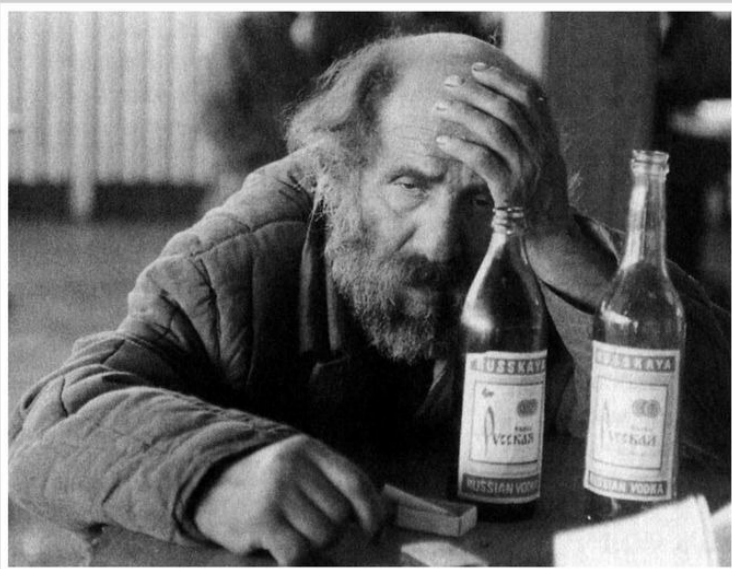


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Liudmila Maksimova

# The Third Day



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### **Аннотация**

Liudmila Maksimova is a Russian poet and prose writer, the author of collections of stories, “How can one be warm alone?” and “With love, mother”, that have gained unconditional acceptance of Russian-speaking readership.

# Содержание

The Third Day	5
Vasjka	11
Happiness	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

# **The Third Day**

**Liudmila Maksimova**

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# The Third Day

My father-in-law, the old man Nikolai, God rest his soul, drank methodically and regularly: “every third day” as he himself put it. For years, it had been an unalterable law of his existence. No matter what was going on around – constant arrivals and departures of numerous relatives; weddings and divorces; perpetual rows, minor and wild, with fights and without, of his sons with one another and with their wives; visits from his imbecile daughter with her little brats; moving to a new place of residence; renovations; illnesses; fires; global cataclysmic events; the end of the world, if you like – the “third day” always began, went by and ended in the same way, following the same pattern. Regardless of the presence in the house of guests or friends – not that he had any friends of his own except, perhaps, an alcoholic who lived next door and used to stop by now and then, which actually made no difference – the old man would spend that day alone.

Prior to the “third day”, there was the “day before”. On the “day before”, as the “third day” was approaching, the old man’s excitement mounted. His skinny frame drifted from one room to another with increasing frequency. Now and then, he would stop dead in his tracks in front of the TV set, having been attracted by bright flashes and invariably high sound volume, which annoyed him even more, such that he swore in foul

language at anyone who fell in his way. Antonina Dmitrievna, his wife, was the one who used to catch hell more than anyone else. But, driven by insatiable greed for work and money, she carried on stitching on her sewing machine in perfect calm. Making clothes for the city elite, she earned five times as much money as myself, the head of the patent department of a large enterprise, and as her son, a designer, and yet she reiterated the phrase “No money!” a thousand times per day. Moreover, she had long since reconciled herself to the inevitability of the “third day”.

And then the “third day” would finally come! In a buoyant mood, the old man would wake up earlier than usual, take a chunk of fatty pork and painstakingly cook it on the gas stove while the others were still asleep.

At the longed-for hour, 11 a.m. (the hour at which alcoholic drinks began to be sold), the old man would be the first to enter the shop and buy a bottle of vodka. Tenderly clasping the bottle close to his consumptive chest, he would rush home to prepare a dish called turya (soup of bread and water or kvass). Loaded into a bowl were chopped onions, crumbled brown bread and cottage cheese, with cold, rusty, chlorinated tap water poured on top of the ingredients.

The old man Nikolai used to prepare his specialty snack in an aluminum bowl. The boiled pork fat that had got cold by that time would be waiting for him on a cracked and chipped plate; he would drink vodka from a faceted table glass that had got dim from long use.

