

Beneath the Snow a Spring Flows

Artem Mozgovoy

It feels safe and pleasant to lie in bed with my back against the wall. Even though everyone at home tells me I might get sick this way, I still prefer falling asleep while sensing a slightly cold, smooth surface right behind me. It's as if through the white flowery wallpaper, through the thin wooden planks, through the massive pine logs, and through my own two thick blankets – already warmed from the inside – I can feel the freshness of the night outside, the restless wind, and the falling snow, and even the rowan tree's naked branches touching the frozen walls of our cottage.

Only my head is sticking out of the blankets. With my eyes a bit moist and sleepy, I watch the fire in the brick stove. Forks of flame keep jumping in the fireplace, getting watery and blurry on the tips of my eyelashes, like drops of paint on wet paper. The pillow is partially blocking the view but I am too lazy to move.

Soon, my grandmother will lie down next to me, blocking the view of the fire. In winter time only the main room is heated, so we have to manage to sleep all together in any way possible: down on my left by the window my dad and my uncle are already snoring in their sleeping bags thrown right on the floor; up on my right by the wall my cousins are dreaming away in their beds; the two camp cots by the stove are still empty. The women are awake. They are sitting by the table, splitting sunflower seeds with their teeth, drinking black tea and talking quietly.

Their conversation has no particular subject. It flows slowly, like a wide, calm river – without conscious purpose or reason. Only the double crack of the seeds being split open gives their talk a rhythm. Click, click-click, click. It seems that without that metronome everything in the house would stop and fall asleep. Click, click-click.

My grandmother is not saying a word, glancing at one daughter-in-law, then the other, at one, then the other, listening to their stories and smiling faintly. Her pinkish face (after a day outside in the cold) is framed by very, very white and weightless hair, which, it seems to me, would simply melt in the air like the halo of saints on icons were it not for her ever-present blue headscarf.

Outside the windows, the darkest night has already fallen on the village. There is not much light left inside either, apart from the warmth of the fire from the stove and a dusty lightbulb hanging on a wire from the ceiling. Its beam is spotlighting the women, reflecting off the lacquered surface of the table and making their meagre tea party look like a theatre scene: the three heroines and the props – a teapot, a few cups, a jar of jam and a pile of seeds – all illuminated much better than the other characters and objects. The rest is swallowed by the night. A washstand in the corner, a cooking table by the window, an old refrigerator with a door that never closes tight, an entrance area and nearby wardrobes, chairs, beds, clocks, photo frames, icons – nothing can be clearly seen at the moment; I only discern their outlines from my daytime memories.

Before the night came, it had been busy and noisy in here. People coming and going, banging the door each time (essential to close it properly), hitting their felt boots on the floor (essential for the snow to fall off), unbuttoning multiple layers of winter clothes, hanging them above the fire to dry and, a second later, sniffing their running noses and repeating the mantra, ‘Oh, it’s so cold out there!’

I wasn’t keen on going out during the day. I preferred to stay inside, reading old books I had proudly rescued from being used as kindling, and chatting with whomever happened to be around. My dad and my uncle hardly ever stayed indoors. They always seemed to have thousands of things to do outside: chopping firewood, bringing water from the spring, clearing the routes from the snow. There was so much snow that year that the passage my uncle had made from the entrance door to the outside toilet (the only place I was forced to go every now and then, another essential) was like a deep, narrow corridor: once I stepped in, I disappeared completely – the piles of snow on both sides were way above my head.

On one occasion, when my father showed up on the doorstep with buckets full of water in each hand, I remember asking him,

‘How is that possible, that even on such a cold day the spring is still running and does not freeze like the lake nearby?’

He only replied, ‘How do I know?’ and went out, shutting the door behind him with a loud thud.

I often feel ashamed I am not helping the other men. I always offer to help and do a little, but after one run to the spring or a few logs split, I get bored and tired and quietly withdraw to my books in the living room.

