

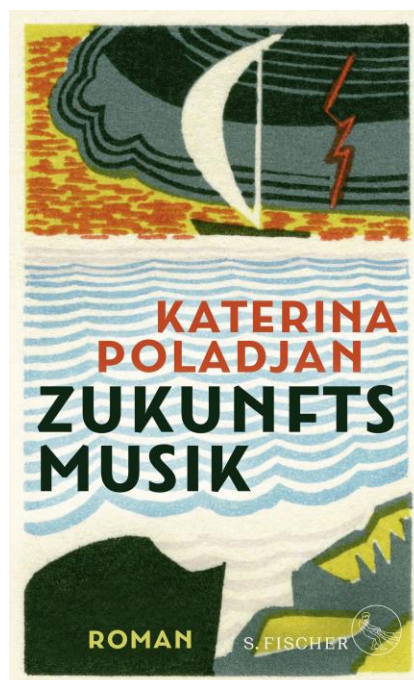
Translated excerpt

Katerina Poladjan
Zukunftsmusik

S.Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2022
ISBN 978-3-10-397102-6

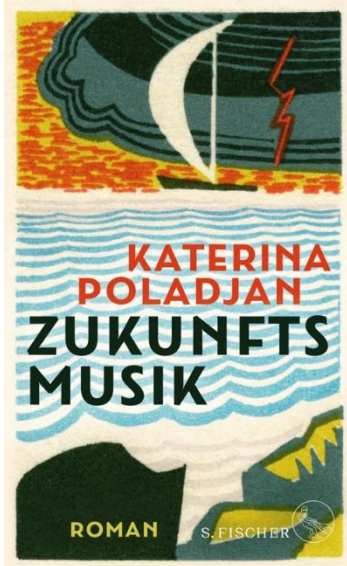
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Katerina Poladjan
Upheaval





S. FISCHER VERLAGE



POLADJAN, KATERINA
ZUKUNFTSMUSIK [Upheaval]

192 pp.

Publication: 23.02.2022

Contact: S. Fischer Verlag
Foreign Rights Department
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Praise for Katerina Poladjan:

“UPHEAVAL is the quintessence of a novel: as powerful and beautiful and clear as thirty novels.” —Monika Rinck

“Strong dialogues, moving portraits. Katerina Poladjan has mastered the art of elision, and yet her novels are all atmosphere.” —Meike Feßmann on **HERE ARE LIONS**

“Katerina Poladjan can do everything: write prose that’s playful, then sharp and clear, and slip into gentle intimacy again. She is many-sided, bold, with a unique and recognizable style.” Felix Palent

[SAMPLE TRANSLATION]

1

One thousand versts—or miles, or kilometers—east of Moscow, the skeletal frame of a radar station, weakly illuminated by the constant beam of light from the lightbulb factory, jutted into the night sky. This March was mild, with temperatures just below zero, and the sandy wasteland was covered with dirty snow. The snow shimmered on the crest of the sharply sloped riverbank, and pale stars were set against the horizon, which made for a pretty sight, and below, Yanka knew, the tar-black river carried everything

1



along in its current, even time itself. Yanka sat down on a tree stump, pulled up the zipper on her parka, and lit a cigarette. Her hand smelled sour, like metal.

At the start of the night shift, the foreman had made an announcement to the workers, raising high a transistor radio that was blaring Chopin's funeral march. *You know what this means*, he'd shouted, and declared that there was no reason to give up—now, more than ever, the Soviet Union needed light.

Two more hours until sunrise. Yanka threw her cigarette away, and watched the embers die in the icy sand.

2

Matvei Alexandrovich woke with a start to the sounds of clattering and scraping in the corridor. He fumbled for the wristwatch on his nightstand, and Gagarin slipped off his chest. It wasn't even five thirty yet. Matvei hoped Yanka wouldn't wake her child straight away, as she usually did after her night shift; the whining would severely disturb his morning rituals. He listened, and stroked Gagarin behind his ears. Over the past year, the old tomcat's fur had lost its luster, and Matvei had feared Gagarin would die, but the cat wouldn't even consider it.