During and as a result of cut-glass ware buying spree, Antonina Dmitrievna had filled all the visible and invisible shelves of the sideboard with crystal wine glasses and tumblers that nobody ever used. The expensive household tableware was also a mere symbol of prosperity and was in no way intended for the “third day”.

The old man was trembling with excitement. With a shaking hand, in a respectful standing position, he would open the bottle. The rhythmic and melodious clink of the bottleneck on the glass-rim, drowning the rattling noise of his wife’s sewing machine, announced the end of the prelude to and the beginning of the act itself.

The first half-glass was a bit of a challenge. Choking and spilling precious drops of liquor, he had difficulty swallowing, groaned and cleared his throat for a long time. Then, having taken a mouthful of turya from the aluminum bowl, he bit off a chunk of boiled pork fat. Gradually, the look in his eyes would become brighter and warmer. With a somewhat less shaking hand, he would pour himself another half-glass of vodka. He would drink it slowly, savoring the liquor. Looking at him, one could say that he was swallowing vodka easily, smoothly and appreciatively. The old man would take a huge checkered linen handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully wipe his dripping nose, light a cigarette with a cardboard holder and begin to ponder over something. Then, with his pale-blue eyes gazing into vacant space, he would begin talking.

His discourse used to be a conglomeration of names and vile curses intertwined in incomprehensible phrases. Now and then, ordinary words would slip in and, having flashed like diamonds, disappear in a muddy torrent of abuse.

But he wasn't swearing. He was thinking – hard and slowly. His brains, finally relieved from the stress of waiting for the “third day”, seemed to be shifting piles of rock in search of an answer to the apparently nagging him, and therefore recurrently popping up, question of “Who needs it?”

Edging their way into life reminiscences of a laborer were names of the mighty of the earth, and he had a vague feeling of being personally responsible for the global catastrophes that had occurred. Having read none of Dostoevsky's novels, he recounted the famous Father Ferapont's deathbed words addressed to Alyosha Karamazov about everyone being “responsible to all men for all men and for everything” which sounded in the old man Nikolai's interpretation somewhat different, to put it mildly.

Religion was never directly present in his speech, and the name of the Lord was not even taken in vain. The old man Nikolai was a member of a once-thriving family dispossessed by the Soviet Power, losing its vitality because of heavy drinking, intimidated by the Soviet Power to such an extent that when the new times came, even the alcohol-relaxed brains of one of its representatives were still alert and under control when discussing the subject with someone or pondering aloud. No words came out

of his mouth, but his thoughts got confused and were throbbing somewhere around the universal truth. Having never heard of the existence of Moses Commandments, he practically quoted them while addressing them to his good-for-nothing children and his greedy wife:

– Don't commit adultery (cf. 7th Commandment: You shall not commit adultery), Don't covet anything that belongs to someone else, Honor your father no matter how bad he might be, and Don't steal – he will take everything away all the same.

Who was the one who was going to take everything away, the old man didn't specify and kept asking himself: "Who needs it?". The question was repeated at an ever-increasing rate but remained unanswered. The incoherent strings of words collided with one another disintegrating into individual broken words and sounds.

Finally, by way of summing up his brainwork, the old man Nikolai would utter an incredibly intricate dirty-word combination and lapse into silence. Then he would weep – silently, motionless as a statue. The tears and snivels would course down his cheeks and chin into the bowl with turya. Having had a good cry, the old man would finish his bottle of vodka and make his way into the room to beat his wife. When they were young, he used to discern in her rapacious eyes the pleading for mercy which was so much like the pleading for love. But that was long ago, when their kids were small and he was young and strong.

Now, however, anyone of us could easily throw him down on the bed and tie his hands. Having been treated like that, the old man would lie, for a long time, helpless, pitiable, weeping quietly. Then, at long last, lulled by the rhythmic sound of the sewing machine, he would drop off to sleep.

At midnight, Antonina Dmitrievna would untie the old man's hands and snuggle down beside him into little spoon position. Through the thin wall, I would hear the champing sounds of their coition, that lasted pretty long, and constrained and muffled moans of their orgasms.