No wonder I cannot fall asleep now, and lie here watching the fire while all the other men are snoring. They are bone tired. Also, they don't have anything to do after nightfall. In winter, the sun starts to go down around three in the afternoon and by five it is totally dark in the village. The night aims to be infinite.

The women don't mind the long night. They are talking, drinking tea, and seem content. Hearing them from my bed, I am soothed by the slow rhythm of their chatter.

'Could you put the pot on the fire, Lena?' my mother asks.

'Yes...' My aunt puts some water on to boil. 'Babushka, do you want anything?' she asks my grandmother.

'No.'

They keep quiet for a minute or two.

'Oh, it was so cold today, wasn't it?'

'It was. It was... Not as bad as last winter, though.'

Another long pause. My aunt takes some chocolate from the cupboard.

'In this weather, one just wants to eat all day.'

'No one stops you, dear. No one stops you.'

When the chocolate is finished, she finds a small box of rahat lokum:

'Tell me, Luda, what are these sweets you brought?'

My mom glances at the box.

'That is rahat lokum, Turkish delight.'

'Rahat lokum. Hmm... They say it's good for you, right?'

'Maybe... I don't know.'

Another quiet moment.

'I should get some too. Where do you buy it?'

'Somewhere in the city... I don't remember.'

'Do you think they make rahat lokum in Siberia?'

'No. I guess they are bringing it from the South. Perhaps from the Black Sea.'

‘You think so? Why didn’t I ask the girls to bring me some then?’ My aunt seems slightly disappointed. For another minute or two, I hear nothing but cellophane rustling, the clicks of seeds and the occasional slurps of tea.

‘What girls?’ my mother asks without much enthusiasm in her voice.

‘Didn’t I tell you about my girlfriends from work who went to the Black Sea last summer?’

‘No, I don’t remember if you did.’

‘Oh, listen...’

Without rushing, my aunt starts to talk about the girls. My mom and my grandmother keep splitting sunflower seeds and taking sips of tea from time to time, while staring into space and listening to the story.

‘Well, imagine... The girls – Nadia, Svetka, and Olia – they went to the Black Sea. You know Olia? The red-haired one from my birthday party? Well, remember how at our kindergarten we always have three months of summer vacation and we never know what to do with all that time? Well, just listen to what they came up with... They wanted to go to the sea, but who has money for that? So far away! Three days on that stinking train! Well, anyway...’ she paused for breath then continued on, ‘someone told them that they could go to Sochi and work over there during the summer, meanwhile, sunbathe and swim every day. When they invited me to join them, I thought they were just laughing at me. How could I go so far at my age? I’m not a girl anymore. Neither are they. Svetka has just had knee surgery. Nadia had cancer two years ago. Olia, she is fine and strong, but then, remember, she has three daughters, one grandson and neither a spouse nor a son-in-law. And a hamster! They have a hamster living in a soup bowl because they have no cage for it... Anyway, they were all serious about going to the sea. Imagine! Each bought a one-way ticket and they got on the train. Three and a half days later they were in Sochi.’

‘Wonderful.’

‘Yes, they said it was very warm, very sunny, and the sea was not cold at all. They were quite enjoying it there. Well, at least while they had some money. Then they started searching for jobs all around Sochi, but of course, it was impossible to find anything. Finally, Olia met a man while dancing in a cafe one evening. Some local guy, well-dressed too, she said, with a car and good manners. He told her that all three of them could work for him.’

‘Was he a business man?’

‘Well, he said he owned a hotel for which he needed some assistance before the high season began.’

‘What kind of assistance?’

‘I think they understood they were in charge of answering the phone and taking reservations.’

‘Ok, but how can the high season start after the summer is over?’

‘Well, how do I know? I think they were told that everything had to be prepared for a sports competition of some sort.’

‘What sports competition?’

‘Some games. Does it matter? Listen. They signed papers and went to work for him.’

‘I’m not sure I would sign papers just like that...’

