

The narrow path from Uvarovka village to the school had been completely covered with snow during the night, and only the barely perceptible pattern of light and shadow on its uneven surface revealed its course. The young schoolteacher stepped cautiously, ready to draw back her foot at once if the shadows proved treacherous.

It was no more than half a kilometer to the school, and the teacher had merely tied a woolen kerchief round her head and thrown her short fur coat over her shoulders. The cold was fierce, however, and fitful gusts of wind showered her with snow from head to foot. But the twenty-four-year-old teacher did not mind it. She even enjoyed the stinging sensation in her cheeks and the momentary cold touch of the wind. Averting her face from the gusts, she was amused to see the small imprints her pointed overshoes left behind, like the tracks of some forest creature.

The fresh, sunlit January morning filled her with happy thoughts. She had come here only two years ago, straight out of college, and already she was considered the district's best teacher of Russian. In Uvarovka itself, in Kuzminki, in Black Gully Village, in the peat settlement, and at the stud farm, everywhere they knew her and called her Anna Vasilyevna, adding the patronymic to show their respect.

The sun rose over the serrated outline of the distant woods and the long shadows on the snow grew a deeper blue, making faraway objects merge with those nearby—the top of the church belfry reached up to the porch of the village soviet, the pines across the river came up the slope of the nearer bank, the wind gauge at the school meteorological station whirled in the middle of the field, right at Anna's feet.

A man was coming across the field. What if he won't step off the path? Anna thought with mock apprehension. The path was too narrow for two people, and stepping aside meant sinking knee-deep into the snow. She knew, of course, that there wasn't a man in the district who would not go out of his way to let the Uvarovka schoolteacher pass.

As they drew closer Anna recognized the man as Frolov, one of the workers at the stud farm.

"Good morning, Anna Vasilyevna," said Frolov, and he raised his fur hat over his shapely, short-ropped head.

"Come on now, put that hat on! What are you sinking in this cold!"

CASE

Winter Oak

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Probably Frolov had no intention of keeping his hat off, but after the teacher's words he took his time about putting it on again. A short sheepskin coat fitted his trim, muscular body. In one hand he held a thin, snakelike whip, which he kept smacking against his high felt boots.

"How is my Lyosha behaving? Up to any mischief?" he asked conversationally.

"All my children are up to mischief; it's quite normal as long as they don't overdo it," replied Anna, savoring her pedagogical wisdom.

Frolov smiled.

"No fear of him overdoing it. He's a quiet one. Takes after his father."

He stepped off the path and immediately sank up to his knees, which made him look no taller than a twelve-year-old boy. Anna nodded to him graciously and hurried on.

The school, a two-story brick building with wide, frost-painted windows, stood a little off the highway, behind a low fence. In the morning light its walls threw a reddish tint on the surrounding snow. Children from all over the district came to it—from nearby villages, from the stud farm, the oil workers' sanatorium, and even the far-off peat settlement. Caps, kerchiefs, hats, hoods, and bonnets flocked to the school along the highway from both directions.

"Good morning, Anna Vasilyevna!"

From some the familiar greeting sounded in clear and ringing voices, from others it was muffled and barely audible, coming through thick scarves and shawls that swathed the young faces up to the eyes.

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Anna's first lesson was to the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds in five-A form. She entered the classroom as the last peal of the bell was announcing the beginning of the class. The children rose, greeted her, and sat down at their desks. But it took some time for them to quiet down. Desk tops banged, benches creaked, somebody sighed heavily, evidently unwilling to switch off the carefree morning mood.

"We shall continue to study parts of speech today."

Now they became perfectly quiet. The sounds of a truck slowly rumbling along the slippery highway could distinctly be heard in the room.

Anna remembered how nervous she had been about this lesson last year. She had kept repeating

to herself, like a schoolgirl before an exam, the textbook definition of a noun. And how foolishly afraid she had been that they would not understand!

