SNOWSTORM

*Horses tear across the hillocks,  
Hoofing the deep snow…  
Further off - a house of God  
Standing all alone.  
………………………………….  
Suddenly, a snowstorm round  
And the snow flocks falling;  
A black crow with whistling wings  
Over sledges twirling;*

*Vatic groan predicts the sorrow!  
Horses in unrest  
Keenly peer into the dark*

*Raising their crests…  
  
Vasily Zhukovsky*

At the end of the year 1811, in an epoch memorable for us, the good Gavrila Gavrilovich R\*\* lived in his Nenaradovo manor. He was famous in the area for his warm hospitality and kindliness. His neighbours constantly visited him to eat, to drink, to spend five kopecks playing Boston with his wife Praskovya Petrovna; and some of them - to cast a look at their beautiful daughter Marya Gavrilovna, a slender pale seventeen-year-old girl. She was considered a rich match, and many a man thought she was meant for him or one of his sons.

Marya Gavrilovna was raised on French romance novels, and hence she was in love. Her love object was a poor army officer who was on leave in his home village. It goes without saying that the young gentleman was enflamed with passion of the same measure, but the parents of his dear, having noticed their mutual attraction, forbade their daughter even to think about him and hosted him worse than if he was a retired assessor.

Our lovers were in correspondence and saw each other daily in a pine grove or near an old chapel. There they swore eternal love to each other, mourned their unhappy lot and speculated about their options. Corresponding and conversing in such a manner they (quite naturally) came to the following point: if we cannot breathe without each other, and the will of cruel parents interferes with our happiness, can we do without it? Needless to say, this blissful idea came first to the young gentleman’s mind and was highly appreciated by Marya Gavrilovna’s romantic imagination.

The winter came and ended their rendezvous; but it made their correspondence more vivid. In each of his letters Vladimir Nikolaevich begged her to devote herself to him, to wed secretly, suggested they hide for some time, and then to throw themselves at parents’ feet. Of course, the parents would be finally touched by heroic consistency and moved by the unhappiness of the lovers, would definitely say: «Children! Fall into our arms!».

Marya Gavrilovna hesitated for a long while; multiple escape variants were rejected. Eventually she gave her consent: at the appointed date she would not dine and would recess to her room under the pretence of having a headache. Her maid participated in the conspiracy; they would both go to the yard through the back porch, find a prearranged sledge there, sit in it and go five versts from Nenaradovo to the Zhadrino village, directly to a church where Vladimir would be waiting for them.

On the eve of the designated day Marya Gavrilovna was up all night long; she packed her suitcases, embalmed her garments and underclothing. She wrote a long letter for one sentimental young lady friend of hers, and another one - for her parents. She said good-bye to them using the most appealing expressions, justified her behaviour with the compelling power of passion and finally stated that she would consider the most blithesome moment of her life the one when she will be allowed to throw herself to her dearest parents’ feet. Having sealed both letters with wax seal depicting two flaming hearts with a corresponding inscription, she collapsed on her bed right before the dawn and dozed off; but terrifying dreams woke her every minute. She dreamed that the minute she sat into the sledge to go to wed, her father stopped her, dragged her in the snow with cruel agility and locked her up in a dark bottomless dungeon… And she dreamt she was falling rapidly with a mysterious sinking feeling in her heart. Now she dreamt of Vladimir lying on the grass, pale and bleeding. Dying, he begged her with a strident voice to wed him as soon as possible… Other disgusting dull images appeared in her mind one by one. Finally she got up, much paler than usual and with a true headache. Her father and mother noticed her unrest; their tender care and continual questions - What’s wrong with you, Masha? Are you sick, Masha? - tore her heart apart. She tried to reassure them, to make herself look happy, but she could not. Her heart was constrained with the thought that it was the last time she would spend the day among her family. She felt half dead; she was secretly saying good-bye to everyone and everything around her. The dinner was served; her heart started beating rapidly. In a trembling voice she claimed that she did not want to dine, and began her leave-taking from her father and mother. They kissed and routinely blessed her: she was almost crying. On entering her room she flung herself into an armchair and burst into tears. Her maid was trying to calm her and cheer her up. Everything was ready. In half an hour Masha should have left everything behind: her parents’ home, her room, her uneventful maidenly life… There was a snowstorm outside; the wind was whistling, the shutters were shaking and rattling; everything seemed to be a threat and a foreboding. Soon it became quiet in the house, everyone fell asleep. Masha put on her shawl and warm overcoat, took her vanity case and went to the back porch. The maid behind her was carrying two bundles. They went into the garden. The snowstorm would not subside; the wind was blowing from the opposite direction, as if trying to stop the villany. They could hardly pass through the garden. The sledge was already waiting for them on the road. Feeling the cold, the horses would not stand still; Vladimir’s driver was walking about the shafts, restraining the stubborn animals. He helped the young lady and her maid to seat themselves and to place the bundles and the vanity case. Then he took the reins, and the horses tore off. But let us entrust the young lady to the hands of fate and the art of Tereshka the driver; and let us turn to our young lover.