Matvei Alexandrovich stood up and turned on the radio. They were playing the third movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata Number 2, the funeral march. He turned down the volume, positioned himself next to the bed in his underwear, stood on the tips of his toes, ready to begin his daily set of calisthenics—and then little Kroshka began to howl. Matvei sank down on his heels and listened. The child was silent again. There was still a slim chance she hadn't woken everyone up, and they wouldn't appear in the communal kitchen in a few moments. Matvei Alexandrovich threw on his dressing-gown and slippers, cleared his room in two steps, and crept out. He paused briefly in the corridor: in the professor's room, it sounded as if someone were coughing into the bell of a tuba.

A large pot with rice and meat stood on the Karisens' stove. Without bothering to turn on the light, he picked up a spoon and ate directly from the pot. The meat tasted delicate, like chicken. Or was it snake? But where would the Karisens have gotten snake? Even in the summertime, there were only a few sad-looking slow worms in the city park. He ate a few more spoonfuls, wiped his mouth on a threadbare kitchen towel, and looked around the kitchen, which revealed the traces of its aristocratic past in the dim glow of a streetlight.

Six groups of renters lived among these crumbling turn-of-the-century moldings and tried to keep out of each other's way—as much as circumstances would allow. Matvei rarely saw the people who lived in the



rooms at the end of the corridor, the Karisens or the old professor, who lived such an inconspicuous life that Matvei always forgot his name. Midway down the corridor was Liebermann, and next to her—in the largest room of all—were the Kosolapys. Matvei had more to do with the women at the front of the apartment; their room was opposite his.

Matvei Alexandrovich put the spoon into a washtub full of dirty plates and cutlery. The lack of cleanliness was a constant, tedious topic in the kommunalka, but in the end, the Karisens always cleaned up. No one knew when they did it, and no one had ever seen them at work, but sometimes, in the middle of the night, Matvei Alexandrovich thought he could hear the Karisens going about with their dustpan, mop, and broom.

Next door, Yanka was drawing a bath, which would indefinitely postpone his shave.

An electric spark from the overhead wires of the seventeen bus, which was driving past, illuminated the face of Mikhail Potapych Topygin, who lived on the shelf as a coin box. The inhabitants of the kommunalka were supposed to slip a few pennies into the slot between the bear's eyes every week for shared purchases of curd soap and toilet paper. Mikhail Potapych Topygin always had an empty belly, but as if by magic, the supplies were always restocked when necessary. Let that be a lesson to those who complained about their system.

Matvei Alexandrovich looked out. Only one window on the street was illuminated; everyone was still fast asleep. Perhaps, by the glow of a table lamp, two people were entwined on a couch in the throes of love, healthfully groaning and straining, kissing each other until sunrise. Matvei Alexandrovich sighed, then started because his sigh echoed eerily in the kitchen. He sighed again, this time more quietly. He growled a little, grumbled, hummed, hummed more loudly, then sang:

*Martyrs forever,
You fell and you died,
We stand here and mourn you
In heart and in mind,
You fought and you perished
For justice to come
But we, we are mourning
The loss of our sons.*

"Have the martyrs hidden themselves away in our kitchen, dear Matvei Alexandrovich?"

He spun around. Before him stood Maria Nikolayevna, dressed in a pale pink dressing-gown, and he didn't know whether it was a sudden impulse, or the blonde locks which fell down to Maria Nikolayevna's shoulders, blonde locks that she pulled back into a severe bun each day, or



whether it was the collar of her nightgown, which showed beneath the lining of her dressing-gown, but he grasped Maria Nikolayevna by her shoulders and belted the next verse of the song into her face, as if there were no tomorrow:

*One day though,
When freedom for mankind arrives
And finished the longing with which you did strive
Then we will extoll you
And all your brave lives
For the highest of mankind
So we could all thrive.*

“Matvei, calm down. I’ll make us some tea. I have some chocolates too, I was saving them for my mother’s birthday, but you seem to need them rather badly right now.”

“If I’d known that a patriotic song would grant me the pleasure of your company and some chocolates, I would have done so long ago!”

Maria Nikolayevna turned on the light and set to work at her stove. Matvei Alexandrovich examined her ankles, which were visible as a small, white stripe between the hem of her dressing-gown and the fake fur cuffs of her slippers. He let himself sink into a chair. No star or sun had the right to intrude into someone else’s orbit and lead to the unforeseeable consequences that expressed themselves in the dreadful disorder of his thoughts.

