

Sample Translation (pp. 5-27)

Baba Dunja's Last Love **by Alina Bronsky**

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I'm awoken in the night again by Marja's rooster, Konstantin. He's like an ersatz husband for Marja. She raised him, and she pampered and spoiled him even as a chick; now he's full-grown and good for nothing. Struts around the yard imperiously and leers at me. His internal clock is messed up, always has been, though I don't think it has anything to do with the radiation. You can't blame the radiation for every stupid thing in the world.

I lift up the covers and let my feet drop to the ground. On the floorboards is a carpet I crocheted out of strips of old bed sheets. I have a lot of time in winter because I don't have to tend to my garden. I rarely go out during winter, only to fetch water or wood or to shovel snow from my doorstep. But it's summer now, and I'm on my feet at five in the morning to go wring the neck of Marja's rooster.

Every morning I'm surprised when I look at my feet, which look knobby and swollen in my German hiking sandals. The sandals are tough. They'll outlive everything, surely including me within a few years.

I didn't always have such swollen feet. They used to be delicate and slim, caked with dried mud, beautiful without any shoes at all. Jegor loved my feet. He forbade me to walk around barefoot because so much as a glance at my toes made men hot under the collar.

When he stops by now, I point to the bulges protruding from the hiking sandals and say, See what's left of all their splendor?

And he laughs and says they're still pretty. He's very polite since he died, the liar.

I need a few minutes to get my blood pumping. I stand there and brace myself on the end of the bed. Things are still a bit hazy in my head. Marja's rooster Konstantin is screeching as if it's being strangled. Maybe someone has beaten me to it.

I grab my bathrobe from the chair. It used to be brightly colored, red flowers on a black background. You can't see the flowers anymore. But it's clean, which is important to me. Irina promised to send me a new one. I slip it on and tie the belt. I shake out the down-filled duvet, lay it on the bed and pat it smooth, then put the embroidered bedspread on top of it. Then I head for the door. The first few steps after waking up are always slow.

The sky hangs light blue over the village like a washed out sheet. A bit of sunlight is visible. I just can't get it through my head that the same sun shines for everyone: for the queen of England, for the black president of America, for Irina in Germany, for Marja's rooster Konstantin. And for me, Baba Dunja, who until thirty years ago put broken bones in splints and delivered other people's babies, and who today decided to become a murderer. Konstantin is a stupid creature, always making such a racket for no reason. And anyway, I haven't had chicken soup in a long time.

The rooster is sitting on the fence looking at me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jegor, who's leaning against the trunk of my apple tree. I'm sure his mouth is contorted in a derisive sneer. The fence is crooked and leaning precariously, and it wobbles in the wind. The dumb bird balances atop it like a drunken tightrope walker.

"Come here, my dear," I say. "Come, I'll quiet you down."

I stretch out my hand. The rooster flaps his wings and screeches. His wattle is more gray than red, and it shakes nervously. I try to remember how old the creature is. Marja won't forgive me, I think. My outstretched hand hangs in the air.

And then, before I've even touched him, the rooster falls at my feet.

Marja said it would break her heart. So I have to do it.

She sits with me in the yard and snuffles into a checkered handkerchief. She has turned her back to me so she doesn't have to see me plucking out the pale speckled feathers and tossing them into a plastic bag. Down floats on the air.

"He loved me," she says. "He always looked at me a certain way whenever I entered the yard."

The plastic bag is half full. Konstantin is nearly indecent, naked in my lap. One of his eyes is half-open, gazing up at the sky.

"Look," she says. "It's like he's still listening."

"There's certainly nothing he hasn't heard out of you before."

That's the truth. Marja always talked to him. Which makes me worry that I'll have less peace and quiet now. Aside from me, everyone seems to need somebody to talk

to, and Marja more than most. I'm her nearest neighbor, the fence is all that divides our properties. The fence might have been solid at some point. But these days it's not much more than a notion of a fence.

"Tell me exactly how it happened." Marja's voice is like a widow's.

"I told you a thousand times already. I came out because he was screeching, and then he suddenly fell over. Directly at my feet."

"Maybe someone put a curse on him."

