

The Snowstorm

Alexander Pushkin

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Horses gallop through the plain
Trampling down the snow. Far away, there stands a church
In the vale below.
Zhukovsky.

AT the end of 1811—an epoch memorable to us—there lived on his estate Nenaradovo kind Gavril Gavrilovitch R. He was renowned in the district for his friendliness and hospitality ; neighbours came to his house at every hour of the day to have a meal and a drink, to play a game of cards for five copecks stakes with his wife, and some to have a look at their daughter, Marya Gavrilovna, a pale and graceful girl of seventeen. She was considered an heiress, and many thought of her as a good match for themselves or for their sons.

Marya Gavrilovna was brought up on French novels, and consequently was in love. She selected as the subject of her affections a poor army lieutenant, staying on leave in his country place. It is needless to say that the young man was burning with equal passion, and that the parents of his ladylove, observing their mutual inclination, forbade their daughter to think of him, and received him worse than a retired assessor.

The lovers kept up a correspondence and met alone every day in the pinewood or by the old wayside chapel. There they exchanged vows of eternal love, complained of their fate, and made various plans. In their letters and conversations they, quite naturally, arrived at the following argument: if we cannot breathe without each other, and the cruel parents' will prevents our happiness, couldn't we do without their consent? Of course this fortunate idea occurred first to the young man, and strongly appealed to Marya Gavrilovna's romantic imagination.

Winter came and put a stop to their meetings, but their correspondence grew all the more lively. In every letter Vladimir Nicolaevitch implored her to trust herself to him, marry him secretly, remain in hiding for a time, and then fall at the feet of her parents who would of course be touched by the lovers' heroic constancy and unhappiness and be sure to say to them: 'Children, come to our arms!'

Marya Gavrilovna hesitated and delayed; many plans of elopement were rejected by her. At last she consented: on the appointed day she was to have no supper and retire to her room on the pretext of headache. Her maid was in the conspiracy; they were both to slip by the back door into the garden, find at the other side of it a sledge waiting for them, get into it and drive four miles to the village of Zhadrino, straight to the church, where Vladimir would be waiting for them.

On the eve of the decisive day Marya Gavrilovna did not sleep all night; she packed, tied her dresses and linen into bundles, wrote a long letter to a friend—a young lady of great sensibility—and another to her parents. She took leave of them in most touching words, excused her action by the irresistible force of passion, and finished by saying that the happiest moment of her life will be the one when she is allowed to fall at the feet of her beloved parents. Having sealed both letters with a seal bearing the device of two flaming hearts and an appropriate inscription, she threw herself on to her bed at daybreak and dozed off, but terrible dreams woke her up every minute. Sometimes it seemed to her that just as she was getting into the sledge to go to church her father stopped her, and dragging her painfully fast over the snow, threw her into a dark bottomless dungeon . . . she flew headlong, her heart fluttering desperately. Or she dreamt of Vladimir lying on the grass, pale and covered with blood. Dying, he implored her in a piercing voice to make haste and marry him. . . . Other visions, senseless and hideous, flitted before her in rapid succession.

At last she got up, paler than usual, and with a genuine headache. Her father and mother noticed her uneasiness; their tender solicitude and constant questions 'What is it, Masha?' 'Are you unwell, Masha?' wrung her heart.. She tried to reassure them, to appear gay, and could not. Evening came. The thought that she was spending it for the last time in the midst of her family oppressed her. She could scarcely breathe; she was secretly taking leave of every person and every object around her.

Supper was served; her heart beat violently. In a trembling voice she said that she did not feel like eating and

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bade good night to her father and mother. They kissed and blessed her as usual: she almost wept. When she came to her room she threw herself into an armchair and burst into tears. Her maid pleaded with her to calm herself and take courage. All was ready. In half an hour Masha was to leave for ever her parental home, her room, her peaceful girlhood. ... A snowstorm was raging outside, the wind howled, the shutters shook and clattered; everything seemed to her menacing and foreboding. At last all was quiet and asleep in the house. Masha wrapped herself up in a shawl, put on a warm overcoat, took her casket, and came out by the back door. The maid followed her, carrying two bundles. They went down the steps into the garden. The snowstorm did not abate; the wind blew against them as though trying to stop the young criminal. They had a struggle to reach the end of the garden. In the road a sledge was waiting for them. The horses were feeling the cold and could hardly stand still; Vladimir's coachman paced to and fro in front of the shafts, restraining the spirited animals. He helped the young lady and her maid to settle in the sledge with their bundles and the casket, took up the reins, and the horses dashed off. Let us leave the young lady in the care of fate and of the coachman Tereshka's skill, and turn to the young lover.