“You know, Maria Nikolayevna, every person lives in their own, separate world; that’s a fact and it seems right and fair to me. Now, your daughter Yanka lives in a particularly foreign and distant cosmos, but does that give her the right to be selfish and wake her child when she comes home from her night shift at dawn, which blubbers and cries and rudely awakens the entire kommunalka?”

“Our lives are shit,” said Maria Nikolayevna. She handed Matvei a cup of tea, sat down with him at the table, and bent over the box of chocolates. But then she seemed to realize that this statement, which she enjoyed saying often, was inappropriate in this moment.

She quickly added, “But not for long, because spring will come soon, and the birch trees will have small, green leaves.”

“When it comes to trees, I’ll admit that when you talk about the bark of a mountain ash or an alder tree, or the color of a birch leaf, I feel as though you’re not talking about trees but about me. I’m flattered by how sweetly you talk about the trees, which lead such quiet, noble lives. Let me tell you one more thing, but don’t make fun of me: thirty years ago, my younger self could never have imagined how melancholy I become when I think about those trees.”



Maria Nikolayevna emitted a big, loud, beautiful yawn, got up, took the kettle off the stove, pushed aside the laundry, which hung from several lines that were strung up across the kitchen, and finally asked, lost in thought: "Trees, you say? You're reading too much Turgenev."

A radio was turned on at the far end of the apartment, and the final strains of Chopin's funeral march rang out, then a choir intoned: *Martyrs forever, you fell and you died*. The radio was turned off again.

"Yes, trees," said Matvei Alexandrovich, who suddenly felt very tired. "If you like, I'll take you for a walk in the park next Sunday and show them to you."

"Oh, Matvei, there's no need. Who knows whether the trees aren't in mourning too, and will make for a sad sight."

"What do you mean, dear Maria Nikolayevna?"

"It's clear someone in Moscow has died again. By the way, do you have the time?"

"The time?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost six thirty. I don't think that the trees are in mourning, except for the willows, of course. Elms and birches naturally have a cheerful, lighthearted disposition. Oaks can sometimes be a bit stern, but mourning? We mourned for Stalin, we mourned for Brezhnev—and today?"

Maria Nikolayevna looked at Matvei Alexandrovich for a long time and said nothing. Then she tossed four lumps of sugar into another teacup and stirred it well.

"Your tea, mother."

Varvara Mikhailovna came in, took the tea cup, looked at her daughter and said, "I'm going to die soon."

"Good morning, Varvara Mikhailovna," said Matvei Alexandrovich.

Varvara Mikhailovna grunted in reply and turned back to her daughter.

"Where's Yanka?"

"Taking a bath."

"Of course. What else. She's either bathing or screaming."

"She doesn't scream, she sings."

"And who died? They're playing Chopin."

"Matvei Alexandrovich suspects—"

"As long as no official announcement has been made, I have no suspicions!" bellowed Matvei Alexandrovich with unusual force.

"Well, no matter who died," said Maria Nikolayevna placatingly, "I have to get ready now. See you later."

"Watch out for the Karisens," said Varvara Mikhailovna.

"Watch out yourself."

"Maria Nikolayevna, before you go—your daughter is hogging the bathroom again. We have to do something."



"And what should we do, Matvei? Any suggestions?"

Little Kroshka appeared on the threshold with bare feet. Varvara Mikhailovna put her on her lap and produced a pair of wool socks from her bathrobe.

"You'll catch cold, child! But no one around here cares, my poor angel."

"A man should talk to her. Set her straight, you understand?"

"I do, Matvei Alexandrovich, but you won't be the one to do it."

Maria Nikolayevna pushed past him out the kitchen and knocked loudly on the bathroom door. *Yanka, come out now.* She tried to make her voice sound commanding. They heard Yanka sing a few more bars and swear.

"You see, there's nothing to be done," Maria Nikolayevna called over her shoulder.