Vladimir spent the whole day traveling around. In the morning he visited a priest from Zhadrino; he hardly succeeded in arranging everything with him; then he went to look for the groomsmen among the local landowners. The first person he came to, a retired fourty-year-old cornet Dravin, yielded a ready consent. He claimed that this adventure reminded him of the good old times and hussar pranks. He persuaded Vladimir to stay for lunch and assured him that there would be no problem finding two more witnesses. Really and truly, just after the lunch came field surveyor Schmidt (in his moustache and spurs) and the district captain’s son (a sixteen-year-old boy who had just entered military service as a lancer). Not only did they agree to Vladimir’s request, but also swore that they were ready to give their lives for him. Vladimir embraced them enthusiastically and went to his house to get prepared.   
  
It had been growing dark quite a while. He sent the trustworthy Tereshka to Nenaradovo with a troika and with very detailed instructions. He asked for a small sledge with only one horse to be prepared for himself, and departed to Zhadrino alone. Marya Gavrilovna should arrive there in two hours. He knew the way, and it would take him only twenty minutes.

But just as he passed the outskirts of his village and reached the fields, the wind rose up; it was such a strong snowstorm that he could not see anything. The snow covered the road in one minute; the surroundings disappeared in a foggy and yellowish mist, through which white snowflakes were falling; the sky and the land became one. Vladimir found himself in a field and failed to come back to the road; the horse was stepping randomly and all the time it was either climbing the snowbanks or falling into drifts; the sledge was being constantly overturned. All Vladimir was trying to do was not to lose the way. But it seemed to him that it had been more than half an hour, yet he had not reached the Zhadrino grove. Ten more minutes passed and there was still no sight of the grove. Vladimir was in a field of deep ravines. The snowstorm would not subside, the sky would not brighten. The horse was getting tired, he was streaming in sweat despite being waist-deep in the snow.

At last he saw that he was going in the wrong direction. Vladimir stopped: he started thinking, recalling, realizing - then he was sure that he should have turned right. So he went to the right. His horse was barely moving. He had been traveling for more than an hour by now. But he was sleighing and sleighing, and the field seemed to be endless. It was just snowbanks and ravines; the sledge was constantly being overturned; he was constantly straightening it. The time ticked by; Vladimir was becoming extremely worried.

Finally something black appeared in the distance. Vladimir turned there. Getting closer he saw a grove. Thank God, he thought, I am close now. He went around the grove, hoping to find the right path or to circle the grove, as Zhadrino was located just behind it. Soon he found the way and entered the gloom of trees undressed by the winter. The wind could not storm in there; the road was smooth, the horse cheered up, and Vladimir was reassured.

But he was sleighing and sleighing, and still could not seed Zhadrino; this grove seemed to be endless. Terrified, Vladimir realized that he had entered an unfamiliar forest. He was overwhelmed by despair. He lashed the horse: the poor animal speeded to a trot, but it quickly felt tired, and within a quarter of an hour it had slowed to walking pace despite all Vladimir’s efforts.

Little by little the forest began to thin, and Vladimir got out of it; he could not see Zhadrino. It must have been midnight. Tears flowed from his eyes; he was going blindly.  The weather inclined fair, the clouds were parting, in front of him there was a plain covered by a white billowy carpet. The night was quite clear. Not far away he saw a small village consisting of four or five farms. Vladimir headed towards it. Next to the first hut he jumped out of the sledge, ran to the window and started knocking. After some minutes a wooden shutter opened and an old man showed his grey beard. «Whatcha doin’ here?» - «Is Zhadrino far away from here?» - «If Zhadrino’s far away?» - «Yes, yes! Is it far away?» - «Not a far cry; sort of ten versts». This answer made Vladimir clutch his head. He was motionless, like someone sentenced to death.

