

Getting to Know

Martha had spent her week fending visits from everyone who remotely knew her and out of the blue "only dropped to say hello". The third such intrusion was from a woman known as a gossip emitter and transmitter rivaling the national radio broadcasts who had hardly said two sentences before trying to steer the conversation towards Iossif and his bride. Martha had had enough. She tried to go out early and spent the days roaming the museums, which she loved. It was impossible to work for Professor Spassov and not to catch his fascination with history and art, and in that week it proved to be a salvation. Of course, the housekeeper had gone and polished every single corner of the house, bought the finest chocolates and arranged them in the second floor sitting room, but it did not take so much time. She did not want to stay alone in the house as the telephone was constantly ringing with well-wishers' voices dripping curiosity. Martha had put the list next to the phone at Iossif's study, as she did with the notes of the calls she had picked up during his absence.

The housekeeper arrived as usual at seven on Monday morning. She was doing her best not to show her nervousness. Although she had met Mitzi at the wedding, the housekeeper was not at ease with her new mistress. Nada had tried to alleviate her fears telling her what a wonderful person the young woman actually was, but Martha wanted to form her own opinion. She had heard enough horror stories from the other housekeepers that she met about the difference between the habits of their mistresses in public and in private. Martha was wary. The marriage had been such a shock; she was still reeling from it.

Another shock was waiting for her in the kitchen. The cold supper that she had prepared had been literally cleared away, plates washed, dried and stored, bowls and cutlery accurately arranged on the dryer. Iossif would not have thought of it, so it was Mitzi. Was it a sign of dismissal that the lady of the manor could do without her? The professor had assured the housekeeper that nothing would change in her position but it had changed already. At least the new Mrs. Spassova was not a slob, but it was a small wonder. Martha took off her coat and contemplated whether to start her daily routine or to wait for the orders of her mistress.

Iossif would probably be asleep for another hour. Should she go upstairs to Mitzi to ask whether she wanted her breakfast in bed? What did she like for breakfast? Were there enough supplies at home or she should go shopping?

The kitchen door opened quietly and a completely dressed Mitzi entered, her hair in a low roll, face cleanly scrubbed and devoid of any make-up, small pearl studs in her ears. She smiled pleasantly, 'Good morning, Mrs. Vassileva! Thank you for the supper, it was delicious!'

'I am glad that you enjoyed it, Mrs. Spassova, but you should have left the dishes for me.'

'There were just a few and it was not a heavy task. I am not quite sure I knew where to put most of the stuff, so I hope that you will give me a tour around the kitchen for me to be able to help you.'

Martha was speechless. The mistress of the house, the wife of Professor Spassov was planning to help her with the kitchen duties! That was the same Mitzi that everyone thought selfish, spoiled to boot, party butterfly, whose impossibly high heels had pierced scores of hearts. And here she stood in a simple dress, flat shoes and was asking to help with the house chores. The Earth was going to stop spinning very soon!

'It will be my pleasure if you teach me some of Professor Spassov's favorites. I have some basic training from college, but I am afraid it is not much above chopping salads and some desserts', the young woman's voice trailed.

Martha was desperately trying to find her words. She swallowed and said, 'Then you will be in his good graces, as he likes simple food and has a sweet tooth.' Martha blushed at her faux pas suggesting that professor's wife of eight days should ever be considered out of his scope of affection.

However, Mitzi did not seem to notice it. Her smile widened, 'So what shall we prepare for breakfast?'

'Just your one, Mrs. Spassova, as Professor Spassov prefers his porridge hot and I doubt he will come for it for another hour. What would you like? I was planning to ask if you like your breakfast in bed. If you tell me what your preferences are, I will be glad to follow them. Also about the meals during the day, you may want to give me a schedule to adhere to. Of course, if anything is planned, a dinner or a supper it would be nice to know in advance, Mrs. Spassova, especially if there are more people involved and the menu will be elaborate. Maybe today if you have time we may go over the cutlery and the dishes, so if you would like to buy something for the upcoming season, it may need to be ordered. There is full china set for twelve, a very

classic one, but if you prefer something new, I will pack this one in the spare dining room upstairs. Should you need anything, please let me know immediately, Mrs. Spassova!