3

Yanka raised her left leg out of the lukewarm water and observed her foot, moving it in circles—it was a solid foot. She closed her eyes. *Only five more minutes.* Her limbs were heavy. The shift had felt never-ending, illuminated by thousands of blindingly bright lightbulbs. Screw, check, screw, sort. These night shifts sharpened her awareness in a peculiar way, and Yanka began to find everything meaningless. She remembered that during her break, her colleagues had stood together chatting, and when she'd joined them to smoke a cigarette, they'd quickly glanced at each other and changed the topic. What were they talking about? It didn't matter. Her colleagues didn't matter. The factory didn't matter. She could be weightless, or sad, or stupid and happy. Or she could stop—finally stop—asking herself how she might be, or what she wanted to be, or what the world wanted of her. Was she useful, or could the world get along without her? Her hand moved tentatively to her stomach, her hip, little bubbles rose and burst on the surface. She dove and swam towards the shore, rising up again. They were all there: Pavel, Olga, Emi, Kostya, and Andrey. Emi and Kostya were entwined on a blanket, devouring each other. Olga was reciting a poem by Pasternak, Andrey was watching the shashlik cook over the embers, and Pavel was standing on the shore, keeping a lookout for her.

"Can one of you bastards throw me a towel?" she shouted, standing in the ice-cold water, so cold the fishes had decamped to Africa. Pavel tossed aside his shirt and pants and ran towards her, penis flapping, and wrapped her tight in his arms.

"So you're my towel," she mumbled into the hollow between his neck and collar bone.

"Yes, I am."



Andrey struck an athletic pose with the grill tongs and stuffed an enormous piece of bread roll into his mouth. They were surrounded by shimmering birches, glistening water, and the sharp knowledge that the summer couldn't last forever. With naked Pavel clinging to her, Yanka tried to move from where she stood, and trudged through the grass as if she were skiing on wet snow, step by step.

"You'll break my back!"

She pinched his testicles, and he finally let her go and fell as if dead to the floor. Andrey tossed Yanka's shirt over to her, and grinned.

"What?"

"Shall we sing a song, Yanka?"

"For whom?"

"For us?"

"What song do you want to sing?"

Instead of an answer, he gave her a skewer with burnt onions and fatty meat, and watched her mouth as she chewed. He took the pieces of fat she pushed aside and ate them.

"That's the best stuff, and you spit it out."

Yanka let some more hot water into the bath. It was so wonderful in the belly of the tub. *Dear God, everything is still before me: let me kiss many mouths, and let my songs be heard.*

That evening, she would hold a concert in her kitchen, a kvartirnik, just she and her guitar in front of ten, maybe twenty, people. It would get crowded if that many came, and she still didn't have a decent instrument. A few days ago, Andrey had drunkenly stumbled into her guitar. The body had survived the kick, but the heel had split from the body, and the neck looked like it might become loose soon.

Andrey covered up his embarrassment with a joke, "You ought to thank me, Yanka, it finally sounds like punk music now."

Pavel almost charged at Andrey, Yanka calmed them down, and Andrey quietly slipped away. Pavel promised to get her a new guitar, but each time he'd come back to her with excuses: hard to find, too expensive, not right for you, what happened to Andrey's guitar anyway?

"He misplaced it."

"Doesn't Olga have one?"

"Olga plays the violin."

"Yanka, I promise you'll have a new guitar for your concert."

Pavel even claimed that the famous B.G. had come from Leningrad and wanted to attend her concert. Andrey didn't think much of B.G., called him a sell-out and a traitor because of his western girlfriend, who had allegedly smuggled his recordings to the United States and brought him back a red Stratocaster. Now he could perform with his Stratocaster in the Leningrad



rock club—under the eyes of the KGB, but still in front of an audience and on a proper stage. But those were probably all lies.

Andrey had also told her about a singer named Diaghileva, who only made music for herself and didn't care whether anyone else liked her songs. But this Diaghileva was probably one of the chosen few who roamed the country unafraid, with a burning soul, let herself be arrested, and had torrid love affairs with others in that chosen few. Yanka's soul should burn too, she wanted to burn with love, be loved ardently. Would she have to play the guitar until her fingers were bloody, like Andrey? Would she have to be arrested by the police for disturbing the peace, like Diaghileva? Yanka went to work obediently and sometimes even enjoyed it, because she could forget about the world while checking the lightbulbs and compose her songs to the rhythm of the machines. She would write an unforgettable song by her twenty-first birthday.

