

# THE MATIUSHIN CASE

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# PART ONE



It was as if all his life he had known in advance that what had already happened in it would happen again, so the memory of the past was more acutely felt – but the most memorable thing of all was childhood, although all that roaming round the garrisons after his father, the dreary rootlessness of father and son, the muteness and lovelessness, like an eternal lump in his throat, could simply have devastated him.

The children – there were two brothers in their family – had never known their granddads or grandmas, so lived without even the affection of old folks. The boys were born in towns far away from each other, in different times and, as if severed by their separate decades, they grew up as strangers.

This spirit of bleakness dwelt in his father. Grigorii Ilich Matiushin was born into the world already an orphan. For some reason, she who gave birth to him chose a graveyard to be delivered of her burden. And she probably wished death for her little child, wrapping it in a rag and abandoning it among the graves like a little corpse, only

because she was afraid to kill it with her own hands. But the bundle was found by people who had come to visit the small grave of their relatives. At the orphanage they registered foundlings with the names of those who found them. And so the anniversary of someone's death, which was marked by that visit to the graveyard, became his date of birth. That was all he could find out about himself as he grew up. He thought of those who had given him life as dead. However, with the passing years, they ceased even to be dead people for him. As a child he lived through the war, with its hunger and cold. Once launched into life, this son of the people, dreaming of qualifying as a mining engineer, worked in the same place where he grew up, in the Urals town of Kopeisk, in the coal mines, until he was drafted into the army.

The taciturn, austere young soldier found himself serving in Borisoglebsk, where he was accepted into the home of his company commander, a man of the same taciturn kind, who loved strict order. He was from peasant stock, a simple man, and he saw the young soldier as a son for himself, especially knowing that he had taken in an orphan. The commander had plenty of children, but all in vain, for he only fathered girls. His wife, who perpetually walked about with a large stomach, took no interest in keeping the home in order. The eldest daughter, Sashenka, managed the household and ordered her sisters about. She and Grigorii Ilich hit it off with no words spoken: he helped around the house, like a workman of sorts,

## *The Matiushin Case*

and it turned out that he was always helping Sashenka: he was her workman and she fed him. She was sixteen years old and hadn't finished school yet. Grigorii Ilich had a year left to serve. The commander watched over his daughter carefully, and although he smiled, he used to tell the young soldier:

'You watch out, Grigorii, don't go staring, you haven't got a stitch to your back. That's not the kind of suitor Sashka needs, and anyway, she'll come in handy round the house yet. Let her help her mother, set her sisters on their feet, then she can get herself a bridegroom.'

However, things turned out the way that his dear eldest daughter wanted. One evening they were drinking tea at the family table, all present and accounted for, there in the commander's house, and Sashenka suddenly said:

'I'm going to marry Grigorii, I've got a child on the way from him. Do what you like, I'm going to have the child.'

The commander almost did for Grigorii Ilich, who went around black and blue for a long time. But there was nothing to be done. The time for Sashenka to give birth was getting close and, in another month, having served his full term, Grigorii Ilich could disappear from Borisoglebsk, and so the commander resigned himself to things. A boy was born and named after him, Yakov. He fixed his son-in-law up as best he could with a post in the bread depot. So Sashka stayed close at hand after all, still in the house.

But then suddenly she said to her father:

‘Grigorii needs to study to be an officer, we’re going to leave.’

Grigorii Ilich completed his studies and, from the time when he was given an independent posting, the Matiushins never visited Borisoglebsk, not even passing through, and they never invited their relatives to visit them.

