where the collective goes, I follow.”

“What collective?” — I’m confused. He laughs. “What about

you and me? — Citizens gathered at the bus stop... Under the present circumstances I suggest we hail a taxi..."

He brought me to his place. A big roomy flat.

"Where is everybody?" — I ask. "Everybody is at the dacha," he says. "I mean the old folks."

How come they're at the dacha? I wonder. It's winter...

"And where are the neighbours?" I look around. — "Alas," he lifts his hands in dismay. "We don't have that kind of stuff. We live like under Communism."

I go in. And it's true. They live well. There's a desk and books lining the walls.

A picture of some bearded guy in a knitted sweater above the sofa. In a frame. "Who's that?"

"Yes," he waves his hand, "there is this one person." Perhaps, I guess, it's someone from the family. It's hard to tell with the beard⁴...

We sat in silence for a while, and then he made coffee. In very fine white cups, which I was almost afraid to drink from. God forbid the handle might break off. "Take some sugar," — he moves the sugar bowl towards me. I took a sip and grimaced. I put two teaspoons of sugar into it, but it was still bitter.

"Black coffee," he says. "Not everybody likes it. It has to grow on you. Don't be upset, you'll get used to it." He took a sip, and put the cup aside. It didn't look as though he was all that used to it himself...

And though we didn't have any wine, I felt as if I was drunk. I listen to his voice. I don't even know how it happened... It was as if I were in a fog...

I jerked the drawer open, and felt for the grater. Now to grate the carrots... The onions are sizzling. I turn off the burner. But my hand is still aching. I turn the water on — stick it under the tap...

He took me out to the cinema during the week. I was happy. I'd always envied other girls who went out with guys. "We can't

go to my place,” he says. “The old folks rushed back from the country after they heard the radio.” And he looked a bit grim himself.

We went to the cinema and there was a comedy showing. “Carnival Night”.

“That’s great,” I say. “All my friends liked it.” He shrugged his shoulders.

We leave the cinema. I’m happier than ever, but he’s as gloomy as a thundercloud. “What,” I say, surprised, “didn’t you like it? I did, very much... I wish I lived like that... It’s a nice life they have, like in a fairytale.”

“They won’t be any fairytales anymore,” he sneers in reply. “Have you heard about Hungary?...” — “What about Hungary? You mean on TV? Of course, I have. They told us all about it at the political information hour: hostile elements... They conspired against us. You have to wonder what’s wrong with them!”

I saw his mouth jerk as though from a whiplash. His eyes suddenly looked dull — neither dead nor alive. The eyes of a fish. He waved his hand at me, and walked away.

Should I run after him?... But I stood still. And I kept standing there until he disappeared...

“Oh, I forgot! I’ve got some sugar candy for you”.

They like this. It’s colourful, homemade. You dissolve it with jam and let it cool, and it thickens into something like caramel. I snagged it up with the knife. They can pick at it.

It’s always like this with lump sugar. God forbid I serve granulated sugar at the table. The tongs are small and shiny. Antique. They don’t make them like that anymore. The tongs crack sugar with a nice clear sound into very small pieces. They take a piece and put it in their mouth. Take a sip of tea and suck. I used to think they were sparing it because it was expensive. Wasn’t I earning enough to buy sugar? But they said it tasted nicer like that. And what’s more they even taught the girl to like it. She pushes the sugar bowl away, if you move it towards her...

When I moved in with the old women, the girls tried to scare me: "How will you get on with neighbours!" At the dormitory it's all family. Over there I'll be a stranger, a country bumpkin with a baby. Go talk to Sytin's wife, they say, maybe she'll give you some useful advice.

I found her. "Don't be afraid of the old women," she says. "The main thing is to make them respect you. Don't let them think they're in charge. You'll take my place in the kitchen — I got myself a good one, by the window. Just shout at them, if they give you any trouble: they'll crawl into their corners. It's a shame you haven't got a man — they sure were afraid of mine"...

I moved in with them. They turned out to be all right — quiet old women. But I was still afraid. Sytin's wife was a big, strapping woman. She could shout loud enough to make the saints blush.