«So where’re ye from?» asked the old man.   
Vladimir did not have the nerve to answer any questions.   
«Old man, can you provide me with horses to get to Zhadrino?» - he asked.   
«Nah, not likely, no horses» was the response.   
«Can I at least have a guide? I will pay as much as he wishes».   
«Wait, I’ll send m’son with ye, he’ll guide you», said the old man closing the shutter.  
Vladimir was waiting. In less than a minute he started knocking again. The shutter opened, he saw the beard.  
«Whatcha want?».  
«What about your son?».  
«He comes now, gettin’ his shoes on. Maybe you’re cold? C’mon, come inside, get warmed».  
«Thank you, no, send your son quickly».  
  
The gates creaked; a boy came out with a big stick and marched ahead, showing the way through the snowbanks. «What time is it?», asked Vladimir. «’Tis almost dawn», the young man replied. Vladimir did not say a word anymore.  
  
The cocks were crowing and the day broke as they reached Zhadrino. The church was closed. Vladimir paid his guide and left to the priest’s house. The priest’s troika was not in the yard. He was about to find out some dreadful news!

But let us go back to the good Nenaradovo landlords and see what is going on there.  
  
Nothing, actually.

The parents woke up and went to the drawing room. Gavrila Gavrilovich was wearing a cap and a flannelette jacket, Praskovya Petrovna was dressed in a cottonwool Schlafrock. The samovar was served, and Gavrila Gavrilovich sent the maid to ask Marya Gavrilovna about her health and whether she had slept well. The girl came back saying that Marya Gavrilovna had not slept well, but was feeling a little better and would come down to the drawing room momentarily. Indeed, the door opened, and Marya Gavrilovna came to greet Mama and Papa.

«How is your head, Masha?», Gavrila Gavrilovich asked.   
«It is better, Papa», Masha replied.   
«You must have overheated yesterday, Masha», said Praskovya Petrovna.  
«Perhaps, Mama», Masha replied.

The day went well, but that night Masha fell ill. A doctor was called from town the next day. And when he came that evening, he found the poor patient in a severe fever, and she spent the following two weeks at death’s door.

No-one in the house knew about the intended elopement. The letters she had written were burnt; her maid would never reveal anything, fearing her masters’ anger. The priest, the retired cornet, the moustached field surveyor and the little lancer were silent, and not without reason. Tereshka the driver always had a controlled tongue, even with wine. Thus, the secret of the love affair was kept by more than half a dozen plotters. But it was Marya Gavrilovna who was constantly letting out her secret in her fever. However, her words were so preposterous that her mother, always at her daughter’s bedside, could only understand that she was deeply in love with Vladimir Nikolaevich and that probably love was the reason for her illness. She consulted her husband and some neighbours, and finally it was unanimously decided that «when a man becomes your fate, to make a choice is too late», that «poverty is no vice», that «you live with a person, not with his money» and so on. Moral sayings can be wonderfully useful when we cannot invent a suitable excuse for ourselves.  
  
In the meantime, the young lady’s health was improving. Vladimir had not visited Gavrila Gavrilovich’s house for a long time. He was afraid of even the most ordinary of visits. He was duly invited to hear the unexpected, but happy news: the family’s consent to marriage! One can imagine the Nenaradovo landowners’ astonishment when in response to their invitation, they received from him a letter bordering on madness! He claimed that he would never set foot in their house, and asked them to forget the miserable man whose only hope now was death. Several days later the news came that Vladimir had joined the army. It was in the year 1812.

For a long time they did not dare announce it to recovering Masha. She never mentioned Vladimir. Several months later, having found his name among those distinguished and wounded in the battle of Borodino[[1]](#footnote-1), she fell unconscious. Everyone feared that her fever might return. However, thank God, the collapse had no consequences.

There was another grief for her: Gavrila Gavrilovich passed away, making her the heiress of the whole estate. But the inheritance would not console her; she sincerely shared poor Praskovya Petrovna’s woe: she swore she would never leave her. They both left Nenaradovo, a place of sorrowful memories, and moved to the \*\*\*skoe manor.