The next morning, a new countdown would begin. During the first day, the old man Nikolai would be sweet to everyone, especially his wife. They would chat quietly. Antonina Dmitrievna, never looking up from her stitching, would say every now and then: "No money!", to which the old man Nikolai would lovingly reply: "Shut the fuck up!" Recollecting the happenings of the day before, he would tenderly call himself an idiot, take out the garbage and even go shopping for foodstuffs at the stores. And, again, he would wait for the "third day" to come.

# Vasjka

My nephew Vasjka is a good-natured guy and a jokester second to none. As far as I remember, he was a shy, taciturn and unsmiling child in his early years. He used to mumble something incoherently. We feared he'd never learn to speak. He was already in his seventh year, but he rarely addressed himself to anyone and when he did he would just murmur "granny, h'm" and use gestures to express himself. And he did so only in case of burning need.

My sister-in-law Clavka believed her son to be a mentally retarded child and sent him to live with us in the village.

– Well, it's a good thing that my grandson is dumb, – my mother used to say to our neighbours. – At least, he isn't going to be conscripted. Thus, he will stay alive longer.

Zinc coffins were arriving in Pskov Oblast by the dozen from Afghanistan. Moreover, not all mothers had the possibility to see their beloved sons for the last time and lay them to the eternal rest in the native land. Our neighbour aunt Tonya, having received two "killed in battle" notices, lived for the rest of her life with a split feeling of despair and hope. She never saw the bodies of her two sons. And she was not the only one living in suspense.

We lived to see Vanjka, Vasjka's father, alive. He returned a captain, with a black face and grey head. And he was still on the right side of thirty. As was the custom, a table was set for all

comers. A huge knockdown table, the one that had been knocked together by our granddad and which was kept in parts, to be used on special occasions. We drank in memory of the fallen, then to the health of the living. Silence reigned for a few moments; just buzzing of flies. All of a sudden – a resounding bang coming from under the bottom of the table sent the dishes jumping on and glasses flying off the table. The next moment the dead silence was shattered by a bass, masculine voice not familiar to anyone:

– Fuck! It really hurts.

Women, scared to death, began to cross themselves. Men, as if on command, poked their heads under the table. And there they saw – guess who? – our Vasjka, smiling.

– Fucking hell! – he cursed again, rubbing the bump on the top of his head.

My brother, before he had time to rejoice in the fact that his son finally began to speak, suddenly grew pale and yelled:

– Stay put! Don't move! – and he crawled towards Vasjka. – Hey, someone, give me the pliers, fuck you...

Sticking out within a hair's breadth of Vasjka's head was a long rusty nail. Who knows where it came from and how it got there, and what angel saved Vasjka from certain death.

– That's one guardian angel the boy's got! – the farm manager Egor Kuzmich remarked, deep in thought. And he added respectfully, – He (the angel) certainly knows his job.

From that day on, the boy began to speak pretty fluent Russian interspersed with foul language. Everyone in our village spoke

that way. The strong language they used was not considered to be bad words or curses. The limited vocabulary typical of ordinary, undereducated people was, where strong emotions needed to be expressed, supplemented with a strong, meaningful word, and, on special occasions, – with a pretty flowery expression.

After a while, we got a letter from my brother describing another incident again involving, for sure, the guardian angel. On arriving at the next place of assignment (military men got a new assignment pretty often), Ivan's family got temporary accommodation in a small dilapidated house that had not been lived in since the demise of the old lady-owner. Just for a couple of days, before they moved into the apartment vacated by that time by previous occupants. Early in the morning, Ivan went to report for service. Clavka went to apply for a job. Vasjka was instructed to behave himself and never leave the house. "The boy is fairly grown-up, will go to school in a month", she reassured herself. But she locked the door, to be on the safe side.