'Mrs. Vassileva, how about if I ask for something right now? I would be really glad if you call me Mitzi at home and leave "Mrs. Spassova" for official use, please. I would rather not have breakfast in bed, I am an early bird and can feed myself, but I will probably have porridge with Professor Spassov whenever he has his. I have two classes today in the morning at the university, but tomorrow I have classes only in the afternoon, so if you like to make time to show me around, I will be glad to do it. About everything else, we need to consult Professor Spassov. I still have another hour and a half before I have to go, what would you like me to do?'

The housekeeper felt how the tight ropes that had coiled her heart since the professor had announced his upcoming marriage fall of and her heartbeat resumed its normal pace. She looked fondly at the young woman and said, 'How about I bring you a cup of milk and some cookies to the library to pass the time until Professor Spassov comes down?'

'Only if you join me - we may discuss the menu and everything that you would like to tell me,' Mitzi blushed and offered, 'Shall I take something there?'

November went by almost unnoticed. Mitzi spent her days in the university, as she took two more courses on top of her full program and whatever time she had between them, she spent studying at the library a block away. The weather was not supportive to long walks, but she tried to move as much as possible, bundled in her warm tweed coat and refusing to shop for furs despite Iossif's insistence. They had fallen into a comfortable routine, having breakfast together, parting ways until lunch when he would pick her up from the library or she would wait for him after his class, studying and teaching again, then meeting at home for dinner that Martha had prepared. After the meal they would go for a brisk walk around or if the weather was bad, Mitzi would curl with a book in front of the fire in his study while he would occupy his desk and prepare lectures. Sometimes she helped him with a lengthy research, but most of the time he was shooing her away as he insisted that she had a right like all his students to be surprised and enchanted at his lessons. Apart for a formal dinner that was given in honor of Mihailovs three days after the newlyweds' return from Istanbul, they did not entertain, nor accepted any of the invitations which were coming in packs. However, the grand

celebration of the Students' day on December 8th was looming on the horizon. Mitzi was growing increasingly nervous as professors were expected to attend with their consorts. Iossif had given her the choice to come with him or not, but it would not be Mitzi if she had refused to go. She had a new dress made, solid woolen black to be worn with scarlet gloves and her autumn apples. The morning before the dinner a black astrakhan coat was delivered, which Iossif insisted to be the customary uniform of professors' wives from the time unknown and assured her that Nada had one of them also. Lambri's wife smoothed as much as she could the introduction of the young lady to the various circles of professors' wives, who like their prominent husbands were divided into fronts, alliances and other military formations depending on the rank and the faculty their wise men belonged to.

Iossif had taken one look at the situation and as soon as it was polite, whispered in Mitzi's ear, 'That is not for us, the young ones, let us drop these old lechers and go have some fun!'

To his wife's bewilderment, his idea of fun was to get to the restaurant where most of her group had gathered for cheap wine and dances. As they had places reserved made her aware that it had not been an impulsive decision, yet she was surprised that not a single soul mentioned anything about their presence or status. Mitzi was blissfully unaware that the same morning the professor had entered his enormous auditorium and had started the lecture with a preliminary of sort, 'As you are well aware, tonight is the Students' fest and I intend to attend like every year before. However, this year there will be changes, as I am coming with my wife who I believe you are better acquainted with as former Miss Altinova. I hope that under the circumstances that we may be expecting an addition to the family you will refrain from inappropriate comments and will treat her with the utmost reverence that you reserve for my subject, which is known to be difficult and may require a second term in case of irreverent attitude. Consider yourselves warned.'

His announcement was met by applause from the male part of the auditorium, some encouraging cries from the more daring students who had started the celebration earlier and oh-s and ah-s from the impressive young ladies on the benches. Few seconds later they were furiously scribbling the differences that allow a column to be dated appropriately. Very few of them caught the unabashed irony.

Christmas was approaching and the shops were decorated with tree branches and blown glass sparkling baubles. The first snow was replaced by the second one and it stayed, turning walking into a hazard on the iced street. Mitzi and Martha were growing more and more concerned about Iossif's increasingly frequent fits of dry cough, but he refused to see a doctor, claiming that it was a result of the filthy air in the auditorium and would pass by itself. The exams were scheduled for the second week of January and the students who had been skipping classes earlier during the semester, were attending regularly, swelling the substantial number in the classrooms. The university was trying to save on coal and the rooms were poorly heated, students and teachers kept their coats on during the lectures. At night a thin glaze of ice was forming in the pails with water for cleaning the blackboards. Dora returned from the visit to her village relatives pale and drawn and Mitzi was worried for her also.