Vladimir spent the whole day driving from place to place. In the morning he went to see the priest at Zhadrino, and had much difficulty in arranging matters with him; then he went in search of prospective witnesses among the neighbouring landowners. His first call was to a retired cavalry officer, Dravin, a man of forty, who readily consented, saying that this adventure reminded him of the old days and of the hussars' frolics. He persuaded Vladimir to stay to dinner and assured him that there would be no difficulty in finding the two other witnesses. And indeed immediately after dinner two guests arrived: Shmidt, the surveyor, who wore a moustache and spurs, and the police-captain's son, a boy of sixteen recently enlisted in the uhlans. They not only accepted Vladimir's offer, but swore that they were ready to lay down their lives for him. He embraced them enthusiastically and went home to make ready.

Meanwhile dusk had gathered. He sent his faithful Tereshka with the troika to Nenaradovo, giving him detailed and careful instructions, ordered a small sledge with one horse for himself, and set out without a coachman to Zhadrino where in a couple of hours Marya Gavrilovna was to join him. He knew his way, and it was only a twenty minutes' drive.

But no sooner had Vladimir left the village and come into the open country than the wind rose and such a snowstorm blew up that he could not see a thing. The road was instantly buried in snow; everything around disappeared in a thick yellowish haze through which white flakes of snow were flying; the sky was merged with the earth. Vladimir found himself in the open plain and vainly tried to regain the road; his horse moved at random, now climbing a snowdrift, now sinking into a pit; the sledge constantly turned over. All that Vladimir endeavoured to do was not to lose his bearings. But it seemed to him that more than half an hour had passed and he had not yet reached the Zhadrino copse. Another ten minutes passed; the copse was not yet in sight. Vladimir was driving across a plain intersected by deep ravines. The snowstorm did not abate, the sky did not clear. The horse was growing tired, and he was bathed in perspiration, although he constantly sank waist-deep in the snow.

At last he saw that he was going in the wrong direction. He stopped: he began to think, to recall his movements, to consider where he was, and decided that he ought to turn to the right. He went to the right. His horse was scarcely able to walk. He had been more than an hour on his way. Zhadrino must be close by. But he drove on and on, and the plain was endless. It was nothing but snowdrifts and ravines; the sledge turned over every minute and he kept lifting it. Time passed; Vladimir began to feel uneasy.

At last, on one side something showed black in the distance. Vladimir turned in that direction. As he drew near he saw a copse. 'Thank God,' he thought, 'it isn't far now.' He drove alongside the copse, hoping to strike the familiar road at once, or to drive round the copse: Zhadrino lay just behind it. He soon found the road and entered into the darkness under the trees bared by the winter. The wind could not rage here; the road was smooth; the horse rallied, and Vladimir was reassured.

But he went on and on, and Zhadrino was not to be seen; the copse was endless. Vladimir saw with horror that he was in a forest he did not know. Despair possessed him. He struck the horse; the poor animal broke into a trot, but soon began to flag, and quarter of an hour later walked along at foot pace, in spite of all that the unhappy Vladimir did to urge it on.

Gradually the trees began to thin, and Vladimir came out of the forest. There was no Zhadrino in sight. The hour must have been about midnight. Tears gushed from his eyes; he drove on at random. The storm had ceased,

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the clouds were dispersing; a plain covered! with a wavy carpet of snow lay before him. The night was fairly clear. In the near distance he saw a hamlet consisting of four or five homesteads. Vladimir drove up to it. He stopped by the first cottage, ran up to the window, and began knocking. After a few minutes the wooden shutter was lifted and an old man thrust out his grey beard.

'What do you want?'

'Is it far to Zhadrino?'

'To Zhadrino, you say?'

'Yes, yes! Is it far?'

'No, not far; about eight miles.'

At this answer Vladimir remained motionless, clutching at his head like a man condemned to death.