The water slowly grew cold. She could hear Kroshka babbling happily. Kroshka, who had only just lain at her breast, amazed her: to think that so much milk could flow out of such small breasts. Once Yanka had woken up at night and felt as though Kroshka wasn't breathing anymore, that she had somehow lost her breath, that their life together was already over before it had properly begun. She had imagined Kroshka's small, exhausted lungs, and screamed so loudly she couldn't even hear the scream. Only when her mother and grandmother started up from their sleep and Kroshka's thin voice joined in the scream had Yanka come to her senses and fallen back on her pillow. Silly goose, she was only asleep.

If Yanka were to spend any longer in the bathtub, she wouldn't manage to get Kroshka dressed for kindergarten and spend a few minutes with her. To be honest, she barely saw the child anymore. Sometimes Kroshka looked at her wide-eyed, as if she were confused, as if there were a misunderstanding between her and Yanka. *Excuse me, have we been introduced? Have we met before somewhere?* And when Yanka admonished Kroshka to do or not do something, it felt odd, awkward, and sometimes she even felt as though she could see a flicker of scorn pass through the child's eyes. She didn't know if the scorn was really there. Maybe she was just afraid that she had nothing to offer her daughter. Then came the pangs of conscience about asking her mother to care for the child, or sleeping while her mother brought Kroshka to kindergarten. Maria never refused, never said no, or even complained. Sometimes, Yanka noticed with alarm that her young mother had begun to grow old; she saw the traits of her grandmother in her face, the slight squint in her eyes, the twitching in one corner of her mouth.

Yanka got out of the tub, dried herself off, and used the towel to wipe off the mirror, which was foggy with steam. She laughed, and watched the laugh transform her face. Shine, my little star, shine.



Maria Nikolayevna folded up her bed and banged it into place with her fist, pushed the room-divider between the door and closet, took off her dressing-gown and nightgown, and got dressed. She flung away her slippers, which were slit open on the sides for comfort, and now they lay scattered on the floor, looking forlorn. Maria lay down on Yanka's bed, pulled the curtain shut, and stared up at the ceiling. She had a little time before she had to leave the house. Now she could have a few minutes alone.

She heard pots clattering in the kitchen. She pictured Varvara digging through the dried mushrooms, mushrooms which were collected every summer and hung up to dry from the kitchen ceiling. They exuded a musty, earthy smell. Then she heard her mother's steps on the corridor, headed towards the toilet. In a moment, she would open the door with a sigh, and swear because the lock still hadn't been repaired, take her toilet seat down from the hook on the wall, and get angry that someone had forgotten to hang up theirs. Varvara's muffled mutterings floated over, then she heard the flush.

Yanka was singing in the bathroom. Maria always thought that Yanka's voice seemed too big and full to belong to her delicate daughter, who would be twenty-one soon and had stoically proclaimed, with dry, chapped lips and eyebrows knit together, that she wasn't going to grow up. Yanka had decided to have the child, despite all the good advice she had received. I'm going to have my baby, and you'll help me with it, she'd declared, and stuck with her decision. Yet she'd had so little interest in practical matters she couldn't even name the father of her child. Or perhaps she hadn't wanted to. Maria even liked some of the young men who hovered around Yanka, and she'd secretly imagine that her favorite was Kroshka's father: sometimes this one, sometimes that one. In contrast to Yanka, little Kroshka was a quiet, undemanding child. When she was given thick porridge with butter, she was happy; when she was put in front of the TV, she quietly gazed at the screen; if Maria kept her in the kitchen with her, she eagerly observed the goings-on with red cheeks. The only thing she disliked was going to kindergarten.

Sometimes Yanka would come home drunk from a concert or party, wake Kroshka up, and cry in her lap that she was a bad mother, that they'd soon have a place of their own—and so on. This frightened Kroshka, and she'd break out into a rash and have little red spots on her arms and legs. As soon as Yanka got herself under control and stopped wallowing in self-pity the red spots would disappear.

Maria didn't know when Yanka had discovered her love for music, only that what Yanka called music seemed like screaming to everyone else. That's what her mother called it. That's what Matvei Alexandrovich complained about. And that's what the cultural committee said when Yanka



and her friends applied for a permit to perform in public. But she was moved by Yanka's music, sometimes even enchanted by it. Yanka's songs were somber and profound, and when she accompanied herself on the guitar, Maria could barely recognize her daughter. Yanka could express things in her songs that Maria only mulled over in vague thoughts at night, with empty catchphrases from bad movies, nothing original.