"It is going to be dangerous to stay much longer in Sofia, Dora, you have to decide where you will go!" Boris was concerned about the last results that were one of the most tightly guarded secrets in his hospital. He was passing them for Mitzi's, who was openly demonstrating that she was carrying the future Spassov and Dora was coming with her as a good friend. But Mitzi looked like an apple in September and Dora was looking like a wilting flower as nothing seemed to influence her dreadful morning sickness - neither the strict diet, nor the rest, not even the herbal remedies which Boris had sought in desperation from a well known herbalist. The analysis showed increasing kidney problems but she refused an X-ray and any even remote hint about abortion. Whatever little time Boris had previously had for himself was now devoted to his interest to pathologies in early pregnancy and he was pouring through every book or publication he could put his hands on. The only person who regularly saw him was Janetta, the little sun of his dreadful days and even more dreadful nights. He wanted to send Dora abroad, to a partner in Vienna who was renowned for his kidney operations, but the young woman was not bulging - the son of a true Bulgarian should be born in the land his father had died for. Years of cherished friendship had stopped Boris from spitting that the land had swallowed the father and may be aiming at the son and the mother in tow. But he knew all the circumstances around that child and could not hurt her.

'Listen, the town is riddled with some deadly pneumonia strain; you don't need any other complications. May be you will go to Bourgas and have some fresh air, I trust the family of Ivana to take care of you there.'

'No, it will be dangerous for them to shelter me, now it is fine, but in a month it will be visible that a food poisoning cannot last so long. Can I pretend I break a leg and stay at home?'

'It all comes to the same - you will have to go and the earlier the better, you have to acclimatize to the place and get some routine for when you get real big.' That she would, she was already retaining water at crazy rates. The longer they postponed the harder the transport would be.

'You will go to stay with Elka. And you will go right after Saint Basil's day, child, no more nagging! Brashlyan is so far from everything that sometimes it seems that God's mother is the only one who remembers where it is. Elka and her husband will take care of you like none of us can at the moment. She has one boy who is already in the grades and in winter there is not much to do in the village. Start packing, you will bring her all the lace that I have made recently.'

'Brashlyan? Where is that?' Boris was not quite positive he had ever heard about the village.

'The Gate to the Sea. You will see. Are you going to come with us?' Nada was looking at him over the rim of her tea cup.

'There is no question, you are not traveling without me, and I need to see the facilities there as well. I'll be back to Sofia the next day if everything is fine, but you may stay and help her settle, will you, Nada?' There was a pleading note in his voice and Nada caught it. It was heartwarming to have a friend who was always there for them, a caring loving person, who was a great doctor as well. God bless him, she loved him like a son.

On the night of the twenty-third Iossif came home paler than usual and hardly stopped coughing throughout the dinner. He excused himself that it would be an early start the next morning and retired to his bedroom. Mitzi was listening with growing anxiety to his cough which was sounding worse by the hour. At eleven, she knocked at his door to ask if he needed anything and he asked for a cup of tea. The hot chamomile brew with honey helped for a while and he slipped into a slumber, but Mitzi could hear his laborious breathing from the sofa in the sitting room that she had moved her pillow and blanket to. In the early hours she woke by the sound of the cough again, a deep, hollow noise. She hastily fastened her robe and hurried to Iossif's bedside. In his dreams he had pushed aside the covers and was shivering violently despite the hot room. She put the covers back and added coal to the stove, but the shivering did not stop. It was not like he was

cold on the outside, these tremors were not good. Iossif asked for more tea and she ran to the kitchen. When she came back with the steaming mug, he was again slipping into what could be sleep but could be unconsciousness all the same. The cough continued to wrack his body. Mitzi brought a kettle and put it on the stove to make the air more humid, but it did not do much good either. Iossif looked like a swimmer who was fighting a tide. Mitzi changed the cloth with which she was wiping his brow, as the first one was soaked. Just before dawn, the cough eased a little and Iossif went to the bathroom, but the trip exhausted him and he literally fell in his bed. The young woman did not hesitate - she ran to the phone and called Boris' hospital. The nurse in charge told her that the director was finishing an operation and would call her as soon as he was free. Mitzi ran back upstairs and piled more blankets on the shivering Iossif, whose breathing grew more laborious. The phone rang and she ran downstairs. Boris listened to her short summary and said he would come immediately. Meanwhile she should keep trying to make Iossif drink, a tea spoon at a time, but drink, as much as she could squeeze through. Mitzi put a new tea to brew, grabbed a spoon and ran upstairs. She propped semi-conscious Iossif on two more pillows and was patiently spooning the tea into his mouth when Boris arrived. She looked like a frightened child, the doctor thought, but was keeping chin high. Mitzi brought him to the bedroom, where Iossif took a look at them and weakly smiled, 'There is still hope, I presume, if my wife called a doctor and not a priest, what do you say, Boris?'