'And where do you corrie from?' the old man continued.

Vladimir was too dispirited to answer questions.

'Can you procure me some horses, old man, to take me to Zhadrino?'

'Our horses are no good,' the peasant answered.

'Can I at least have a guide? I'll pay him what he likes.'

'Wait,' said the old man, letting down the shutter. 'I'll send you my son; he'll go with you.'

Vladimir waited. In less than a minute he began knocking again. The shutter was raised, the beard poked out.

'What do you want?'

'Is your son coming?'

'He won't be long, he is putting on his snow-boots. Are you cold? Come in and warm yourself.'

'Thank you; tell your son to be quick.'

The gates creaked; a young man with a thick stick came out and walked in front of the sledge, pointing out the road covered by snowdrifts, or looking for it.

'What time is it?' Vladimir asked him.

'It will soon be daybreak,' the young peasant answered.

Vladimir said nothing more.

Cocks were crowing and it was already light when they reached Zhadrino. The church was locked. Vladimir paid his guide and drove to the priest's house. His troika was not in the courtyard. What news awaited him!

But let us return to the good people at Nenaradovo and see what is happening there.

Why, nothing.

The old couple woke up and came into the drawing-room, Gavril Gavrilovitch in a nightcap and a warm jacket, Praskovya Petrovna in a quilted dressing-gown. The samovar was brought in, and Gavril Gavrilovitch sent the little servant girl to inquire how Marya Gavrilovna felt and what sort of night she had had. The girl returned saying that the young lady had had a bad night, but was feeling better now, and would come to the drawing-room directly. Indeed the door opened, and Marya Gavrilovna came in to wish good morning to her father and mother.

'How is your headache, Masha?' asked Gavril Gavrilovitch. 'It's better, papa,' Masha answered.

'I expect it's the charcoal fumes yesterday that gave it you,' said Praskovya Petrovna.

'Very likely, mamma,' Masha answered. The day passed as usual, but in the night Masha was taken ill. The town doctor was sent for. He arrived towards evening and found the patient delirious. She was in high fever, and for a fortnight the poor girl hovered on the brink of death.

No one in the house knew about the proposed elopement. Masha burnt the letters she had written on the eve of it; her maid did not say a word to anyone, for fear of her masters' anger. The priest, the retired cavalry officer, the moustached surveyor, and the young uhlan were discreet, and with a good reason. The coachman Tereshka never babbled, not even when he was drunk. Thus the secret was preserved by more than half a dozen conspirators. But in her continual delirium Marya Gavrilovna herself gave it away. Her words, however, were so incoherent that her mother, who never left the invalid's bedside, could only gather from them that her daughter was desperately in love with Vladimir Nicolaevitch, and that probably love was the cause of her illness. She consulted her husband and some of their neighbours, and at last all agreed that evidently it was fated, that marriages were made in heaven, that poverty was no vice, that one had to live with a man and not with his money, and so on. Moral proverbs are wonderfully useful in cases when we have little to say in self-justification.

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Meanwhile the young lady began to recover. Vladimir had not been seen in Gavril Gavrilovitch's house for weeks. He had been scared away by his usual reception there. It was decided to send for him and announce to him unexpected good fortune: their consent to the marriage. But what was the parents' amazement when in reply to their invitation they received a half-crazy letter from him! He declared that he would never set foot in their house and begged them to forget an unhappy man whose only hope was in death. A few days later they heard that Vladimir had gone to join the army. That was in 1812.

Many days passed before they ventured to tell this to Masha, who was still convalescent. She never mentioned Vladimir. Several months later, finding his name in the casualty lists among those who had distinguished themselves and been dangerously wounded in the battle of Borodino, she fainted, and it was feared that her illness might return. But, thank heaven, the fainting fit had no bad consequences.

She was visited by another sorrow: Gavril Gavrilovitch died, leaving her his sole heiress. But wealth was no comfort to her; she sincerely shared Praskovya Petrovna's grief and vowed never to part from her. They left Nenaradovo—the place of sad memories—and went to live on another estate, in a different province.