...A couple of hours later, the roof burst into flames: old electric wiring caught fire. Firefighters arrived promptly, immediately got fire pumps ready and nozzles trained on the roof. The roof collapsed under the weight of water. Vasjka was nowhere to be seen. Clavka was already wailing and sobbing when Vasjka's muffled voice reached her ears from beneath the earth. Mystic-minded officers' wives and some of the recruits involved in clearing the site of fire passed out. And when they came to, they saw Vasjka, safe and sound, with an apple leftover

bit in his hand. It turned out that seeing round the new dwelling, the boy discovered a cellar under the floor right in the middle of a small room the entrance to which was tightly covered with a piece of sheet iron. The cellar was well stocked with various preserves and other eatables. And it was there that Vasjka was staying, tucking away jam and apples, until he sniffed something burning and heard some noises above. He couldn't get out of the cellar unassisted: the metal cover slammed down, became terribly hot and heavy; that's why he was calling out to mum and dad.

We used to receive new evidence of the presence of a guardian angel in Vasjka's life about once a month. One day, our blockhead made a bet with his friend that he would jump off the roof-top of the four-storey barracks, of the "Stalin architecture", by the way. Has made up his mind to become an airman and to start preparing himself for the future profession accordingly, young rascal. To this end, he decided to use Clavka's umbrella as a parachute. He made all the necessary mathematical calculations – he was about fourteen at the time – and jumped off the top of the roof. But the umbrella, which was unfamiliar with Vasjka's laws of aerodynamics and had been produced at a Soviet plant, apparently at the end of a quarter (when the quarterly report was to be submitted and there was a drive for product quantity rather than product quality), folded in the opposite direction at the very first moment of the flight. He would have never come out if alive had it not been for the truck full of hay

that appeared at the very spot where Vasjka's helpless body was to hit the cobble-stone pavement. It was not until evening that the winner of the bet appeared in front of his friend, prepared to receive a hundred flicks on the forehead as a bet loser, and admiring crowd. Because Vasjka had to take a ride on the hay truck as far as the local state farm and then go back to the cantonment on foot. But to make up for it, he returned home safe and sound.

In the early 1990s, my brother was promoted to the rank of colonel and given an assignment to Transbaikalia as a military unit commander. Clavka, in an effort to live up to her husband's senior position, strutted about in Chinese imitations of Versace clothes. But she failed to win the admiration of or arouse envy in anyone. Over there, like in our Pskov Oblast, valued highly were plump women. And our Clavka, although a good person, was, as my mother dubbed her on seeing her for the first time, "not much to look at, with a fist-size bum". And Vasjka took after her: puny and anything but tall – reaching a bit above his father's shoulder. My mother used to say about people with stature like that: "a good sneeze could knock them down". But girls cared for him – a curly-headed and blue-eyed guy.

Vasjka never graduated from the university, he dropped out of it, having been inveigled by jolly crowds. He took to the bottle, drinking heavily and going on a drunken binge for days on end. For him – a jokester and the life and soul of the party, – there was no way he could avoid this fate. He would have become

a drunkard and perished, like many of his peers, had it not been for Alevtina who suddenly appeared from nowhere – like a bolt from the blue. I believe it was the guardian angel who had a hand in it again. He either called her to his assistance, being tired of saving his ward, or appointed her as his deputy. Alevtina went to distant Irkutsk from these parts to see her boyfriend, the private Stepan – a muscular, handsome young man, – and came back with our “a good sneeze could knock him down” Vasjka. Who would have thought it possible?! Their love was all-consuming and it passed all understanding. They made love non-stop for a whole month. Vasjka even forgot about vodka. But soon, having found new friends, he took to drink again. Alevtina didn't like it at all. She decided to employ a carrot-and-stick approach. Intended to be used as a “carrot” was her rich, sweet body which Vasjka proved to be craving for to the point of trembling; and as a “stick” – a real whip which she had inherited, along with her considerable physical strength and a comfortable house, from her granddad who had been an owner of a stud farm. Within a few months, Vasjka stopped even thinking about vodka. At this point, we could finish our story with the words “and they lived happily ever after”, but my nephew became involved in a still another amusing incident without which his portrait would be incomplete. This time, everything turned out all right without the guardian angel intervening. Although, you never know.

On the occasion of twenty-year-long record of service, the

plant management rewarded Vasjka with a free holiday package to Tunisia. They themselves must have been tired of taking all-inclusive overseas holidays and getaways several times a year.