A severe fit of cough allowed the doctor not to answer. He opened his satchel, took out a thermometer and his stethoscope. Iossif motioned him to come closer, 'Not in front of my lovely nurse, Boris!' 'You don't know how scarce the good nurses had become recently,' countered Boris, but asked Mitzi to leave.

His fears were confirmed few minutes later - it was undoubtedly a pneumonia, hopefully one-sided for the moment and would not be so grave, if not for the age of his patient and his fragile blood vessels. The doctor wrote a prescription for penicillin, called Mitzi and gave instructions. Boris said he would try to find a nurse to stay with Iossif, but was not overly optimistic. The town was swept by a black wave of infections. The hospital was bursting at the seams, he had called every one available already. Iossif would need injections every six hours after the one he administered and a round a clock attention. Mitzi said she would learn to do whatever needed to be done, but Boris was concerned about her also, she was four months ahead and it

would drain her as well. The young woman did not want to listen. Boris wearily gave her the instructions and went to catch few hours of sleep, but cautioned the young woman to call him if the things went unexpected.

Martha arrived and was met by the pale Mitzi, who filled her in, sent her to look after sleeping lossif, hastily put her coat and speeded to the pharmacy. From there the young woman hurried to the grocery and bought some fruits that might entice his appetite as well as a pack of every cough lozenges that she could find. She ran home and dropped everything in the kitchen, then washed her hands and went to see lossif. He was developing the fever that Boris had warned against and Martha went to bring water and vinegar for compresses. The housekeeper looked at the lines of fatigue etched on the young woman's face and insisted that she had to have some proper sleep herself. Housework could wait. Mitzi agreed and went to her bed, but when Boris showed for the next injection, she was sitting again at lossif's bedside, changing the washcloth on his forehead. The cough was not lessening and his handkerchief was pink with blood. The doctor contemplated hospitalization, but the conditions at the hospital were worse at the moment. Nada would come for the next dose of antibiotic; he assured them and left for the hospital.

The hours trickled by. Martha had sent Mitzi for some food and sleep again in the afternoon and had called her son to tell him that she would spend the night at lossif's. The professor was trying to sleep, but the cough did not let him for long and the antibiotics seemed not to have much of effect. Mitzi determinedly was trying to feed him chicken soup and then fruit puree by a teaspoon then some tea then the juice of a black radish with sugar, then the tincture of onion shells and walnuts with honey, then quince seeds infusion. Nada came, give lossif his shot, but did not stay long as it was the night before Christmas and she had to prepare a lot of things for the family celebration. Martha took watch again, trying to convince lossif to drink some hot lemonade, then changed his soaked sheets. He felt weaker and the usual healthy color of his face was replaced by waxy paleness. The housekeeper had the urge to go and summon the local priest, but it was up to Mitzi as his wife to decide about such move. It would tell him that they were preparing for the worst. Looking at the professor's dry lips Martha clasped her hands in prayer. How would the young woman cope with his death? And of all times, just before Christmas! The priest always said that the people who died on God's birthday and on Easter would go directly to Heaven, but that was for the dead and the living

remained on Earth to cry over them no matter where their souls went. The housekeeper looked at the thermometer again, the red line was passing the last digit on the scale.