There too suitors circled round the rich and charming young lady, but she gave not the slightest encouragement to any of them. Her mother sometimes urged her to select a partner;

Marya Gavrilovna shook her head and grew pensive. Vladimir was no more: he died in Moscow, the day before the French entered it. His memory seemed sacred to Masha; at any rate, she treasured everything that could remind her of him: his drawings, the books he had once read, music and verses he had copied out for her. The neighbours, hearing of this, marvelled at her constancy and waited with interest for the hero who would at last triumph over the sad fidelity of this virgin Artemisia.

Meanwhile the war came to a glorious end. Our regiments were returning from abroad. Crowds ran out to meet them. Military bands played the airs won by the victors: Vive Henri Quatre, Tyrolese waltzes, and arias from Joconde. Officers who had gone to the war as mere boys came back as grown-up men, seasoned in battle and covered with military decorations. Soldiers gaily talked to one another, constantly introducing French and German words into their conversation. An unforgettable time! A time of enthusiasm and glory! How the Russian heart throbbed at the word 'Fatherland'! How sweet were the tears of reunion! How unanimously we combined the feelings of national pride with love for the Tsar! And what a moment it was for him!

Women, Russian women, were at that time beyond compare. Their usual coldness disappeared. Their enthusiasm was truly ravishing, when meeting the victors they shouted hurrah!

And threw up their bonnets in the air.

What officer of the period would deny that his best and most precious reward came from Russian women?

At that brilliant epoch Marya Gavrilovna was living with her mother in the province and did not see how the two capitals (Moscow and Petersburg.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE) celebrated the army's home-coming. But in country towns and villages the general enthusiasm was perhaps even greater. If an officer arrived there, he was given a triumphal reception, and in his company a lover in civilian dress had a poor time of it.

We have already said that in spite of her coldness Marya Gavrilovna was, as before, surrounded by suitors.

But all had to retreat when there appeared in her castle a wounded colonel of the hussars, Burmin, with St. George's Cross on his breast, and 'an interesting pallor,' as the local young ladies used to say. He was about twenty-six years old. He came on leave to his estates, which neighboured on Marya Gavrilovna's land. She showed him marked attention. In his presence her usual pensiveness gave way to animation. It could not be said that she flirted with him, but a poet, observing her behaviour, would have said:

Se amor non é, che dunque . . . ?

And indeed Burmin was a very attractive young man. He had just the type of intellect which women like: pliant and observant, utterly unpretentious and gaily ironical. He was simple and unconstrained in his manner towards Marya Gavrilovna, but his eyes and his whole mind closely followed everything she said or did. He seemed to be of a quiet and modest disposition, but rumour had it that he had once been a dreadful scapegrace. This did not lower him in Marya Gavrilovna's estimation, for like all young women she readily excused escapades that showed an ardent and fearless temperament.

But more than anything else (more than his tenderness, his pleasant conversation, his 'interesting pallor,' and his bandaged arm), the young hussar's reticence stirred her curiosity and imagination. She could not help admitting that he liked her very much; probably he too, with his intelligence and experience, noticed that she

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singled him out; how was it then that she had not yet seen him at her feet and heard his avowal? What restrained him? Timidity, inseparable from true love, pride, or the coquetry of a cunning Don Juan? It was a mystery to her. After much thought she came to the conclusion that timidity was the only cause and decided to encourage him by showing him more attention, and even tenderness if need be. She was preparing a most unexpected denouement, and was impatiently waiting for the moment of the romantic explanation. Mystery, of whatever kind, is always irksome to the feminine heart.

Her manoeuvres had the desired effect: at any rate, Burmin grew so pensive, and his black eyes gazed at Marya Gavrilovna so ardently, that the decisive moment seemed to be near. The neighbours talked of the wedding as though all had been settled, and good Praskovya Petrovna rejoiced that her daughter had at last found a suitor worthy of her.

One day when the old lady sat alone in the drawing-room, playing patience, Burmin walked in and at once inquired about Marya Gavrilovna. 'She is in the garden,' the old lady answered; 'you go to her, and I'll wait for you here.' Burmin went out, and she crossed herself and thought: 'God grant it may all be decided today.'