I nod. Marja believes in that stuff. Tears run down her face and disappear in the deep wrinkles of her face. Even though she's at least ten years younger than I am. She doesn't have much of an education, she worked as a milkmaid, she's a simple woman. Here she doesn't even have a cow, though she does have a goat that lives with her in the house and watches TV with her when there's ever anything on. At least that way she has the company of a living, breathing entity. Except the goat can't hold up its end of the conversation. So I answer.

"Who would want to put a curse on your stupid bird?"

"Shhh. Don't speak ill of the dead. And besides, people are evil."

"People are lazy," I say. "Do you want to cook him?"

She waves her hand dismissively.

"Good. Then I'll do it."

She nods and looks furtively at the bag of feathers. "I wanted to bury him."

"You should have told me earlier. Now you'll have to bury the feathers with him so his people don't laugh at him in heaven."

Marja thinks for a moment. "Ach, what's the point. You cook him and give me half of the soup."

I knew that it would work out that way. We don't eat meat very often, and Marja is a glutton.

I nod and pull the shriveled eyelid down over the rooster's glassy eye.

The stuff about heaven I didn't really mean. I don't believe in it. I mean, I believe there's a heaven above our heads, but I know that our dead aren't there. Even as a little girl I didn't believe that people snuggled in the clouds like in a down-filled duvet. But I did think you could eat the clouds like cotton candy.

Our dead are among us, often they don't even know that they're dead and that their bodies are rotting in the ground.

Tschernowo isn't big, but we have our own cemetery because the people in Malyschi don't want our corpses. At the moment the city council is debating whether to require a lead coffin for Tschernowo corpses buried in Malyschi, because radioactive materials continue to give off radiation even if they're no longer alive. In the meantime we have a provisional cemetery here, in a spot where a hundred and fifty years ago a church stood and thirty years ago a village school house. It's a humble plot with wooden crosses, and the few graves there aren't even fenced in.

If you ask me, I don't even want to be buried in Malyschi. After the reactor mishap, I left like almost everyone else. It was 1986, and at the beginning we didn't know what had happened. Then liquidators showed up in Tschernowo in protective suits, carrying beeping devices up and down the main street. Panic broke out, families with little children were the fastest to pack up their things, rolling up mattresses and stuffing jewelry and socks into tea kettles, roping furniture to their roof racks and roaring off. Speed was now a necessity, since it wasn't as if the reactor mishap had taken place the day before, it was just that nobody had told us about it up till then.

I was still very young, fifty something, but my children were no longer at home. So I wasn't too worried. Irina was studying in Moskow, and Alexej was on a tour of the Altai mountains. I was one of the last to leave Tschernowo. I helped others to stuff their clothes in sacks and to rip up floorboards to get at the money they'd hidden underneath. I didn't really see why I should leave at all.

Jegor had shoved me into one of the last cars that were sent from the capital and squeezed in beside me. Jegor had let himself get swept up in the panic, as if his balls still needed to produce lots of children and as a result needed to be rushed to safety. Despite the fact that he'd long since drunk his crotch sterile and limp. The news of the reactor

mishap brought him temporarily to his senses, and he started yammering on about the end of the world and got on my nerves.

I don't have any large pots at home because I've lived alone since I returned. House guests aren't exactly lined up around the block. I never cook to save leftovers, I always cook fresh every day. Borscht is the only thing I warm up day after day. But it gets better with every day it sits.

I take the biggest pot I can find out of the cabinet. And look for a top that will fit. I've accumulated a lot of tops over the years, none of which fit properly, but they're good enough for me. I cut the head and feet off the rooster, they'll go into the soup. Then I cut off the rump, which I give to the cat. I put the rooster in the pot along with the head and feet, a peeled carrot from the garden, and an onion with the skin on so the broth will have a nice golden color. I pour water in from the bucket, just enough so everything is covered. It'll be a nourishing broth, fatty and glistening.

When the reactor happened, I counted myself among those who got off lightly. My children were safe, my husband wasn't going to live much longer anyway, and my flesh was already toughened with age. In essence I had nothing to lose. And anyway, I was prepared to die. My work had taught me always to keep that possibility in mind so as never to be caught by surprise.