At the beginning, I tried to be very quiet. In the morning I'd wrap the baby in a little blanket, and the pram is under the stairs, with a lock on it. A heavy lock, with a chain. The pram was given to me by the factory, and I bought the lock myself. I'd run down the stairs, open the lock, put it under the little mattress and hurry back upstairs to get the baby. All done, and, blizzard or no blizzard, we go to the nursery. I leave her with the nannies and off to work. The nursery belongs to the factory. But all the same, my soul aches. Sometimes I have to work the second shift, if the foreman wants me to. Then, when it's already late at night, I get back to the nursery. There's a nanny on duty. She wakes the baby, wraps her up and brings her to me. And it would all have been all right if she hadn't started to get sick. Zoya Ivanovna would comfort me: "Children all get sick, yours will recover too".

The nursery is on the balance — the factory pays the difference to the staff. The mothers also give the nannies things on holidays, like candy or stockings. I did too, but I was too shy to ask them to do anything special for her. There were a lot of new babies and only one nanny. She'd cry herself sick because she stayed in wet nappies for too long, or have a stomach ache. I got

tired of having to take sick leave all the time. And on sick leave they only paid me the average, of course: it was nowhere near the money I earned normally.

It was all right at first. If her temperature rises, you just give her some drops and that's it. And it goes down in a couple of days. It wasn't until later that the convulsions started. She'd get blue all over and go into a fit. Her eyes would go cloudy and white. And my heart would stop: I'd think it was the end of her. So I made up my mind to send her to the country. My mother was still alive. And that's where the old women came in. They wouldn't hear of it..

They didn't have any family themselves. Their husbands and children were all gone, dead. No grandchildren either. "Go and work," they said. "Surely the three of us can raise her!"

And so it all started that at home I became something like a servant. I'd go to work, then to the shops to wait in various queues. Then, I'd do the washing, the cleaning and the cooking for everybody. They were retired, and their pensions were tiny. I had to pay for a lot myself. Still, the girl lived like a princess. And no wonder, three nannies for one child — she was well looked after. They took her for walks, and read to her. They taught her French, if you can believe that.

She was growing up smart — not a bumpkin like me. She drew pictures a lot. She learnt the alphabet at four. She understood everything. But wouldn't talk. She turned five, then six, and still wouldn't talk.

It was all my fault anyway. I kept silent until my belly started to stick out.

They transfer pregnant women to other shop floors at the factory. You can bring a certificate from the health clinic and they'll transfer you out of the hazardous jobs. Give you a position as a cleaning woman or at the storehouse. The married ones don't mind telling. Why would they? They're in the right. But people like me... how can you admit it? It's shameful...

Before the decree came out, you weren't even allowed to

think about an abortion. If you get knocked up, you have the baby. But no one could keep the girls from doing it. At the first alarm, they'd get rid of it in secret. One, they say, really took to it. The guys joked that she tired out a whole team of workers, bitch. Well, she wasn't bothered — she lies in bed for a little while, gives it a rest and she's at it again. Two girls died, though, they say. From blood poisoning, it seems. Now the decree came out, you can do it every year if you must. It's still scary, of course: they make it hurt as much as possible. But there wasn't much to be done. So I made up my mind.

I went to the hospital, but the doctor said: "It's too late now. It's too far along. You'll have to have it."

So I got some pills from the chemist. I thought I'd miscarry if I took them. I took them for a week. But no...

She turned three, and I took her to the clinic. The doctor examined her mouth, spread some pictures on the table. It seems that everything is all right, she said. She hears, she understands. It's some kind of developmental delay. You've got to wait, she may start talking.

She said there was a professor in Moscow. That means I have to take her there. And where do I get the money to do that from, I wonder? As it is, I can hardly make ends meet from one paycheck to the next...

At first I cried a lot: I thought she'd grow up to be a freak... I can't send her to school or summer camp. And the worst thing is, she won't have a family. Who'll marry a mute? She'll die an old maid. Unless she finds a mute like herself.

The grannies, thanks a lot, tried to comfort me.. Everything is in the hand of God. When the time comes she'll talk. But sometimes, you're just walking along the street. And all around, you hear other people's children talking. Your heart contracts and you turn away, swallowing tears.

The grannies advise me: don't you talk about it at work. If they ask you, say everything is fine. People have long tongues, evil tongues. All woes come from tongues. They'll tell you they

sympathize with you to your face but behind your back, who knows? They may slander you.

“Would you like some cabbage soup?”

They would. Soup is good for you. I got a nice piece of meat yesterday at the grocery store on the square. Brisket. With fat on it, the way they like it. And with the bone. It’s a good marrowbone. “Leave the marrow for the little one,” they say. “We’ll do without it...”