‘Well, you are a smart girl and have some experience. They are simple women, working with me in the kindergarten. Anyway, when they got to the hotel, it wasn’t exactly what they had imagined. The building looked more like an old sanatorium, one of those abandoned Soviet ones, you know?’

‘Yes.’

‘No one had stayed in that place for decades... The man told them to clean the entire sanatorium... To wipe all the floors, to paint the walls, to wash the windows, to polish the doors, to dust the mattresses, to scrub the toilets, to get rid of cobwebs and all the insects...’

‘Goodness, what, in all the rooms?’

‘Yes! They were to clean and take care of all three hundred rooms, six floors, plus the canteen, the main hall, and all the staircases.’

‘Hm.’

‘At first, they wanted to get out of the deal but the man said they had signed the contract and if they didn’t like it, he would call the police. Pig-head!’

‘Why couldn’t they call the police? The police would surely arrest him!’

‘Don’t you know that it’s illegal to work in another state without an official permit? They were afraid they would have problems. Anyway, in the end, they agreed to do the job... So the three of them spent the entire summer cleaning that bloody sanatorium. All six floors! One room after another after another. All three hundred! The good thing was that they could sleep in the

best rooms once they had cleaned them because the building was empty. No linens or towels but they did say they had never stayed in such pretty rooms in all their lives! Plus, they could go to the beach and occasionally ate fresh fruit... Nice, isn't it?

'But did the man come back after all?'

'Well, he did, of course, come back at the end of August. Though he refused to pay them what he had promised.'

'What do you mean?'

'He said they did a great job with the sanatorium, but he had to deduct from their salaries the charge for all the nights they stayed there... Imagine, they stayed in the hotel for the entire summer! I think he gave them around three thousand rubles each in the end.'

'That's all? For three months work?'

'Well, yes. It was just enough for a train ticket back to Siberia... The hotels are very expensive in Sochi, you know.'

My mother sighs, probably thinking about the girls, the hotels, Sochi, and sports competitions. My aunt continues,

'I met my foolish hens back here at the train station. They were all so tanned and they brought two sacks full of pears. Although they were quite squashed after three days on the train... Silly me, I should have asked them to bring me some rahat lokum... I don't think the girls are going back to the sea any time soon.'

The women are quiet again. After a while, my mother looks at my grandmother and asks her,

'Do you want more tea, babushka?'

My grandmother shakes her head... I kept looking at her, while my aunt was telling the story about the girls and their summer. All throughout, my grandmother had a sly little smile on her face as if she knew how the story would end. It occurred to me that, perhaps, she had had many summers like that in her life.

Meanwhile, the metronome has stopped: there are no more sunflower seeds left. My mother is staring at the window. At night, it is more like a black mirror, reflecting everything and showing nothing. Nobody says a word for a while... When the flow of the river gets too wide, it becomes immovable, or so it seems.

So much life it takes in, so much water. So many polluted streams are poured in, and so many crystal-clear sources. When it goes through the mountains, it turns loud and aggressive but then, when the space suddenly opens – like in our Siberian land – the river becomes so wide that an entire train with its dozens of carriages can fit in on a bridge above it. And it might seem then that the water is completely immovable, nearly dead – yet it is there that it's the fullest of all life forces.

'Good night, Alioshenka,' I hear my mother whisper.

'Good night.'

Just as I close my eyes and begin sliding slowly into sleep, I wake up at hearing my grandmother's voice rising in song. The sound of it is at once trembling and sweet. It is the old song she always sings after tea.

'Oy, to ne vecher, to ne vecher.

Oy, mne malim-malo spalos...'

Soon I hear my aunt join her and then my mother. The three of them sing. Inside my chest, all becomes velvet-soft and quiet. I think of the spring that never stops flowing and then, I fall asleep.

Artem Mozgovoy is a prize-winning writer and journalist from Central Siberia who migrated to Europe in 2011 when the anti-gay law came into effect across Russia. His coming-of-age novel *Spring in Siberia* is set to be released by Red Hen Press, USA, in 2023. You can find him on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/artemozgovoy/>