Before she went to bed, Mitzi prayed for guidance. She felt that the antibiotics and liquids were just part of the cure. She needed to find the rest of it, the key ingredient that she was missing. It was unthinkable that Iossif would die, she refused even to contemplate it, as if her thoughts could somehow slip downstairs and cause more harm. The young woman was tired and the moment her head touched the pillow, she fell asleep. First her dreams were jumbled fragments of memories - Orient Express, her wedding dress, the chrysanthemums all over Sveta Nedelia, Iossif smiling in front of Saint Sophia, the dim light of Grand Bazaar, Iossif slipping the ring on her finger, or it was not Iossif and it was not even her, but a man was slipping the ring on a woman's finger and it was not fitting and the hand of the woman looked lifeless, the sun over Taxim Square, Iossif giving her Anna's pearls, the door on the ancient Istanbul city wall opening to nowhere. At once the picture froze, out of the door came Anna, young and beautiful like on her portrait, and glided towards Mitzi over an invisible path. The woman was smiling; she was dressed in flaming red and was wearing her pearls, her curly blond hair flowing in the invisible breeze. She stopped close to Mitzi, who was sitting with a book in hand at what appeared to be a shore.

'It is not his time yet, my dear, and I told him so, but he does not want to listen! You go and tell him, it may work!' said the woman in red.

'Will you help me?' asked Mitzi in the dream.

'I will do my best; I will be close and will watch you both.'

Then Anna smiled again and went back to the wall and Mitzi woke up with a gasp. She jumped and ran to the bathroom. The reflection in the mirror had nothing to do with the elegance of the image in her dream. If she should fight, she needed proper attire. Her red dress was in the wardrobe, ready, and she quickly put it on, then brushed her hair and tied it with a ribbon. Mitzi went to the safe and took her pearls from there, then looked at the portrait but did not replace it at the wall. 'Wait!' she whispered, then she went to send Martha to get some rest herself. It was almost nine in the evening.

The housekeeper looked at her dress and the pearls and her hand flew over her mouth, 'You are going out now?'

'No, Mrs. Vassileva, I am not, but I don't want to frighten Professor Spassov when he wakes up if I look like a hurie. He may get a wrong message.'

'He is not doing well. Do you want me to go call the priest - it is late but he will come.'

'No, thank you, I am sure he will not be needed as the professor will turn the corner tonight.'

The assurance of Mitzi's voice made Martha tremble. She had never seen her young mistress like that, calm, concentrated and self-confident. If only she could transfer a piece of her strength to the professor, might be he had a chance to pull through. Sometimes best help was not to meddle; Martha thought and went to sleep in the spare bedroom on the second floor.

Soon the house was quiet again. Mitzi looked at the sleeping lossif and tiptoed to the wall across from his bed. She took off the beautiful seaside picture and put it aside. The young woman brought Anna's portrait and hung it on the vacant hook. Then she sat down on the chair next to lossif night table and waited.

The sharp coughing sound startled her. lossif had propped on his elbow and was trying to stifle it with his handkerchief. All of a sudden, the grey ashes in his eyes turned to life coals and he gasped, 'Anna!'

'Plain old Mitzi, I am afraid.'

'I know who you are, child, but why did you bring her?' The cough returned with vengeance.

Mitzi supported him until he stopped shuddering, then smiled, 'I thought it would be better if we both watch after you. According to her, it is not your time to go kick the flowers yet, but you will not listen. The two of us will team to make you listen.'

That time the sound stretching lossif's lungs was not a cough. He was actually laughing, despite the piercing pain in his side. He took another handkerchief from the supply ready on his night table and wiped his eyes. The effort was too taxing and he lay back on his pillow. Mitzi hovered, 'What would you like me to do to make it better?'

'Bring two more pillows and you may read me a fairytale.'

The young woman did not argue. Iossif accepted few sips of tea and laid back again. Mitzi took the book of fairytales that was in his night stand drawer and opened it on her lap. She took his hand in her and started reading. The more she read, the less he coughed. When the nurse that Boris had arranged for arrived shortly after midnight, Iossif was breathing easier. He even smirked at the look she threw at Mitzi in her evening dress and pearls, obviously thinking that the trophy wife had been partying while her husband was dying. He was not dying, his time was not up. Both Anna and Mitzi had told him, so who was he to argue? Mitzi saw off the nurse and returned to his bedroom with another fairytale book. She took his hand again and went on reading, infusing as much emotions as she could into the ancient texts. The blond woman on the portrait looked alive in the tender light of the night stand lamp that had been hers several decades before. The man in bed looked at her and a smile ghosted his lips.