Sleep had become an adventure anyways; she woke up several times each night, got out of bed and wandered through the apartment. Liebermann snored, the Kosolapys' grandfather clock ticked, the professor was just as quiet as by day, and the end of the corridor held only dim darkness. Only under Matvei Alexandrovich's door did she sometimes spy a small shaft of light, and a few times she had been tempted to shyly knock on his door, since they might as well pass the time together if they were both awake. Of course she hadn't knocked, she'd been too afraid that he might misunderstand her intentions, that she might misunderstand things herself. So she remained alone. And she was tired of being alone. She wanted to drink wine and fondle someone's hairy chest, but there were barely any men in this country. It didn't matter which way you looked—only women. Two men worked alongside thirteen women at the museum. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, since she preferred dealing with women, but she didn't want to be surrounded by them forever and spend every night lying between her mother, daughter, and granddaughter.

The water stain on the ceiling had turned the color of mud. In the beginning, this room had meant freedom to her. She had moved in with Boris and away from his parents, they had been assigned this room, and barely one year later, Yanka had arrived. They had been happy here. For a few years. Then her father died and her mother moved in. Maria turned her head towards the couch, where Varvara lay like a corpse every night, wheezing gently and smiling in her sleep. Closed, bright eyelids, lips slightly parted.

"Are you sick? Why're you lying in bed?" Varvara Mikhailovna ripped aside the curtain suddenly.

"I'm not lying in bed, mother, I'm lying on the bed."

"You should have put on your dressing-gown. You're lying on Yanka's bed in street clothes."

"Yes."

"Are you sad?"

"No."

"A woman your age shouldn't wear skirts that short."

"My skirt isn't short, and I'm not old."

"You're almost sixty."

"I'm forty-five."



Varvara Mikhailovna sat down on the bed next to her daughter. "You're right to suffer, right you are. Good thing we have each other; good thing you have me; good thing we'll always have each other; we'll always be together, won't we?"

She rocked back and forth and emphasized each sentence with a sigh. Then she bent down to her daughter. "You'll never leave me, will you?"

Maria Nikolayevna sighed with her, then sat up, rubbed her forehead, moved her head as if shaking something off, and said sternly, "That's enough. I'm fine."

Yanka came into the room with Kroshka on her shoulders and a pile of laundry in her arms. She put the laundry on the dresser and Kroshka on the ground, took off Kroshka's pajamas, sniffed at them, and put them, folded, on Kroshka's bed. Yanka was so tired she looked as if she could barely stand. She dressed the child in a clean shirt, woolen tights, and a wool dress. She combed Kroshka's hair and tied her thin braids together with white tulle ribbons.

Varvara Mikhailovna stood up, absent-mindedly stroked Maria's hair as if to apologize, inspected the laundry, and sorted out the foreign pieces into another pile. Maria knew she would have to hurry so Kroshka wouldn't be late for kindergarten and Yanka could finally get to sleep after her night shift. Varvara was picking up lint from the carpet; everywhere she looked, she saw dust, dirt, grime. Maria breathed in and out heavily, and noticed that when she inhaled, there was a small, stabbing pain in her left chest. She breathed in deeply again, and the pain grew. But this time it was on the right, not the left. It wasn't a stabbing pain anymore, but more of an ache. She had read that spells of dizziness precede heart attacks. This thought made her heart beat faster, and she stopped breathing. Her heartbeat pounded, vanished for a moment, then returned. Maria pinched her hand. Yanka darted a stern glance at her.

"I'd best get going," said Maria, but didn't get up. "How was the night shift, Yanka?"

"Same as usual." Yanka put the tea cups, which had been standing around since yesterday, on the tray.

"I should take over your night shifts, I didn't manage to sleep a wink anyway."

Yanka fluffed up her pillow. "A great darkness lies before me."

Varvara Mikhailovna picked up the tray with the tea cups.

"Our Yanka's speaking in riddles again."

"By the way, Kroshka coughed all night."

"I didn't hear her cough."

"That's because you sleep like the dead, mother. People who aren't sensitive have deep, sound sleep."

"Maria, won't you be late for work?"



“Last night, I thought that this year, we should go to the sea. The four of us. On holiday.”

Varvara Mikhailovna looked pityingly at her daughter.

“What ideas you have!”

Yanka loosened the towel around her head, toweled off her hair, picked up the pile of foreign laundry, and went out.