I have basins in the corner, with linen soaking. I’ll leave it there until the evening now, until after the shift.

No one knows about the grannies. I said I had sent for my mother from the country, and she is the one looking after the child. Zoya Ivanovna asked me about it too. No, I say, she doesn’t get sick at home. And she says: it’s all right while she’s a baby, but when she grows up a bit you should send her to kindergarten, to be among other kids. Because, she said, she’ll have a bad time at school if she’s not used to being with other children. I thought about it. Maybe she will be more at ease with other kids after all. She might come out of her shell and play and start talking. The grannies never let me, though. Leave her at home, they said. There’ll be plenty of time for her to suffer later on. And now they’ve thought up a new one: they want to take her to the theatre.

To a New Year show, I ask them^{5?} I got the ticket already. They were giving them out to everybody with kids. I got the ticket out, showed them. A coupon comes with the ticket. Santa Claus gives out candy, sweets of all kinds, wafers. Santa Claus is all very well, of course, but it’s really the factory that pays. On the shop floor, they say that it’s a good present. They put in some chocolate too. We never buy it. She doesn’t know what it is. I get soy bars or caramels from time to time...

The grannies looked at the ticket and said — No. You’ll go get the present yourself. But *she* won’t go. She’s going to another theatre, the Mariinsky. And she doesn’t need a ticket, they’ll let

her in without it. They have a friend there. They go to church together. She'll let her in, find a seat for her and look after her. The friend doesn't have anybody either: no children, no grandchildren.

They told me to get her a suit: a woollen, Chinese one. A jacket with buttons, tights and a hat. All children have them, they say. It must be expensive, — about six rubles. And ribbons for her braids. Silk ones, of a matching colour.

Can they be nylon, I ask. No, they say. The nylon kind split at the ends. The ribbons she wears at home are soft, the grannies make them out of old rags.



We gathered for early tea in the kitchen. Here, before the child wakened, we discussed all the important matters, and made our plans. The day started with a dark dawn, like a long age. Daytime was a long road that rolled on, glancing back at striped milestones that fell behind — once and for all.

At nine it's time to get up, get dressed, and wash. At ten, there's a story on the radio. Lunch at two. After lunch, it's nap-time: you don't have to sleep, but you've got to lie down for a while anyway.

Between the milestones, depending on the weather, there were things to do. The most important one was to take a walk. Here time would slow down and resign itself to the yearly cycle —like it does in the country.

In the spring we'd go to the little park near the Lion bridge. They close the gardens at this time of year to dry them out, because it's too muddy. In the autumn, to the park near Saint Nikolai⁶ Cathedral: to walk under the oaks by the railing where there are a lot of acorns. In October, the maples shed their leaves. You walk, and the dead leaves rustle under your feet... In November, the first snow falls.

In winter, also to Saint Nikolai Cathedral, or to Soldiers

garden. The slide there is so high... Children line up to go down the slide — on a sled or without it. We have a sled, and it's old and good. But we didn't let our little girl ride on it much. And we learned to walk along the edge, away from other people. With other kids, it was a real pain: "Is your girl a deaf-mute?" It was easier in summer, as there weren't so many of them — some went to the country, some to summer camps.

Here, at the table, just after we got the baby, we all came to an agreement: the first thing was to baptise her. In secret, without the mother's consent. She didn't have a word in these matters. Thank God, we knew the bell-ringer at the Saint Nikolai Cathedral. He's deaf, but understands everything. He agreed to talk to the priest, and ask him to come to the home.

She was called Suzanna in the birth certificate. What an unchristian name, God forgive us. In the olden days, they called whores that, so as not to dishonour the names of the patron saints... And now her own mother called her that — a name for a dog...

We thought and thought, and leafed through the church calendar. There are too many good names to count, but you can't just take the first one you come across. Father Innokenty said: search for something resembling the birth certificate. You can choose by meaning, or by the first letter.

Glikeria came up with Serafima.... No. We decided to call her in honor of Saint Sofia.

In the evening when her mother was present we avoided calling her by name: *her*, for *her*, *she*. In the daytime we called her lovingly — Sofyushka. Among ourselves — Sofia.