Here the lovely wealthy heiress was also surrounded by bachelors, but she would not give the slightest hope to any of them. Sometimes her mother tried to persuade her to choose an admirer; Marya Gavrilovna would shake her head and fall to thinking. Vladimir no longer existed: he died in Moscow shortly before the French invasion. The memory of him seemed to be sacred to Masha; at least, she kept everything that could remind her of him: some books he used to read, his drawings, music-sheets and poems that he had copied for her. Having learnt the whole story, the neighbours wondered at the permanence of her feelings for Vladimir; they curiously awaited a hero who was bound to triumph over the sad faithfulness of this virgin Artemisia.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the meantime, the war was gloriously over. Our regiments were back from abroad. People greeted them. The music played the songs of the conquered ones: Vive Henri-Quatre, Tirolean waltzes and the *Joconde[[3]](#footnote-3)* arias. Officers, who had joined the campaign almost as adolescents, returned mature from their time on the battlefields, now bedecked with heroes’ crosses. The soldiers talked to each other merrily, constantly adding German and French words to their speech. What a memorable time! The time of glory and delight! Russian hearts were beating so rapidly when hearing the word *motherland*! The tears of reunion were so sweet! We solidly combined the national pride and the love towards the sovereign. And for him it was such a great moment!

Women, the Russian women became incomparable. Their habitual coldness faded away. Their delight was truly ravishing, when, while greeting the victors, they shouted *hurray!*

*And threw their bonnets in the air.*

Would not any of the officers of that time admit that they were indebted to the Russian women for their best, more precious rewards?..

During that brilliant time Marya Gavrilovna was living in the \*\*\* province with her mother, and would not see both capitals celebrating the return of the troops. But the universal delight was probably even stronger in villages and parishes. A sight of an officer there was a true festivity, and gallant bachelors wearing dress suits would feel wrong next to him.

It has already been mentioned that despite her coldness, Marya Gavrilovna was still surrounded by contenders. But everyone had to retract when a wounded Hussar colonel Burmin appeared in her manor: he had a Saint George’s Cross in his buttonhole and was *interestingly pale,* as the local young ladies would say. He was about twenty-six years old and on leave in his estate which was located next to Marya Gavrilovna’s village. She really distinguished him from others. In his presence her habitually pensive mood became livelier. This is not to say that she coquetted with him, but describing her behavior a poet would say:

Se amor non è, che dunque?..[[4]](#footnote-4)

Burmin was a very nice young man indeed. He had precisely the kind of mind that women like: a mind of decency and observation, without any pretensions or reckless mocking. His behaviour towards Marya Gavrilovna was simple and free; but whatever she said or did, his glance would follow her. He seemed to be of quiet and modest temper, but rumours had it, that at one time he used to be terribly prodigal. However, it would not influence Marya Gavrilovna’s attitude towards him, as she (just like all young ladies in general) kindly pardoned tricks that exposed a brave or ardent disposition.

But above all (above his tenderness, above a cheerful conversation, above the interesting paleness, above the bandaged arm) - it was the young Hussar’s silence that incited her curiosity and imagination above all. She had to admit that he liked her very much; presumably, given his wit and experience he could also notice that she favoured him: then how could it be that she had not seen him at her feet and had not heard his confession yet? What restrained him? Was it shyness which always accompanies true love, or was it pride, or was it the coquetry of a sly philanderer? It was a mystery to her. Having done some serious thinking, she decided that the only reason it could be, was his shyness, so she decided to encourage him with greater attentiveness and tenderness, as the occasion might demand. She was prepared for the most unexpected outcome and edgily waited for the moment of his romantic declaration. A secret of any kind is always burdensome for a woman’s heart. Her warlike strategy was successful as intended; at least, Burmin plunged into such a reverie, and his black eyes looked at Marya Gavrilovna with such shine, that the defining moment seemed to be coming. The neighbours were talking about their wedding as if it had already happened, and the kind Praskovya Petrovna was happy that her daughter had finally found a suitable match.

One day the old lady was sitting alone in the drawing room playing grande-patience, when Burmin walked into the room and immediately enquired after Marya Gavrilovna. «She is in the garden», replied the old lady; «go to her, and I will be waiting for you here». Burmin went out, and the old lady blessed herself and thought that maybe it would be done this day.

Burmin found Marya Gavrilovna sitting next to the pond, under a willow, with a book in her hands, wearing a white dress - just like a heroine of a romance novel. After several questions, Marya Gavrilovna deliberately stopped engaging in the conversation, which resulted in an intense mutual confusion, and the only way to get rid of this awkwardness was a sudden resolute confession. So it happened: Burmin, feeling the difficulty of the situation, declared that for a long time he had been waiting for an occasion to bare his heart to her, and asked her for her attention. Marya Gavrilovna closed her book and lowered her eyes signifying her consent.