They had to go to the funeral. But having shown respect for his deceased commander, Grigorii Ilich didn’t want to let his wife go when the time came to bury her mother . . . Believing that he had achieved everything in life for himself, Grigorii Ilich was not so much proud of his own prosperity as afraid of letting his constantly moaning, bereaved relatives come anywhere near, even on a fleeting visit. Let them live their own life and we’ll live ours. I’m not going to ask them for help, so let them not ask me for any. They’ve always lived at their father and mother’s expense, so let them at least bury their mother, like decent people. I gave them money for their father, a hundred roubles to put up a gravestone – and all they do is make promises, the scoundrels, because they’ve eaten and drunk up all his money . . . He whinged on and on like that, refusing to let his wife go to the funeral, but he was surprised at how the anger, even fury, built up inside his Sashenka. She started shouting that she wasn’t going to work like a dog, washing his clothes and feeding him, any more. Matiushin’s first memory in life was his mother’s howl ringing out in the dark, echoing house, when his father raised his hand to



## *The Matiushin Case*

strike her but didn't dare to do it. At the time his father was cowed by the children, whom Matiushin's mother used as a shield to fence herself off – the elder son, an adolescent, and him, a small bundle at her unassailable feet of stone, his shoulders squeezed as painfully in her hands as in a vice.

This howl of his mother's tormented him afterwards, never settling anywhere in his mind. In their family the past was always subject to an unspoken ban, as if there had never been any other life apart from the one they were all living in the present.

Drinking alone after supper, Grigorii Ilich would sit on until late in the night, forbidding his wife to clear the dirty dishes from the table. Matiushin's mother would leave everything and go off to sleep, making the brothers go to bed too. The darkness took such a long time to grow, it was devastating. The silence tore down the walls and Matiushin felt afraid.

Nobody slept. On the other side of the wall, where their father stayed alone at the table, it was quiet. But they waited, not sleeping, knowing that the end had to come, the end that he was furiously approaching, torturing himself with vodka – and it would all end in weeping or a dark, hopeless fight between him and their mother. They never heard him come in. He crept into the room, as if he didn't want to wake anyone. But suddenly it would begin. Blinding, pitiless light. A wrecked room. Their father shouting his lungs out. Their mother yelping and



screeching. Then something bursting out of the room, flinging the door shut. Silence would descend again, and the light would be obscured, then go out.

The boy recovered his wits in the arms of his mother, still breathing like an animal at bay and whimpering tearfully. But his older brother lay there blankly: he could endure the destruction and their mother's whinging, and his little brother wailing his heart out just two steps away. Their father couldn't endure it, but this son, their father's heartless shadow, could. And there were times when, after he got drunk, Grigorii Ilich merely sobbed forlornly all alone in the middle of the night in the kitchen, and his wife lulled him like a little child and led him away to sleep.

To Matiushin, his brother and his father were identical creatures. They even had the same smell: tobacco and eau de cologne. Yashka stole their father's cigarettes and eau de cologne, for which the father beat his elder son mercilessly, until he drew blood, punishing him for his thieving and again when he complained to his mother. And Yashka tormented his younger brother: he would grab his hand and squeeze it, crush it with all his strength, exulting because he knew that his brother would complain to their mother, and she would complain to their father. And their father would get him up in the middle of the night again, when he came back from duty, because there wasn't any other time. Leading him out into the kitchen, in order not to wake the others, he beat him as hard as

## *The Matiushin Case*

he could, but Yashka gritted his teeth and endured his father's batterings. And that, it was fancied, made him grow up a bit.

Matiushin remembered his mother saying with relief that Yashka would soon be taken into the army . . . Afterwards Yakov only wrote rarely from his posting. He served on the border, in some warm place somewhere: their mother retold his letters – and they immediately forgot about him. But Matiushin remembered how he dreamed that Yashka would be killed in the army in some war or other and never come back. Sometimes he fancied that his older brother really wasn't alive any longer – and because of that the walls of their home were papered with peace again, and a strict, neat order suddenly appeared in it . . . Alexandra Yakovlevna boasted to her women friends: I tell Vasenka to sit on the stool so he won't get in the way, and he keeps on sitting there, the little sparrow, and I get all the jobs done and I forget about him. And he only felt good with her, the way it sometimes feels good not to think about anything and submit to everything thankfully, like a puppy.