– Thank you, – he said, – I don't seem to have been to this country.

– And what countries have you been to, dear Vasilyi Ivanovich? – the plant management enquired politely.

– You, dear, know yourself that I've been to none.

– But you probably travelled on your account.

– My account, dear, is only enough for a trip to Pskov and not always for a return trip.

Alevtina tackled the task of packing her husband's suits for his overseas travel with all responsibility.

– This is to be used exclusively for medicinal purposes, – Alevtina said, knitting her brows and shaking her fist at Vasjka, and put a bottle of “Putinka” vodka carefully wrapped in a couple of newspapers in the suitcase. – For an extreme emergency!

An “emergency” occurred already during the third evening of his stay. The guest sitting next to him at the table drew Vasjka's attention to a tall and muscular African standing near the exit from the hotel restaurant, with his eyes glued on their table. Vasjka reassured him and offered his own explanation saying that the guy was seeking an object of sexual pleasures and, therefore, was looking at the woman at their table. The next evening, the new friend accepted Vasjka's assumption but with one reservation: that it was Vasjka himself who was the

object of the guy's attention. Vasjka took a more careful look at the African guy. The guy grinned, baring his teeth and rolling his eyes, and winked at him. Vasjka panicked. He had already heard a lot about all kind of perverts, and began to be seriously concerned about his honour. Vasjka's new friends considered his fears to be pretty well-founded: you never know what to expect from these foreigners. Look at the way they live: they don't know when they are well off. Therefore, they decided to ensure that he was never alone, and to arm themselves, just to be on the safe side. They bought a long knife at an exorbitant price (with Vasjka's money, of course, – all he had left) and advised that he put it under his pillow at night. But there were no solicitations from the African guy. And on the last evening before Vasjka's departure, he, as usual, was staring fixedly at the "object" who became slightly hysterical. Vasjka, escorted by his new-found friends, ran to his room to fetch the bottle of "Putinka", exclusively for medicinal purposes, as instructed by Alevtina. To remove the stress. Vasjka was pouring out vodka himself and, being highly agitated, failed to notice that one more, the fifth, glass appeared on the table.

– With your permission, – a voice, speaking in Russian with a slight accent, came from above. And the fifth glass disappeared in the cupped palm of a huge black hand. Out of fear, Vasjka downed his vodka in one gulp.

– Vasja, friend, don't you recognize me? I'm Dzhamil.

– Which, fuck, Dzhamil? – asked Vasjka, growing somewhat

bolder.

– In the wild steppes, be-yond the Lake of Bai-kal, where gold-diggers toil in the mountains, in the hope of incredible luck, \* – the guy started singing at the top of his voice. – Remember?

– I remember the song, but I don't remember you.

– Well, then let's drink some more.

– Sorry, buddy, I have nothing left at all. I'm flying back tomorrow.

– Don't piss your pants, Vasja. I'm the owner of this hotel.

Dzhamil put up his hand, and two bottles of Tunisian vodka "Buha" \*\* appeared on the table.

– I don't drink, – Vasjka said remembering Alevtina.

– And what is there to drink?! – Dzhamil asked and roared with laughter. – Back then, we drank a lot.

– Well, come straight to the point, will you? – Vasjka knocked back a second drink in one go and went on, – what do you mean by "then"? When was it, and where?

And Dzhamil briefly recounted his experiences in Russia. In the early 90-s, he, along with other students of Peoples' Friendship University (Moscow), was on vacation in a summer camp at the Baikal Lake shore. One day, they came to Irkutsk by bus to make the tour of the city. During the tour, he got carried away by the sights of the city and by talking to his fellow countryman. In short, both of them dropped behind the excursion party and got lost. They were cold, without money, and at a loss

what to do and where to go. They only remembered the name of their camp and that it took over an hour to get there. It was getting dark. They were feeling a little scared. They couldn't think of a way out of the situation, so they were just standing and feeling sad. And then they saw a frail white chap with three mugs of beer in his hands heading towards them from a beer stand near the railway station.

– Well, “peoples’ friendship”, shall we drink? – he asked smiling happily. Then he took a bottle of vodka out of his pocket and pored some into the beer mugs.