Father asked: is anyone called Vera, Nadezhda, or Lubov? She would be the godmother then so they could celebrate the Saint's day together. We shook our heads: no. No Lubov, no Nadezhda, no Vera. While deciding, we almost had a fight over it. There can only be one godmother. And she's the one that answers to God. The godmother is family, and so the rest of us will be...what — strangers? Father Innokenty made peace between

us. God, he said, will hold each of you responsible in turn. The one who goes to Him first will be the first to answer.

And then it was hard to know whether to laugh or cry: we started comparing our illnesses. One had a bad heart, one could barely walk. Father Innokenty said: people cannot know when their time will come. Sometimes it happens that God takes the young and healthy but leaves the old and sick. Can one see into His design? We agreed. We remembered the young and healthy. Our own young and healthy.

As it turned out, Yevdokia Timofeevna had a baptismal shirt in her chest of drawers. It was amazing that it was still there after so many years. It had belonged to her elder son, Vasilii. Even his bones had decayed long ago, but the shirt was still there.

The fabric was thin, as light as air: an angel's garment. The lacework was a little crumpled though, like fallen-out feathers. Her grandson had not been able to use it. Her son and daughter-in-law didn't let her baptise him. They had their own religion, they said.

Her son became a big shot. "The people today are no match for me," he said proudly. "I've been with the Bolsheviks ever since the Civil War."

She didn't dare to do it secretly. She was afraid of getting them into trouble.

We're building a new life, they laughed at her, and you still long for the old times. You want to drag us back to the Tsarist past. Back on the old road. There's no way back, and your religion is opium.

The things they'd come up with! Opium is sold at the chemist — the doctor prescribes it for pain. And the daughter-in-law chimes in with him. Look around you, mother. It's too late for me to look around, I say. You look around. You'll have to live this life. Then, before they had time to look around, they were taken away. And that was it, they disappeared in their Communism. Thank God, they didn't take the grandson: the *other* grandmother took him.

A couple of months went by, then on Trinity Sunday I took a present I'd managed to save up, and went to see my grandson. And, stealing a minute when the boy went out to play in the courtyard, I brought the topic up. Let's go together, I said. He'll grow up to be a heathen. What a sin! The other grandmother grew frightened: "Don't you even think about it! If somebody finds out, they'll come for him straight away. And they'll lock him up in an orphanage. He'll never come out of it."

And this other grandmother went together with him in the evacuation. They were killed by a bomb somewhere close to Luga. So she was the first to stand before Him — and the first to answer.

We prepared the shirt, washed it. The lacework was worn-out, and we spread it on a towel. It looked as though it got whiter when we washed it. But when it dried, it was all yellow again. Maybe if it was put in boiling water... But we didn't dare to do this: it was at the end of its life — it would come to pieces in our hands.

We heated up some water beforehand. The priest said: well, make up your mind and dress your little girl. We brought the shirt, and put it on Sofyushka. Yevdokia stood there with a frozen expression: how could it be easy to see her baby son resurrected... After that she was all right, and got a hold of herself. I can't be the godmother, she said. My heart turns black when I look at this shirt. You be the one, Ariadna. It all happened the right way in your family: your husband died in the First War, your son in the Second, and your grandchildren died along with your daughter-in-law in the Blockade. It was all proper.

How can it be proper, she says, if they're all lying in ditches. Let Glikeria do it: she never had children. The count, her unwed husband, fled from the Revolution. Who knows, he may still be alive.

We agreed to that. After all, Ariadna knew better. Who are we to second-guess her... She's the educated one. She even lived abroad when she was young.

Glikeria was the godmother, and the other two sang along with the priest. Father Innokenty says: sing quietly so that no one hears. Who would hear, we say, there isn't anybody around.

He performed the ceremony well, didn't miss anything out or hurry. Sofyushka, smart girl, blinked her eyes, and listened attentively, as if she understood.

She only cried once, when Glikeria denied the demons. Yevdokia looked at Ariadna as if flicking her with a knife.

Everybody sat down to tea. The priest smiles: I must admit to this fault, I'm an inveterate tea drinker. I like to soothe my soul with tea and sugar lumps. We remembered the bucket samovars. It's not the same on stove burners. The boiling water is weak, without any taste. It boils up nice and thick in a samovar.

As for the communion, he says, see for yourselves, as you can. It's all right, we say, it's all the same now, we'll bring her.



The weather is good. Frosty and dry. When it warms up a bit, that's the right time to go for a walk. We look out into the yard — it's white as white can be. And the yard-keeper is nowhere in sight. In the old times they used to come out before dawn with a shovel. They've got very slack since then. We sat and talked about the old times.

