

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian

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Chapter one

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 diploma 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!'