I still marvel every single day at the fact that I'm still here. And every second day I ask myself whether I might be one of the dead who wander around unwilling to acknowledge that their name is already inscribed on a gravestone somewhere. They need to be told, but who is that brazen? I'm happy that nobody has anything left to say to me. I've seen everything and have no more fears. Death can come, just let it come gracefully, please.

The water in the pot is bubbling. I turn down the heat, grab a ladle from a hook, and begin to scoop off the thick gray foam that's pushing up the sides of the pot. If the water were to keep boiling so hard, the foam would break up into tiny bits and get mixed into the broth. On the ladle the foam looks dreary and unappetizing, like a collapsed gray

cloud. I let it drip into the cat's bowl. Cats are even less sensitive than we are. This cat is the daughter of the one that was in my house when I came back. She was really the lady of the house and I was just her guest.

The nearby villages are all abandoned. The buildings are still there, but the walls are flimsy and collapsing, and the nettles grow as high as the eaves. There aren't even rats because rats need garbage, fresh, greasy garbage. Rats need people.

I could have taken my pick of houses in Tschernowo when I came back. I took my old one. The door was open, the gas tank was only half empty, the well was just a few minutes walk away, and the garden was still recognizable. I cleared the nettles and cut back the blackberries, for weeks I didn't do anything else. I knew: I need this garden. I can't manage the walk to the bus stop and the long ride into Malyschi very often. But I need to eat three times a day.

Ever since, I've planted a third of the garden. That's enough. If I had a large family I would use the entire garden. I benefit from the fact that I took such good care of it before the reactor. The greenhouse is a jewel, handcrafted by Jegor, and I harvest tomatoes and cucumbers a week before everyone else in the village, just as I did before the reactor. There are gooseberries in green and red, and currants in red, white, and black, old bushes that I carefully prune each fall so they produce new shoots. I have two apple trees and a raspberry patch. It's a fertile area here.

The soup is simmering on the lowest flame. I'll let it cook for two or even better three hours, so the old flesh softens and falls from the bone. It's the same with people: it's hard to choke down old flesh.

The smell of the chicken soup makes the cat twitchy. It slinks around my feet, meowing, and rubs itself against my calves in the thick wool stockings. I know I'm getting older because I'm always cold. Even in summer I don't leave the house without wool socks.

The cat is pregnant, I'll give her the skin and gristle of the rooster later. Sometimes she hunts beetles and spiders. We have a lot of spiders in Tschernowo. The amount of bugs has increased since the reactor. A year ago a biologist came and photographed all the spider webs in my house. I leave them be, even when Marja calls me a slovenly housewife.

The good thing about being old is that you don't need to ask anyone's permission anymore—you don't need to ask whether you can live in your old house, or whether it's okay to leave the spider webs be. The spiders were here before me, too. The biologist took pictures of them with a camera that looked like a weapon. He set up spotlights and lit up every corner of my house. I didn't have any objection, no reason he shouldn't go ahead and do his job. He just had to turn down the sound on his device because the beeps sent chills down my spine.

The biologist explained to me why we have so many bugs. It's because there are far fewer birds in the area since the reactor. So the beetles and spiders can multiply unhindered. He was unable to tell me, however, why there are so many cats. Cats probably have something that protects them against bad things.

A second cat slips into the doorway. The cat that lives with me immediately arches her back. She's a beast and doesn't let anyone across the threshold.

"Come on, be nice," I say, but she isn't nice. She hisses and hisses and her hair stands on end. She has only half a tail, someone clipped off the rest. I always had cats and dogs and chickens, it's something I like about village life. Another reason I came back. The animals here aren't sick in their heads the way they are in the city, even if they are irradiated and crippled. The noise and constriction of the city makes cats and dogs crazy.

Irina flew in all the way from Germany just to try to keep me from moving back to Tschernowo. She tried all means, even crying. My Irina, who never cried, not even as a little girl. It wasn't that I forbade her to cry; on the contrary, it would have been healthy to cry sometimes. But she was like a boy, climbing trees and fences and sometimes falling off, even getting smacked, and still she never cried. She ended up studying medicine and now she's a surgeon with the German military. That's my girl. And then, of all times, she thought she needed to cry just because I wanted to move back home.

"I have never told you what you have to do," I explained to her. "And I don't want you to tell me what I have to do."