Ariadna came to herself first. She went to the pantry to take the dry stockings down from the washing line. Yevdokia went to get the kasha: the mother made it at night, and put it under the pillow. It's nice and crumbly from under the pillow. Every buckwheat grain is like another. And she won't have any other kind: neither semolina nor porridge. Yevdokia grumbles: they give them God knows what in kindergartens. Buckwheat is expensive, hard to come by. Lucky that Antonina gets it at the factory. Two kilos a month they give her, one for her, one for the child.

Ariadna dressed her and brought her out to the kitchen.

Sofyushka is used to the routine, and goes to the tap herself. Glikeria is waiting with the ladle in her hands. In summer the water in the pipes is warm. But in winter we've got to heat it up to pour over her little hands.

"You can relax now," Yevdokia orders. "Let the child eat in peace."

She ate and had her tea after that. She drank and set aside the empty cup. We don't teach her to cross herself, God forbid. We're scared of the mother. What if she sees it.

After breakfast, Glikeria sits her down with the embroidery hoop. She's too young to sew, but it's just the right age for embroidery. Satin-stitch, knots, and chain stitch. The morning lesson is a little yellow petal. She won't give it to us until she's done.

She works on it, and Glikeria tells her about the Saints, or the Holy Virgin.

Then, it's Ariadna's turn: she reads a story. She has her own stories, in French. The book is plump, with lots of pictures. Whatever stopped them from burning it during the blockade... She reads until the end, then starts with some questions: she asks, she answers herself. She talks strangely — in French. And from time to time she deliberately makes a mistake: she wants to check whether the girl understood. Sofyushka frowns, and shakes her head. She points in the book — it's not right, she means.

Yevdokia saw it once: "Is she really reading, or is she pointing at random?" Ariadna got offended: "Why at random? I move my finger along the lines when I read so that she can follow too. And she's known the alphabet for a long time. I showed her back in spring".

"Come," Yevdokia says, amazed, "ask her some word. Let her find it in the book".

Sofia smiles archly, and runs her eyes over the lines — she finds it twice.

"Oh, get along with you!" Yevdokia cries out happily. "Who

can test you literate people — you must have arranged it together!”

Sofyushka wrinkles her nose. That means she’s laughing.



The big black radio is in Yevdokia’s room. Sofia comes in, and gets on a chair. She turns it on, and presses her ear against it. Quietly, so that she doesn’t disturb the grannies.

“I couldn’t sleep at night, and remembered things: the sweets used to come in boxes. Some were plain, some were wrapped in gold. And when you open the box, you find silver tongs. Ivan Sergeich often bought them for me — he liked to spoil me.”

Her eyes are happy, and she smiles, as if she has gotten younger.

“Yes, I can see that he spoiled you,” Yevdokia purses her lips. — “Fancy the things you remember: sweets wrapped in gold...”

“It’s not the sweets I miss,” she screwed up her face.

Yevdokia’s lips are dry and thin. As thin as a thread.

“Yesterday on Officers street I saw them digging again. They dug an enormous hole, and clouds of steam were coming out of it. There were footbridges and tripods on the side. So I’m walking past them with Sofia, and, good gracious, there are evil spirits: voices coming from under the ground. Who could be there in the boiling water? I looked and saw some men. Two of them, their mugs all dirty, digging around under the pipe. And they had the nerve to laugh at me: ‘What are you afraid of, granny?’ Of course, I’m afraid. Devils, God forgive me! They dig and dig. They’ll soon dig right through to the other side. They can’t sit still on this earth.”

“Where on Officers street?” Glikeria cracks sugar, and pours it into the saucer. She’s as tiny as a sparrow.

“Here, round the corner. What do they call it again? Decembrists Square.”

Glikeria is sucking her sugar and thinking:

“Those Decembrists, when did they get famous? In the revolution or the war^{8?}”

“God bless you.” — Ariadna shrugs her shoulders. — “It was back in the last century. The December uprising of 1825. Against the law of serfdom.”

She’s learned. Reads a lot. She has a whole shelf of books.

“Ah,” Glikeria shakes her head, “that’s when it was... That’s why I can’t remember. It was then that they gave freedom to my mother. Our family were all serfs. But mother wasn’t too happy about it. It was better with the masters, she used to say. The ones who went to the city to work made out the best. Though they had always done it freely. In the old times they paid you everywhere. It was enough to pay the master and still have some left for the family.”