Burmin found Marya Gavrilovna by the pond under a willow, in a white dress and with a book in her hands—just like the heroine of a novel. After the first questions Marya Gavrilovna deliberately ceased to keep up the conversation, thus increasing their mutual confusion, which could only be ended by a sudden and decisive explanation. And this indeed was what happened. Conscious of his embarrassment Burmin declared that he had long been seeking an opportunity to open his heart to her, and asked for a minute's attention. Marya Gavrilovna closed the book and lowered her eyes in token of acquiescence.

'I love you,' said Burmin, 'I love you passionately. . . .' (Marya Gavrilovna blushed and bent her head still lower.) 'I acted heedlessly, abandoning myself to the delightful habit—the habit of seeing and hearing you every day.' Marya Gavrilovna recalled St. Preux's first letter (The reference is to J. J. Rousseau's novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.) 'Now it is too late to struggle against fate; the remembrance of you, your sweet, incomparable image will be my joy and misery for the rest of my life; but I must first carry out a painful duty, reveal a terrible secret, and put an unsurmountable barrier between

'It has always existed,' Marya Gavrilovna interrupted him impetuously. 'I could never be your wife. . . .'

'I know,' he answered gently, 'I know that you loved once, but death and three years of mourning... Dear, kind Marya Gavrilovna! do not try to deprive me of my last comfort—of the thought that you would consent to make me happy, if only . . . don't speak, for God's sake, don't say anything. You torture me. Yes, I know, I feel that you would have been mine, but—I am the unhappiest creature . . . I am married!'

Marya Gavrilovna looked at him in astonishment.

'I am married,' Burmin continued. 'I have been married for the last four years and I do not know who my wife is, and where she is, and whether I shall ever see her!'

'What are you saying?' Marya Gavrilovna exclaimed. "How very strange! Go on; I'll tell you afterwards . . . but go on, I beg you.'

'At the beginning of 1812,' said Burmin, 'I was hastening to Vilna where our regiment was stationed. One day I arrived at a posting station late in the evening and ordered that the horses should be harnessed at once; but suddenly a terrific snowstorm blew up, and the postmaster and the drivers advised me to wait. I obeyed, but an unaccountable restlessness possessed me; it was as though someone were egging me on. Meanwhile the snowstorm was not abating; I could endure no longer, gave word to harness the horses again and set out in the thick of it. The driver decided to go along the river as this would shorten our journey by nearly three miles. The river banks were buried in snow, and the driver missed the place where one could get on to the road; we thus found ourselves in an unfamiliar part of the country. The storm was still raging; I saw a light in the distance and told the driver to go in that direction. We came to a village; in the church, built of wood, there was a light. The church was open; several sledges stood outside the fence; people were moving about in the porch. "Here, here!" several voices cried. I told the driver to go right up to the church. "Mercy on us, what delayed you?" someone said to me. "The bride has fainted, the priest does not know what to do; we were on the point of going home. Come, be quick!" Without a word I jumped out of the sledge and went into the church, dimly lit by two or three candles. A girl was sitting on a bench in a dark corner of the church; another was rubbing her temples.

"Thank heaven you've come at last," said she. "You've nearly killed my young lady."

The old priest came up to me with the question: "Am I to begin?"—"Yes, Father, begin," I answered

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absent-mindedly.

They lifted the girl from the bench. She seemed to me rather pretty. . . . Unaccountable, unforgivable folly ... I took my place beside her before the lectern; the priest was in a hurry; the three men and the maidservant supported the bride and gave her all their attention. We were married.

"Kiss each other," said the priest. My wife turned her pale face to me. I was about to kiss her. . . . She cried out: "It isn't he! it isn't he!" — and fell down senseless. The witnesses looked at me in consternation. I turned round, walked out of the church unhindered, jumped into my covered sledge, and called to the driver: "Go on—!"

'Good heavens!' cried Marya Gavrilovna, 'and you do not know what became of your poor wife?'

"I do not know," Burmin answered. 'I do not know the name of the village where I was married; I do not remember from what station I had set off. At that time I attached so little importance to my criminal prank that after leaving the church I went to sleep and did not wake till the morning, when we had reached the third station.

The servant who was with me at the time died during the campaign. I haven't any hope of tracing the girl on whom I played such a cruel joke and who is now so cruelly avenged.'

'Merciful heavens!' said Marya Gavrilovna, seizing his hand, 'so it was you! Don't you recognize me?'

Burmin turned pale . . . and threw himself at her feet.