«I love you», - said Burmin, - «I love you passionately…». (Marya Gavrilovna blushed and tilted her head even lower).

«I acted carelessly abandoning myself to a sweet habit, to a habit of seeing and hearing you daily…». (Marya Gavrilovna recalled the first St.-Preux letter[[5]](#footnote-5)).

«Now it is too late to resist my fate; the memory of you, the dear, inimitable image of you will henceforth become the agony and the joy of my life; but I still have to perform a painful duty, to reveal a terrible secret to you, to create an invincible obstacle between us…».

«It has always existed», Marya Gavrilovna interrupted him dramatically, «I could never be your wife…».

«I know», he replied quietly, «I know that you loved once, but death and three years of lamentation… Dear, darling Marya Gavrilovna! Please do not deprive me of my last consolation: the thought that you would agree to make me happy, if… Be silent, for God’s sake, be silent! You are tormenting me. Yes, I know, I feel that you would be mine, but I am the unhappiest creature… I am married!».

Marya Gavrilovna looked at him in surprise.  
«I am married», continued Burmin, «I am married for almost four years, and I do not know who my wife is, or where she is, and whether I will ever meet her again!».  
«What are you saying?», exclaimed Marya Gavrilovna, «It is so strange! Go on; I will explain afterwards… But please, you go on».  
«In the beginning of the year 1812», said Burmin, «I was speeding to Vilna, where our regiment was accommodated. Having arrived at the station one evening, I had just ordered the horses to be harnessed as quickly as possible, when a terrible snowstorm rose, and the superintendent and the coachmen told me to wait. I listened to them, but an inexplicable unrest overwhelmed me; it seemed to me that someone was pushing me. In the meantime, the snowstorm would not cease; I could wait no longer, so I ordered again that the horses be harnessed, and I departed at the peak of the storm. The coachman decided to go along the river which would shorten our way by three versts. The banks were covered with snow; the coachman went past the turn we needed, so we found ourselves in unfamiliar surroundings. The storm was relentless; I saw a light ahead and ordered we go there. We came to a village; the light was coming from a wooden church. The church was open, there were several sleighs behind the fence; people were walking on the porch. «Here, here!», several voices were shouting. I told the coachman to come closer. «Beg your pardon, sir, where have you been?», someone said to me, «the bride is unconscious, the priest does not know what to do; we almost went back. Come here, quickly!». I left the sleigh without saying a word and entered the church which was poorly lit by two, maybe three candles. A young lady was sitting on a bench in the darkest corner of the church, another one was massaging her temples. «Thank God», she said, «you finally came. You almost became the death of milady». The old priest approached me and asked if we should begin. «Yes, please, father, let us begin», I replied absent-mindedly. The young lady was made stand up. She seemed quite pretty to me… Inexplicable, indefensible thoughtlessness… I stood next to her in front of the altar; the priest was in a hurry; three men and a maid were holding the bride and were engaged with her only. We were married. We were told to kiss each other. My wife turned her pale face to me. I wanted to kiss her… She cried: «Ah, it is not him, it is not him!», and fell into a faint. The witnesses looked at me in terror. I turned around, left the church without impediment, sat into the tilt cart and shouted: «Go!».

«Oh my God!», shouted Marya Gavrilovna, «and you do not know what happened to your poor wife?».

«I do not know», Burmin replied, «I do not know the name of the village where I got married; I do not remember, from which station I departed. At that time I attached such little importance to my shameful trick, that I fell asleep right after leaving the church, and woke up the following morning at the third station. The valet who accompanied me passed away at the time of the campaign, and now I have no hope of ever finding the one whom I hoaxed so cruelly and who is now being cruelly avenged».

«Oh my God, oh my God!», said Marya Gavrilovna grasping his arm, «It was you! And you do not recognize me?».

Burmin grew pale… And threw himself at her feet…

1. The Battle of Borodino, fought on September 7, 1812, was the largest single-day action of the French invasion of Russia in 1812. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Artemisiawas the sister, the wife, and the successor of [Mausolus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mausolus), ruler of [Caria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caria). She is known as a faithful wife desolate in her widowhood. She built a Mausoleum - a tomb for her husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joconde ou Les coureurs d’aventures was a comic opera by Nicolas Isouard successfully performed in Paris in 1814, when the Russian army was present there. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. If it is not love, then what is it? (Italian) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From an epistolary novel «Julie, or the New Heloise» by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1761) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)