Shortly before dawn the bone tired Boris returned home, but saw the light at Iossif's bedroom and decided to pay his visit half an hour earlier. He blinked several times at Mitzi who was still clad in red, the curtain of glossy black hair covering her shoulders. She was as pale as the pearls she still wore. For an instant Boris thought like the nurse that she had gone partying but immediately rebuffed himself. Nobody had seen Mitzi at a party since her marriage, why should she start going now? The young woman let him in and led him upstairs, but stopped in front of Iossif's bedroom.

'He is asleep!' she said happily. In his mind, the doctor had a flash of the image of Iossif asleep in the final way, but shook it off. Mitzi was not callous. He entered inaudibly. Iossif was indeed sleeping, the sound sleep of healing instead of the rugged slumber of the previous day. It was nothing short of miracle - at the hospital Boris' patients, much younger than the professor, were dying in droves, the doctor had spent half the night writing protocols. He had been thinking to call whether to send the nurse at all for the midnight call, but had decided not to tempt fate. He was glad he had not - the patient was showing dramatic improvement. Iossif coughed and woke up, looked at Boris and pretended to whinge, 'Again someone with needle aimed at my poor flesh, and all my life I had been told that the devil comes with a pitchfork!'

'Well, I hope you will not find soon what the fellow with the hooves comes with as you have definitely made a progress, but remember you are not out of the woods yet. The antibiotics should continue for at least eight more days and I expect you are not going to run to the university as soon as you feel tad better. I expect

that your fever may return tonight, but you have to follow what you have done and it should not be as bad. Call me if there is a difference.'

The afternoon injection was done by Nada again, Boris stopped by for the evening one, lossif remained in bed, but the coughing decreased and there was no more blood in it. Yet Mitzi could not shake a bad feeling, despite professor's improvement. She slept most of the morning and some of the afternoon when Martha took her place at the patient's bedside, then the housekeeper left promising to be as early as possible the next morning. Riste showed and got a tin of cookies, but was not allowed to visit lossif in order not to catch the bug himself. It was Christmas and the rare pedestrians were trying to get home as fast as possible under the heavy gray skies.

The thermometer was showing a steady increase just as Boris had warned, but it did not seem to be bad at first. With some patient coaxing, lossif had managed to eat a bowl of chicken soup and to drink another mug of herbal tea, this time St. John's Wort with honey. Around nine however professor's temperature skyrocketed. Mitzi was changing his compresses every few minutes, wiping his hands, but soon his pajamas were soaked and his eyes were getting a glaze. The red fluid in the small glass thermometer shot by figures that were just not possible. Mitzi remembered how when she had been a tiny one and had got a bad fever, her grandma had enveloped her in a wet sheet. She would not be able to wrap lossif entirely, but the top half should be better than nothing. Mitzi pulled out two dry pajamas' tops, brought a clean set of sheets and a spare one, then run to the bathroom for a basin of cold water. She dropped the spare sheet in it and unbuttoned lossif's top. She tugged on one sleeve to take it off and froze in horror looking at his bare chest.

A monstrous scar was clearly visible even in the night shade's soft light. A cross that started few inches under the hollow of his throat and went down almost to his navel and crossed his chest just under his nipples. It was an old mark, the skin stitched together with tens of stitches, their minuscule marks like pearly beads on both sides of the cuts that had healed remarkably well, neatly together, no jugged parts. Someone had sliced twice only, swift cuts without mercy. Someone had spent hours and hours patching it together. It

did not resemble anything like an operation, the scar looked exactly like someone had tried to mark lossif with the sign of the cross, but had held a knife in hand.

Mitzi bit her lip savagely to stop her hands from trembling and continued with her task. She wrapped lossif in the wet sheet again and again and tried to spoon some cold water in his mouth. He swallowed convulsively and she kept spooning until the cup was empty. She lost count of the time, but did not give up. Gradually, the sheet started getting hot slower and lossif had swallowed another cup of water. The fever had lost its force and was retreating. Mitzi was afraid that she might have overdone it, so she dressed lossif in a dry top and changed the sheets. It took a lot of time, as the professor was a big man and he was tittering on the fine line of conscious and unconscious, too weak to help her, but she finally managed. His breathing was getting back to normal, the cough almost gone as if it had been burned away by the fever. The young woman restocked the stove and went to open the window for some fresh air. Blast of cold made her conscious of the fact that her own blouse was soaked wet. She closed the window and thought about going upstairs to change, but she was exhausted and did not want to leave lossif alone. Mitzi scooped all the discarded sheets and the soaked pajama and brought them to the bathroom. Wearily she returned and picked the second pajama top, went to the bathroom and changed. She checked the professor's temperature again and the results were encouraging, he had fought the fever and won. Mitzi pulled the big armchair closer to the bed, held lossif's hand and struggled to stay awake.