She smiled at those memories, adjusted a pin in her heavy knot of hair, and sensing confidence coursing like blood itself through her body, she began speaking in a calm, even voice: "A noun is a word that denotes a subject—that is, a person, thing, or quality. A subject in grammar is anything about which you can ask the question What is it? or Who is it? For instance: Who is it?—a pupil. What is it?—a book."

"May I come in?"

A small figure in battered felt boots covered with melting snowflakes stood in the open doorway. The round, wind-reddened face glowed as if it would burst; the eyebrows were white with frost.

"Late again, Savushkin." Like most young teachers, Anna enjoyed being strict, but now an almost plaintive note sounded in her voice.

Considering the matter settled, Savushkin quickly slid into his place. Anna saw him shove his oilcloth schoolbag into the desk and, without turning his head, ask something of the boy next to him.

Savushkin's unpunctuality annoyed Anna; it somehow spoiled the fine opening of the day for her. The geography teacher, a small, dried-up old woman, very much like a night moth, had once complained to Anna about Savushkin's often being late to lessons. She complained about other things, too—the children's inattentiveness, their much too boisterous behavior. "Those first morning lessons are so trying," she said. They may be, for incompetent teachers who don't know how to hold the interest of their pupils, thought Anna disdainfully, and offered to change hours with the older woman. She felt a prick of conscience now: the old teacher had doubtless sensed the challenge in Anna's magnanimous offer.

"Is everything clear?" she asked the class.

"Yes!" chorused the children.

"Very well. Then give me some examples."

There was a short silence and then someone said haltingly, "Cat."

"Correct," said Anna, recalling that last year, too, "cat" had been the first example.

After that examples poured in like a stream: window . . . table . . . house . . . highway. . .

"Correct," Anna assured them. The children were excited.

It amazed Anna to see such joy at the discovery

of a new aspect in long-familiar words. At first the choice of examples embraced only the most everyday, tangible things: cart, tractor, pail, nest. . . . From the back desk a fat boy called Vasya kept repeating in his thin voice, "Chicken, chicken, chicken."

But then someone said hesitantly, "Town."

"Good," encouraged Anna.

"Street . . . victory . . . poem . . . play. . . ."

"Well, that's enough," said Anna. "I can see you understand it."

The voices died down reluctantly; only fat Vasya's "chicken" still came from the back of the room. And then suddenly, as if awakened out of his sleep, Savushkin stood up behind his desk and shouted eagerly, "Winter oak!"

The children laughed.

"Quiet, please!" Anna brought her palm down hard on the table.

"Winter oak!" repeated Savushkin, heedless of the laughter around him or of Anna's order. There was something peculiar in his manner. The words seemed to have burst out like a confession, like some glorious secret which could not remain unshared.

Annoyed and uncomprehending, Anna asked, barely controlling her irritation, "Why 'winter oak'? 'Oak' is enough."

"An oak is nothing. A winter oak, there's a noun for you."

"Sit down, Savushkin. That's what coming in late leads to. Oak is a noun, and what the word 'winter' is in this case we have not studied yet. You will come to the teachers' room during the long recess."

"Now you'll catch it," whispered somebody behind Savushkin.

Savushkin sat down smiling to himself, not in the least put out by the teacher's strict tone. A difficult boy, thought Anna.

The lesson continued.

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"Sit down," said Anna when Savushkin entered the teachers' room. With evident pleasure the boy sank into a soft armchair and rocked a few times on its springs.

"Will you please tell me why you are always late for school?"

"I really don't know, Anna Vasilyevna," he said with a gesture of surprise. "I leave home an hour before school."

It seemed that even in trifling matters like this, truth was not easily to be established. There were many children who lived much farther away from school, yet none of them needed more than an hour to get there on time.

"You live in Kuzminki, don't you?"

"No, I live on the sanatorium premises."

"Aren't you ashamed, then, to tell me you leave home an hour before school? Why, it's fifteen minutes from the sanatorium to the highway, and no more than half an hour's walk down the highway!"

"But I don't never go down the highway. I take a shortcut through the forest," Savushkin said earnestly.