With his service record, Matiushin's father earned rank after rank, post after post . . . An abrupt, strong-willed, tenacious man who got everything done, he knew how to achieve his goal without stumbling and falling. Grigorii Ilich didn't fight to cling to his own perch: after a certain time he wanted only to win victories in life, and he could do it. This struggle required not only strength of will but

the exertion of that entire will, which he achieved, transforming himself into a single, tense nerve in the form of a man. When father was sleeping, no one could make any noise, and at the table no one dared to speak; apart from him, no one had the right to leave even a spoonful, even a little bit uneaten. ‘Who’s this disdaining his bread? Who’s got too finicky?’ And what had been left uneaten was chewed up and swallowed as he watched – only then was Grigorii Ilich at peace.

Matiushin had eaten up since he was a child – choking as he did it, but eating up. There was fear in it, but a thrilling fear, contaminated with love, exactly like his jealousy of his older brother’s closeness with their father – and the love, not the dread, made them subject to their father’s will. This love could not be eradicated from their hearts. Just as their father failed to grasp that he was driving his children away and taking revenge on this alien life through his antipathy for them, so his children failed to grasp that the stronger it became – this antipathy of their father’s, this sacred, bloody revenge that he was wreaking on life through sacrificing them – the more selfless and insuperable the impulse of their love for him would become, as if it were the very impulse to live, and they couldn’t manage without each other.

When Yakov came back from the army, it seemed as if a new man had been born: courageous, resolute, bright



## *The Matiushin Case*

and cheerful. Unexpectedly for everyone, his return to the family was a joyful occasion.

Grigorii Ilich's position could not have been more secure: a brand-new colonel, commander of a strategic division, he even looked solid and stately. At that time, during those bright days, Yakov's fate was decided. Grigorii Ilich had no respect for the labouring or even the creative professions, regarding one set as spongers and the other as blatherskites. And Yakov, like his father, despised weaklings – even at school, the only thing he enjoyed was the physical training: he lorded it over his bright and diligent classmates, who fearfully obeyed all his commands.

His years in the army had made Yakov physically stronger, and in addition the discipline had been strict, which had made him humbler, but clearly also because of that he had no interests in life, no desires, as if he were fettered somehow. The colonel was not averse to taking pride in his son now, but he was not so much thinking about Yakov as relishing the thought that the line of officers originated by him would be continued. The idea of Moscow immediately occurred to him – Yakov had served his tour of duty in the border forces, and the capital had the best border-forces training college in the country. In just one hour the colonel told his son how he saw his future life. Yakov seemed to be ready for this decision and gave his consent without a second thought, although it meant that he would leave the home, having barely had time to get used to it.



They left together but only the father came back, looking well rested and somehow without enough luggage. Yakov stayed in Moscow. He took the examinations – they gave him a place in the college hostel – and when he was enrolled, he could have left and come home to rest until autumn, but he chose not to: he set off immediately to the trainees' barracks.

To be on the safe side, Grigorii Ilich went to see the commanding officer of the college, so that they would know who he was. He spent the rest of the time looking round the capital, indulging himself in every possible way. He dined in restaurants. He stayed in the Rossiya hotel. He spent all of the large sum of money he had brought to Moscow with him. He came back, not in uniform, as he had left, but dressed completely in provocative new clothes, even with a beautiful yellow suitcase – he left the one he had taken with him for Yakov.

The moment the mother saw him at the door she went for him like a dog. Instead of joy, there was baying and howling. The child, who had been forgotten, first huddled in a corner, then darted out of the apartment. When it got dark outside and he started to feel afraid, he came back to a devastated home. Everything was smashed, slashed, ripped open. In the middle of the night his father showed up, totally drunk, out of his mind. He walked round the apartment, pleased with himself, thinking he had sent his wife packing. He prodded his son, but didn't wake him. Then he calmed down and plodded off to his room to sleep.