“But mother, who in their right mind could possibly want to go back to the death zone?”

“You’re saying words that you don’t understand, my girl. I’ve already gone to look, the buildings are all still standing, and weeds are growing in the garden.”

“Mother, you know what radioactivity is. Everything is irradiated.”

“I’m old, nothing can irradiate me anymore, and even if it does it’s not the end of the earth.”

She dabbed her eyes dry in such a way that made it clear she was a surgeon.

“I won’t come visit you there.”

“I know,” I said, “but you don’t come very often anyway.”

“Is that a reproach?”

“No. I think it’s good. Why should anyone hover around their parents?”

She had looked at me suspiciously, like she used to many years before, when she was still little. She didn’t believe me. But I meant it just like I said it. There’s nothing for her here, and I don’t try to make her feel guilty about that, either.

“We can meet every couple of years in Malyschi,” I said. “Or whenever you come. As long as I live.”

I knew she didn’t have a lot of vacation days. And when she took them she didn’t need to spend them here. And back then the flights were still really expensive, far more expensive than they are now.

There was one thing we didn’t talk about. When something is particularly important, you don’t talk about it. Irina has a daughter, and I have a granddaughter, who goes by the very pretty name of Laura. No girls are named Laura around here, only my granddaughter who I have never seen. When I went back to the village, Laura had just turned one. When I went back home, I knew I would never see her.

Grandchildren always used to leave the cities during their summer breaks and stay out in the country with their grandparents. The school holidays were long, three hot summer months, and the parents in the cities didn’t have such long vacations. It was the same in our village, from June until August city kids ran around and in no time at all they had sunburned faces, bleached hair, and dirt-crusted feet. They went together into the

woods to pick berries, and they swam in the river. Noisy as a flock of birds they went up and down the main street, stealing apples and wrestling in the muck.

When they got too wild, you sent them out into the fields to collect potato bugs, which threatened our crops. They would pick the beetles off the plants by the bucket-load and then burn them. I can still hear the sound of all the shells popping in the fire. We really miss the little thieves now—the world's never seen a plague of potato bugs like the one we've had since the reactor.

Everyone in Tschernowo knew that I was a nurse's assistant. I was always called when children had broken something or had abdominal pain that wouldn't stop. Once a boy had eaten too many unripe plums. The fibers caused a blockage in his gut. He was pale and writhing around on the floor, and I told them to get him to the hospital immediately, and the boy was saved by an emergency operation. There was one with appendicitis and another who turned out to be allergic to a bee sting.

I liked the children, with their fidgety feet, scratched up arms, and high-pitched voices. If there's anything I miss these days it's them. Those of us who live in Tschernowo these days don't have any grandchildren. Or we never see them if we do. Except maybe in a photo. My walls are covered with pictures of Laura. Irina sends me new ones in almost every letter.

It probably wouldn't take Laura long to become a carefree summer holiday child, either. If everything were like before. Though it's hard for me to imagine it. In her baby pictures she had a serious little face, and I wondered what sort of thoughts lived in her head to project such darkness from her eyes. She never wore bows or barrettes in her hair. Even as a baby she didn't smile.

In the most recent photos she has long legs and hair that's almost white. She still looks very serious. She's never written to me. Her father is German. Irina promised me a wedding photo—one of the few promises she hasn't kept. She always sends greetings from him. I collect all the letters from Germany in a box in my dresser.

I never ask Irina whether Laura is healthy. I never ask about Irina's own health, either. If there's one thing I'm afraid of, it's the answer to that question. So I just pray for them, even though I don't believe there's anyone who listens to my prayers.

Irina always asks about my health. When we see each other—every two years—the first thing she always asks about are my blood counts. As if I have any idea. She asks about my blood pressure and whether I've had a breast cancer scan.

“My dear girl,” I say, “look at me. Do you see how old I am? And I made it this far without vitamins or operations or checkups. If something bad manages to worm its way into me now, I will leave it be. I don't want anybody touching me and sticking needles in me, and that much I have earned.”

Irina shakes her head. She knows that I'm right but she can't escape her surgeon's mindset. At her age I thought the same way. And the way I was at her age, I would have picked a huge fight with the me of today.