The silence of the house was deafening when Martha entered at the first signs of dawn. She passed the kitchen which looked unused since the previous day and hurried upstairs without bothering to unbutton her coat. Nobody answered her quiet knock at lossif's bedroom door. The housekeeper pushed and stopped instantly. The night shade was still on helped by the gray light sipping through the windows. lossif slept, his breathing even, safe for an occasional snore. Curled in the armchair, Mitzi slept dressed in her skirt from the previous day and lossif's monogrammed pajama's top. Black strands which had escaped from her plate were streaked over pale material. One of her hands was curled under her cheek. The other was firmly clutching lossif's right hand.

A quick glance at his wristwatch told Boris that it was time for the new shift to take care of the hospital and him to go home. The evening had been busy and he had operated almost until two in the morning, followed by some other troubles that he did not want to recall. The doctor took off his uniform, put his coat on and took his satchel. At the triage he discussed the most urgent cases with his assistant who was taking charge and left. He thought that a walk would do him a lot of good, but was tired and hailed a cab. Few minutes ride and he was fumbling for his keys. Out of habit he looked at the still dark house of Lambri and stiffened. He had forgotten to send a nurse for Iossif's injection at midnight! It had flown completely out of his mind, such thing had not happened to him in ages. He almost ran to Iossif's house where the bedroom window and the kitchen were lit up and pushed the bell button. Martha opened the door still in her coat, her eyes swimming, and pressed her index finger to her mouth, as if Boris was making too much noise. She motioned for him to follow and he did, stopping only to discard his galoshes. The doctor pushed the bedroom door open and looked at the scene there. He heard sniff then rustle when Martha was fishing for a handkerchief, but did not trust his face to turn to her.

Under the two intense gazes trained at them, Iossif stirred then opened his eyes. They were clear and lucid. He scanned the room, took in the presence of Martha and Boris and tugged at his wife's hand, 'Mitzi, we have visitors!'

The young woman jumped immediately, the sleep seeping from her red eyes like sand in an hourglass. She blushed at the sight of the housekeeper and the doctor and tried to smooth the hair out of her face. One look at the pajama top that she was wearing and her blush deepened. Iossif patted the hand still clutching his, 'I believe the consilium will excuse your absence while you change. Anyway I suspect that Boris came with a needle again if he could not find a pitchfork...'

To the surprise of everyone, Iossif not only turned the corner, but did it at high speed. Even Boris was amazed by the progress - long before the last shot of penicillin was administered, Iossif was working in his study and refused to stay in bed except that his afternoon nap sometimes gradually melted into a night sleep. His two assistants came to discuss the exams as Boris in no nonsense tones forbade him to go to the university himself. After the holidays Mitzi returned to school for the classes but was coming to study at

home. If Martha had been fond of her young mistress before, after the night of Christmas she was worshipping her and tried her best to spoil the future mom with her favorite dishes and sweets. The exams started one by one and Mitzi was passing flying colors not because she was Mrs. Spassova but because her husband's fellow professors were pleasantly surprised by her knowledge. For the short vacation after the exams Iossif rented a villa at Chamkoriya where they spent the time reading in front of the fire and making short walks in the crystal clean air. Mitzi's frame started growing round in the middle, but it was visible only when she was not wearing her coat.

The new semester started and upon his doctor's insistence Iossif cut down his classes. He was going to the university three times a week instead of the customary six and spent the newly acquired free time in his study, preparing Mitzi's individual program for the autumn. She had insisted that she felt fine and as her due date was in June, she would be able to finish the semester full scale. Iossif usually walked her to the university in the morning "to keep in form" as he insisted. There was a gnawing feeling in his gut that something was not right. The streets were covered with murky snow that kept melting and falling again, there were days of fog thickly laced with soot and smoke, but it was not the elements that bothered the old man. He had the creepy feeling that something was lurking at the corners, something eminently dangerous that he had missed. He tried to caution Mitzi about it, but she thought he was just being overprotective in view of her condition. Maybe he was turning into mother hen, but some nagging feeling still bothered him.