“And before the war,” Yevdokia nursed her cheek, “they also used to dig. I remember I went for a walk once and thought to myself — what are they digging for? They’ll dig up some evil. I said as much to my daughter-in-law. And she pouted: they’re laying pipes, she said. Under the Tsar they didn’t see to it that all the houses should have water.”

“And mother told me, our master was good. Never made anybody marry against their will. My father was a blacksmith, you know. So he and my mother came to the master. But he didn’t mind. He blessed them. Young couples went to ask for blessing for a long time after. There was freedom already, but still...”

“It’s not true that they didn’t see to that, I said. We’ve had a tap since the old times. And the water was good and never stank of anything. But my daughter-in-law says, we’ll change the pipes everywhere. And we’ll put trains underground. She laughs...”

“People laughed often before the war...” Glikeria remembers.

Yevdokia screwed up her face: — “They’re good at that, they are. They either laugh or dig up the ground...”

“God,” Ariadna sighs, “so many nameless ditches... When I think of how many of them were left after the blockade...”

“After the blockade!... What about the Canal?”

Glikeria crossed herself:

“So many people. Some dig, others lie in the ground.”

“That’s if they’re lucky...” — Yevdokia banged her cup on the table. — “They think they dug it for somebody else. And then it turns out it was for themselves... All right then.” She smoothed the oilcloth. “One turns into a sinner, sitting here with you. Oh, my tooth hurts, damn it. My mouth’s empty, no teeth left, and they still hurt...”

Tights made of thick wool. Glikeria undid an old fleece cardigan and knitted them in double strands. Felt boots, white, with rubbers. Nowadays they make them black. And you can’t bend them at the knee, so it feels like you’re walking in stocks. Under the hat — a cotton scarf: they tie it up and ask if it’s too tight. The coat’s new and warm. Yevdokia turned her own inside out. It’s thick cloth, and she put in a double layer of wadding. She’s got another one — it’ll last the rest of her lifetime.

“We’d better go to Saint Nikolai,” she tied up her kerchief and tucked in the ends. “Don’t give us the sled — we’ll walk.”

Ariadna shuts the door behind us:

“When you’re walking past it, have a look: maybe they’ve brought fir trees for New Year...”

The stairs are wide and not steep. There are two apartments on every landing. The house is old, but there’s nothing left of the past apart from one grotto. The Bolsheviks never got to it. Tritons, sea shells — everything is untouched. Sofia always turns around to look at it when she goes past it. She likes fairy tales.

Ariadna noticed it a long time ago. It used to be like that: she sits and listens, just so someone is reading to her. It didn’t matter if it was Little Red Riding Hood, that Buratino¹⁰, or the witch Baba Yaga. And now that she has learnt something — she brings the book herself: she opens it and gives it to Ariadna. As though

saying : read about the girl, about the Little Mermaid. Ariadna can't stand it any more: she's exhausted. How many times can you read the same thing?.. You know it by heart, don't you, she says. And Sofia frowns, her eyes fill with tears: she points at it with her finger — read. Ariadna even tried to cheat her: she'd leave out one thing or another sometimes. But no! She's older now. You can't fool her like that any more...

Glikeria figured it out first. It's because, angelic soul, she understands it to be about her muteness. And the Little Mermaid is like her. Only the Mermaid knows why she's been deprived of speech. And ours, what does she know...

There's a little park in front of the house. Behind it is a monument: it faces the square and turns its back to us. On warm days children climb on the rails. The rails are slippery and slick with ice in winter. We pass the monument and turn the corner — and here they are, the domes.

Grandma grabbed her back. We'll stop for a minute, she says. It's been getting numb since morning, as if it weren't mine. She stands there, looking around.

"I wish," she whispers, "I could have twenty more years..."

And I'm walking by her side and thinking: she's old, why would she want so much?

"To see what they'll come to in the end.

Who are they?

Yevdokia mutters gruffly as if she overheard:

"They... the Bolsheviks. Never mind," she says, "you keep your mouth shut. And don't listen to the old hag. Look under your feet so you don't stumble... First to the church, I've got to light a candle. It's a bad day for me today — a bad anniversary. Then we'll walk to the belfry. Do a circle along the canal — and home."