"Don't ever go," Anna corrected him mechanically. Why did children have to lie? she thought unhappily. Why couldn't Savushkin tell her simply, "I'm sorry, Anna Vasilyevna, I stopped to play snowballs with the kids," or something else equally straightforward. But the boy said no more and just looked at her out of his large gray eyes, as if wondering what else she would want of him.

"That's not very good, Savushkin. I'll have to talk to your parents about it."

"There's only my mother, Anna Vasilyevna," Savushkin said softly.

Anna blushed. She remembered the boy's mother, the "shower nurse," as her son called her. A withered, tired-looking woman who worked at the sanatorium's hydrotherapy section. From continuous contact with hot water, her hands, limp and white, looked as if they were made of cotton. After her husband had been killed in the war, she remained alone to bring up four children as best she could. She certainly had enough worry without being bothered about her son's conduct. But all the same they had to meet.

"I'll have to see your mother, then," said Anna.

"Please do, Anna Vasilyevna. She'll be so glad to see you."

"I doubt that. What shift does she work on?"

"The second. She goes to work at three."

"Very well then. I finish at two. We'll go together right after school is over."

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Savushkin led Anna Vasilyevna along the path that started at the back of the school. As soon as they entered the forest and the heavy, snowladen spruce branches closed behind them, they found themselves in a different, enchanted world of peace

and quiet. Now and then magpies and crows flew from tree to tree, shaking the spreading branches, knocking off dry pine cones, and occasionally breaking off a brittle twig. But the sounds were shortlived and muffled.

Everything around was white. Only high up against the blue sky the dainty lacework of the tall birch trees stood out as if sketched in with India ink.

The path followed a frozen brook, sometimes right down along the bank, sometimes climbing up a steep rise. Occasionally the trees fell back, revealing a sunlit clearing crisscrossed with hares' tracks that looked like a watch chain pattern. There were larger tracks too, shaped like clover. They led away into the densest part of the woods.

"Elks' tracks," said Savushkin, following the direction of Anna's gaze. "Don't be afraid," he added, reading an unspoken question in her eyes.

"Have you ever seen one?" asked Anna.

"An elk? No. No such luck," sighed Savushkin, "I've seen elk droppings, though."

"What?"

"Dung," Savushkin explained, embarrassed.

Diving under a twisted willow, the path ran down to the brook again. Parts of the brook's surface were covered with a thick layer of snow; in other parts, its icy armor lay clear and sparkling, and there were spots where unfrozen water stood out in dark blotches like evil eyes.

"Why hasn't it frozen there?" Anna asked.

"Warm springs. Look, you can see one coming up right there."

Bending over the clear water, Anna saw a thin, quivering thread which rose up from the bottom of the stream and burst into tiny bubbles before reaching the surface. It looked like a lily of the valley with a fragile stem and tiny white flowers.

"Plenty of these springs here," Savushkin explained eagerly; "that's why the brook never freezes over completely."

They came to another unfrozen stretch, with pitch-black but transparent water.

Anna threw a handful of snow into it. The snow did not melt, but grew bulkier at once and sank, spreading out in the water like some jellied greenish weeds. This pleased her so much that she started knocking the snow into the water, trying to push off bigger lumps which took on especially fancy shapes. Carried away by the game, she did not

notice Savushkin go on ahead. He perched up on a low tree branch hanging right over the brook and sat waiting for her. A thin layer of ice covered the surface of the brook there, and light, fleeting shadows kept moving over it.

"Look how thin the ice is; you can see the water flowing underneath," said Anna, coming up to the boy.

"Oh, no, Anna Vasilyevna, it's the branch I'm sitting on. It sways and the shadows it throws over the ice sway with it."

Anna blushed. It looked as if she had better hold her tongue here, in the woods.

Savushkin trod on ahead, bending slightly and throwing keen glances around. Anna followed behind.

The winding path led them on and on. There seemed to be no end to all those trees and huge snowdrifts, to that enchanted silence and sun-speckled twilight.