When I look at our village, it doesn't seem to me as if it's nothing more than a collection of living corpses. Some people won't last long, it's true, but the reactor alone isn't to blame for that. There's not many of us, you can count us all on two hands. Five or seven years ago there were more of us, when a dozen people followed my example and moved back to Tschernowo all at one time. We've buried a few of them in the meantime. Others are like the spiders, resilient even if their webs are a bit erratic.

Marja for instance is a little nuts with her goat and her rooster, which is simmering so nicely in my pot. Unlike me, Marja knows her blood pressure exactly because she takes it three times a day. If it's too high she gulps down a pill. If it's too low she gulps down a different pill. That way she always has something to do. But she's bored anyway.

She has a medicine cabinet that could wipe out the entire village. She restocks it regularly in Malyschi. She takes antibiotics for a cold or diarrhea. I tell her she shouldn't take them, that they just wipe you out, but she doesn't listen. I'm too healthy, she says, I wouldn't understand. And it's true, I can't remember the last time I had a cold.

The aroma of the chicken broth fills my whole house and wafts out the window. I pull the rooster out of the pot and lay it on a plate to cool. The cat brays and I raise a cautionary finger at her. I fish out the vegetables, too, they've already lent the broth their

flavor and now they're just limp. I wrap them in an old newspaper and take the bundle out to the compost pile. There are pumpkins growing on my compost pile, in the fall I'll harvest them and pass them out to people in the village, otherwise I'll have to eat gruel with pumpkin all winter.

I pour the broth through a sieve into a second pot. A thousand fatty golden eyes peer up at me from the new pot. I read in a newspaper that you should skim off the fat. But I disagree. If you want to live, you have to eat fat. You have to eat sugar once in a while, too, and first and foremost lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. In summer I eat cucumber and tomato salad almost every day. And herbs by the bundle, they grow thick and green in my garden—dill, chives, parsley, basil, rosemary.

The meat isn't too hot anymore, I can touch it with my fingers. I carefully remove it from the bones and put in a bowl. I used to cut it up into small pieces for my children and make sure I divided it evenly among them. Even though Alexej was just eighteen months younger than Irina, he was a skinny little fellow, and I was sometimes tempted to save the best bits for him.

We ate a lot of chicken soup because there were a lot of chickens in Tschernowo. I made borscht and schi and solyanka from the broth. It was never boring. I can picture Irina cutting meat into small bites for Laura when she was younger. If Laura was here, I would tell her what her mother was like as a child. But Laura is far away and stares out at me from the wall with sad gray eyes.

The day goes quickly when you have things to do. I tidy up the house. I wash a few pairs of underpants and hang them on the line in the garden. The sun dries and bleaches them, and it takes just two hours before I can fold them and put them away.

I scrub the dirtied stockpot with sand, rinse it with well water and leave it, too, to dry in the sun. I have to take a break at some stage, and I sit down on the bench in front of the house with a newspaper. I get the papers from Marja. She found them in her house when she moved in. The single woman who used to live there had read a lot of papers, including the good women's papers: *Factory Woman* and *Woman Farmer*, every issue. Bundles of them, each bound with twine, were stacked under the bed and in the tool shed. Marja gave them all to me. I read them whenever I have time during the day and also before I fall asleep at night.

In the issue of *Woman Farmer* I open are recipes using sorrel, a sewing pattern, a short love story set on a collective farm, and a disquisition on the theme, Why women shouldn't wear pants in their free time. It's from February 1986.

I pour half the soup into a smaller pot and look around for a top that will fit it. Holding it by the handles, I carry it over to Marja's. I have to suddenly blink as I pass the fence because Konstantin's ghost is sitting there swaying in the wind. I nod at him and he answers by flapping his wings wildly.

Cats are crowded in front of Marja's house, and no wonder: it smells like valerian inside. Marja is a large woman, particularly in width. She's sitting in a chair and her body arches over the backrest. Her gaze is fixed on the TV, which is equipped with a double antennae. The screen is black.

"What's on today?" I ask and put the pot on the kitchen table.

"Nothing but shit," says Marja. "Same as always."