It's gloomy below. The upper church is bright. It's incredibly beautiful if you climb the little stairs: decked with gold wherever you look.

We'd take her to communion when she was a baby. Now we're scared. They're knocking down churches again. They can't sit still, those snakes. It looked like they'd calmed down after the war. Now they're at it again...

Grandma Yevdokia is very strict in church.

"That's the altar," she instructs me. In front of it are the holy gates: when they open you can see everything through them." Priests walk inside the altar like righteous men in Heaven. When the service starts in the evening — they light chandeliers. The light is soft and lovely. You look around and your heart rejoices: the gold sparkles and glints — as if it were bathed in fire.

She leaves me and comes back with candles, then takes my hand and brings me closer.

"Melt the candle at the bottom a bit," she says, "Fix it well so it doesn't fall over. And don't look around. Look straight at the holy face. Now cross yourself while no one's looking. Not like that, you oaf: put your fingers together tightly. Entreat the Holy Virgin for the lost souls, sinful souls. She never listened to me, but maybe she'll have compassion for one who is wordless...."

The holy faces are stern and dark. The flames are dancing and flickering on the candles. Grandma Yevdokia says: "They are living souls glimmering. When they burn out, the old woman in black comes along; she'll brush the stubs into her apron. And that's how we live: we burn for a while and then we go out. The candles burn to the end, but as for people, they don't even burn down to the stubs sometimes."

Grandma Glikeria's more fun to go to church with. She takes me to Saint Nikolai.

"Pray, Sofyushka," she instructs me, "for the wanderers and travellers."

She keeps him in her room too. And under him there is a flame in a red cup. Grandma comes up to him. She stands there and talks. Whispers and whispers. And he remains silent. Apparently he doesn't know how to talk.

"Saint Nikolai," she says, "protects everybody. Those who travel the seas, who are lost in the woods — he sets them on the right way. He visits those who are in prison and cures those who are lying sick...."

She takes me to the icon and explains. "Here, look. All human life is shown here. In this world and in the next. There beyond it's light. Our Lord sits in the middle, and on both sides are the righteous. They don't remember their former life: they enjoy themselves in a new way. And why would they remember? They have it all different there now, not like we do..."

"And below," — she frightens me, — "is hell. The tortures: weeping and gnashing of teeth. And in hell, no doubt, are the sinners. Only He comes down to them — he descends to them. Sinners are all different: some are inveterate, some sin through folly. Life," — she sighs, — "can go in strange ways — especially when you're young..."

We came out of the church and went along the canal. And there's that scary house; those enormous guys. Grandma says: idols, block-heads. We're walking past them, I steal a glance: what huge legs they have. They'll crush you if they step on you.

We walked in a circle, and now we are home.

"Well," Grandma Glikeria helps me to undress, "where have you been, what have you seen?"

"Where have we been?" Grandma Yevdokia answers. "We were at the church, tell her, then we went along the canal."

"Well, how is it out there? Is it freezing? Froze right through, did you?"

They took off the galoshes, and put the felt boots against the heater to dry.



Elena Chizhova

Born in Leningrad in 1957, Elena Chizhova worked as an economist, teacher, and entrepreneur until a rescue from a burning cruise ship in 1996 inspired a change in her life focus. She became a writer, and has

gone on to be nominated for and to win several prestigious literary awards, including the Shortlist Russian Booker Prize in 2003 and 2005, and the Russian Booker prize for Time of Women in 2009. This novel weaves together the personal and historical struggles of mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and women who become sisters through circumstance, in “a secret culture of resistance and remembrance.”



Life is not easy in the Soviet Union at mid-20th century, especially for a factory worker who becomes an unwed mother. But Antonina is lucky to get a room in a communal apartment that she and her little girl share with three old women. Glikeria is the daughter of former serfs. Ariadna comes from a wealthy family and speaks French. Yevdokia is illiterate and bitter. All have lost their families, all are deeply traditional, and all become “grannies” to little Suzanna. Only they secretly name her Sofia. And just as secretly they impart to her the history of her country as they experienced it: the Revolution, the early days of the Soviet Union, the blockade and starvation of World War II. The little girl responds by drawing beautiful pictures, but she is mute. If the authorities find out she will be taken from her home and sent to an institution. When Antonina falls desperately ill, the grannies are faced with the reality of losing the little girl they love – unless a stepfather can be found before it is too late. And for that, they need a miracle.

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