– They say in our parts that drinking vodka without beer is wasting your money.

They became warm and cheerful straight away. They got into a conversation.

– Don't panic, “peoples’ friendship”, we'll make it! Russians never abandon friends. Vasja ran to the stationmaster, and within a couple of hours a military GAZ car (off-road vehicle manufactured by GAZ motor works) drove up to them.

But prior to that he ran someplace to fetch a few bottles of vodka more:

– These are for you – to warm yourselves.

While saying goodbye to one another, they were standing for a long time on the square near the station hugging one another and singing at the top of their voices: “In the wild steppes, beyond the Lake of Bai-kal,…”

– Vasja, – completed his narrative (in broken Russian)

Dzhamil, – you made us laugh a lot then, telling us about . . . , how do you call him? Gardian angel? How is he?

– Guardian angel, – corrected him Vasjka. – She is all right. At home, waiting for me, my “carrot”.

And glancing at vodka, added:

– Most likely, with a whip.

Dzhamil, Vasjka and his new friends formed a circle, hugged one another, drawing their heads together, and started to sing quietly: “In the wild steppes,

Joining them little by little, were tourists from other countries. Vasjka had difficulty identifying their nationality. There seemed to be Germans, Poles, Englishmen and some other nationalities as well.

Resounding above the flat roofs of Hammamet right until night, was not very harmonious but powerful multi-voiced singing: “In the wild steppes, be-yond the Lake of Bai-kal, where gold-diggers toil in the moun-tains, in the hope of incre-dible luck, . . .”

# Happiness

The gentle Moldavian sun has already dried the earth a little at the newly whitewashed front of the two-storey house that was built for families of Russian officers a few years ago.

The smell of the thawing earth mixed with the smell of whitewash reminds the girl that it's time to make preparations for the first day of spring – a holiday with a nice name Mărțișor. \*\*\* She needs to stock up on threads of different colours, to make two little brushes to be tied up together with a thick thread which is then tied in a bow. One is supposed to present the beloved ones with red-and-white mărțișors. The girl has already bought up red and white threads and is hopping home to set to work as soon as possible.

The beloved ones are many, but the work with threads doesn't come easily to her: the threads get tangled and torn. The girl's mother watches her torments discontentedly, then, as if having obtained confirmation to some knowledge familiar to her alone, concludes: "No, you'll never amount to anything!"

At the front door, the girl runs into auntie Nyura and stops, eying with admiration a group of women, standing in the middle of which is her mother with her head proudly jerked up.

Mother is wearing a new cashmere overcoat fitting her slender body at the waist and falling in a splendid semi-flare nearly down to her ankles. She has stylish overshoes on from which

shoe edges peep out. She is also wearing a hat revealing the sleek hair that has been raised from the forehead and brushed back and the recently made permanent wave elegantly framing her slightly powdered plump cheeks. The mother's face exposed to the sun reflects pure bliss. She is standing with her eyes closed and smiling happily.

Auntie Nyura wearing a dark-grey overcoat, whose only stylish feature is its huge buttons, and a darned headscarf that has slipped down onto her shoulders, doesn't notice the appearance of the girl since, at the moment, she is trying to convince herself loudly, with a nervous twitch to her cheek:

– Mine has recently heard on the radio that the prices are to go down soon. Then I will be able to buy an overcoat for everyone in the family for the same amount (i.e. for the cost of one overcoat at the currently existing prices). And in the meanwhile, I will wear this one; after all it is practical and not easily soiled. What is the use in buying a beige one: it will show all the dirt.

Saying “mine”, auntie Nyura means by it her husband who she is very proud of. He married her in a remote Russian village where he returned from war safe and sound, decorated with numerous orders – the only survivor from that village. Demobilization found Fyodor Ezhov in Moldavia. And now he was a minor party official. Every day, he would carefully read all the party newspapers from the first to the last line, understanding little or nothing of what he was reading but, unlike the girl's

father, never questioning a thing, including commas.

And the girl's father, who was quick-witted and about everything had an opinion of his own, preferred to keep it to himself in Ezhov's company – just to be on the safe side.

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