Suddenly a bluish-white patch gleamed ahead. The trees grew sparser. The path rounded a nut bush, and a vast clearing flooded with sunlight opened up before their eyes. In the middle of the clearing, in sparkling white raiment, stood an old oak, tall and majestic like a cathedral. Its branches spread far out over the clearing, and snow nestling in the cracks of the bark made its gigantic trunk look as if inlaid with silver. It had not shed its dried foliage and was now covered to the very crown with snow-capped leaves.

"The winter oak!" gasped Anna. She reverently approached the tree and halted under its glittering branches.

Unaware of the tumult in his teacher's heart, Savushkin busied himself with something at the foot of the trunk, treating the magnificent tree with the familiarity of a long-standing friendship.

"Come here, Anna Vasilyevna," he called. "Look!"

He pushed aside a large clump of snow with earth and old grass clinging to its underside. A little ball plastered with decayed leaves lay in the hollow below. The skeleton-like remnants of the leaves were pierced with sharply pointed needles.

"A hedgehog!" cried Anna.

"See how well he hid himself?" And Savushkin carefully restored the protective covering of earth and snow over the immobile hedgehog. Then he dug at another spot and revealed a tiny cave with

icicles hanging at its opening. It was occupied by a brown frog, its tightly stretched skin shiny as if lacquered.

Savushkin touched the frog. It made no movement.

"Isn't he a sly one?" remarked Savushkin. "Pretending he's dead. But just watch him leap as soon as the sun warms him up a bit."

He guided Anna on through the world he knew so well. There were numerous other tenants in and around the oak: bugs, lizards, insects. Some hid among the roots, others in the deep cracks of the bark. Thin, withered, apparently lifeless, they hibernated there all through the winter. The powerful tree accumulated in itself a store of vital warmth, and those poor creatures could not wish for a better shelter. Fascinated, Anna watched this hidden forest life, so little known to her.

"Oh, oh, Mother'll be at work by now!" came Savushkin's anxious voice.

Anna looked at her watch. A quarter past three. She felt trapped. Ashamed for her human frailties and inwardly begging forgiveness of the oak, she said, "Well, Savushkin, this only proves that a shortcut is not always the best way to choose. You'll have to go along the highway from now on."

Savushkin looked down and did not reply.

Heavens! thought Anna, isn't this the clearest proof of my incompetence!

The morning lesson flashed through her mind. How dull and lifeless her explanations were, how utterly devoid of feeling. And she was teaching the children their native language, so beautiful, so rich in shades, color, and meaning! An experienced teacher, indeed! She'd taken no more than a few faltering steps along the path that might well require a whole lifetime to cover. And how is one not

to swerve aside but follow the correct path? Yet the joy with which her pupils shouted familiar words, a joy she had not fully appreciated or shared, told her now that she had not strayed too hopelessly after all.

"Thank you, Savushkin, for the lovely walk," she said. "I didn't mean what I just told you. Of course you can take the forest path to school."

"Thank you, Anna Vasilyevna." Savushkin blushed with pleasure. He wanted to promise his teacher then and there that he would never be late again, but hesitated, because he was afraid he might not keep his promise. He only raised his collar and, pulling down his hat, said, "I'll walk you back to school."

"No, don't, I can find the way myself."

He looked at her in some doubt, then picked up a long stick, broke off its thinner end, and offered it to Anna. "Take this," he said. "If an elk comes your way, just hit him on the back and he'll run for all he's worth. Though better not hit him, just wave the stick at him. He might get angry, you know, and leave the woods for good."

"Don't worry, I shan't hit him," she promised.

She took a few steps back, then stopped and turned to take one last look at the winter oak, tinged with pink by the setting sun. A small dark figure stood at the foot of the trunk. Savushkin did not go home. He stayed to guard his teacher's way, even if from a distance.

And suddenly Anna knew that the most wonderful being in that forest was not the winter oak but this small boy in battered felt boots and patched clothes, the son of a "shower nurse" and a soldier killed in the war.

She waved to him and went on her way.