That's why I never turn on my television. I dust it off once in a while and the cat likes to sleep on top of it, on a doily. On my last visit to Malyschi I saw in a shop window that there are now TVs you can hang on the wall like a painting. Marja's by contrast is like a potbellied chest, and it takes up half the room.

"What did you bring?" She doesn't turn toward me because that's difficult when you're wedged into a chair like that.

"The soup," I say. "Your share."

She immediately starts to cry and the goat, which is lying in Marja's bed, adds a baleful "Meeeeeh."

When I get out a bowl, I can't help but notice that Marja has really let herself go lately.

Her dishes are covered with a fatty film, which tells me she's scrimping on soap. The sink is stopped up and moldy. And this woman says I should clear out the spider webs in my place. There's a pile of colorful pills on the table.

"Marja," I say sternly, "Tell me, what's going on?"

She waves my question off with one hand and with the other rummages around between her breasts. From between various layers of unwashed clothing, she pulls out a photo and hands it to me.

I push my glasses up to my forehead and hold the picture closer to my face. It's a black and white photo of a couple: a girl in a white wedding dress with a long train, and a guy with broad shoulders and a low forehead in a black suit. The girl is heartbreakingly beautiful: big eyes beneath thick lashes and a mouth that promises sweet kisses. She looks fragile in the slightly too big dress that's not been fitted quite right. And although the contrast couldn't be more stark, I recognize immediately that the girl is Marja.

"That's your Alexander?" I ask.

And Marja cries more and says that she got married fifty-one years ago today.

I should have realized that Marja isn't just lazy and messy. She's lazy and messy because she's suffering from depression. Back when I was a nurse's assistant nobody had depression and when people killed themselves you called them insane, unless it was out of love. Later on I read in a newspaper that there was such a thing as depression, and I asked Irina about it on her last visit.

She looked at me as if she didn't want to answer at first. She wanted to know why I was asking, like it was some kind of state secret.

I told her I just wanted to know if there was anything to it. And Irina said in Germany it's very widespread, practically like a stomach bug.

And when I look at Marja, I think maybe it sloshed across the border at some stage. Maybe if she'd moved back to Tschernowo earlier, she could have avoided it—if there's one thing that can't harm us here, it's the epidemics that sweep the rest of the world.

Marja has told me lots about her Alexander. Most importantly, that he beat the living daylight out of her and at some point got run over by a tractor in a drunken haze. She took care of him for a while after that, and he continued to curse her and to throw his cane—and whatever other heavy objects he could grab—at her from bed. A few days before the reactor he threw a radio at her and managed to hit her. The radio was totally destroyed, which made Marja so upset that she left with the liquidators and a sack of

clothes without ever turning around to look at Alexander. He was discovered only after he was dead, and now she's reproaching herself and painting a rosy picture of her past.

I'm of only one mind about that sort of thing: when two adults live together but have no children, they can just as well live apart. That's not a marriage, that's just a lark.

But I keep my opinion to myself.

I thoroughly wash two of Marja's bowls and dry them with a dish towel that turns out to be a piece of curtain. Marja mutters to herself that I'm wasting her water and that she's too weak to go to the well. I click my tongue, she needs to pipe down.

She wrenches herself out of the chair and comes to the table. Her body is massive and the rickety chair groans beneath her backside. It's a mystery how someone can get so fat in a village where you have to either grow all your food or drag it all laboriously home from town.

I shove a bowl of chicken soup over to her.

When she takes the spoon in her hand, dunks it in the golden broth, and guides it to her lips, I suddenly see it: Marja as a young bride in whose eyes the fear of the future flickers. Her former beauty hasn't completely disappeared, it's still here in the room like a ghost. How much easier I've had it my entire life: never being beautiful means never being afraid of losing your beauty. Only my feet drove men wild, and now I can't even cut my toenails. Lately Marja has helped me do it.

The goat jumps out of Marja's bed and comes over to us at the table. It puts its head on Marja's lap and peers over at me. I take a mouthful of soup, which is clear and salty like tears.

And I think to myself that Marja should never have come here. It's not the radiation. It's the peace and quiet that is so bad for her. Marja belongs in the city, where she can quarrel with the baker every morning. But since nobody here has any desire to fight with her, she's lost her sense of self and keeps swelling up, and she's wilting as a result.

[END OF SAMPLE]