

OTHER
OTHERS
OTHERWISE

CHILDREN'S PROJECT 
BY LYUDMILA ULITSKAYA

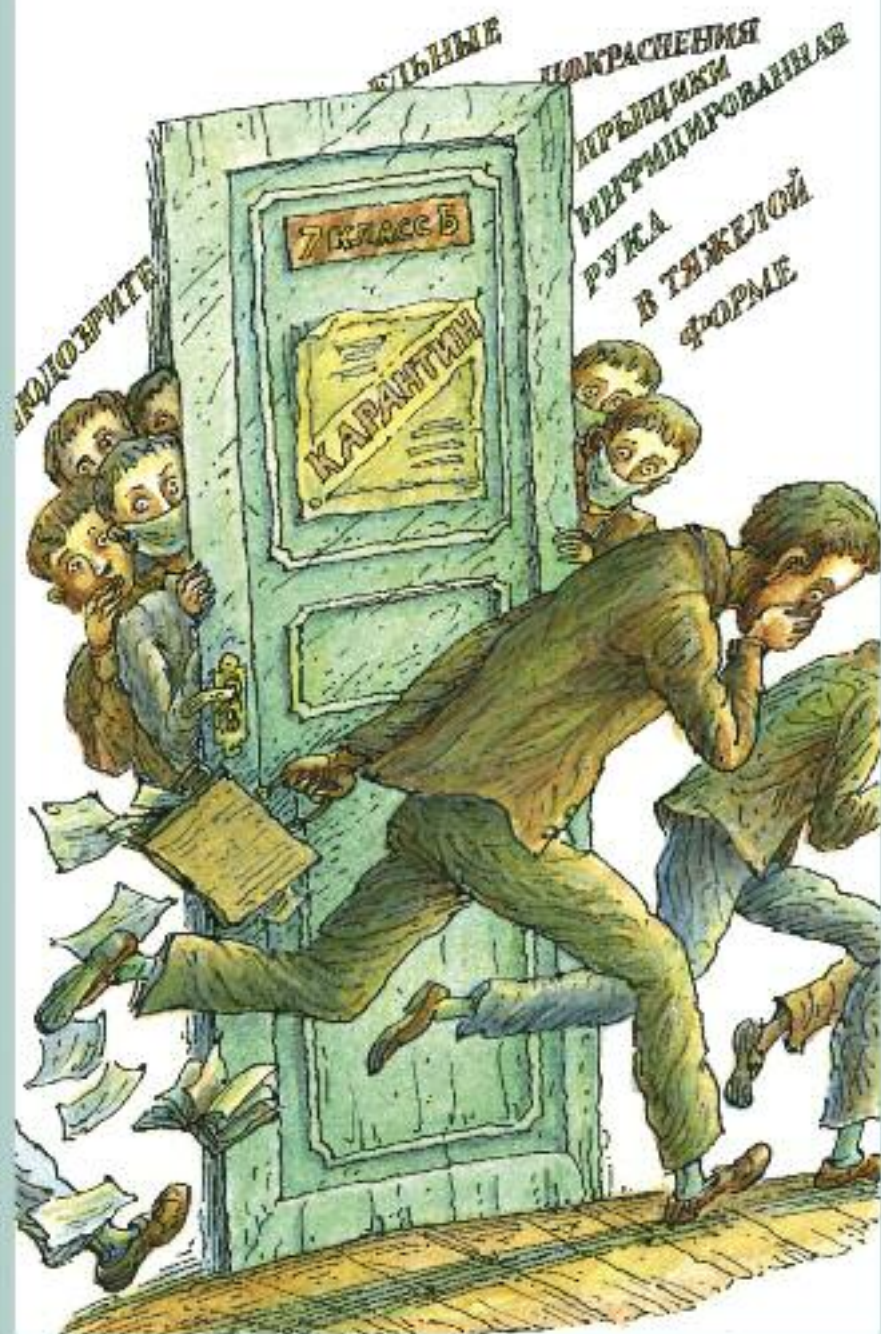
KONSTANTIN SKRIPKIN

HIV
and AIDS:
WHAT
CAN
WE DO
ABOUT
THIS?



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HIV
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WHAT CAN WE DO
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Please, meet Konstantin Skripkin. I do not even know how to introduce him best. Well, I can certainly call him a friend of mine, a geologist by profession. Yet, he thought that was too little, so he took his courses at the Institute of Literature and had three novels published. Too little again, though, so he entered the Department of Psychology to get another profession – psychologist. Now it looked all too much for I can hardly imagine someone working as geologist in the morning, psychologist in the afternoon, and writer in the evening. By the way, he is also a father of four kids, a good father, I must admit, he loves and takes care of each of them.

It goes without saying that Konstantin Skripkin had to sacrifice something, namely geology. Still, he works as psychologist in a hospital and writes his books, wonderful books, as you will find once you read on. It took a lot of efforts to write a book about AIDS as many people believe there are things that should be withheld from teenagers and youngsters – they are not aware of such things and let them continue to be ignorant of so horrible aspects of life!

But the two of us – Konstantin Skripkin and me – are absolutely confident that our children, both mine (older than his) and his (younger than mine), should know everything about life the way we do, including its challenges, problems, things that are unpleasant and things that are even deemed to be indecent. It is sometimes difficult to write in a way making complex things easy to understand. My opinion is that Konstantin Skripkin has done it, though.

This book differs from the other books of this series in that it was written upon UNESCO request. UNESCO stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Its goal is to ensure respect, fairness and compliance with laws and human rights. We are very glad that in our country, too, there are now books telling that all humans in the world have equal rights – no matter whether they are black or white, poor or rich, healthy or ill, educated or those who had no chance to get education.

Best regards and wishes to everyone,
Yours, Lyudmila Ulitskaya

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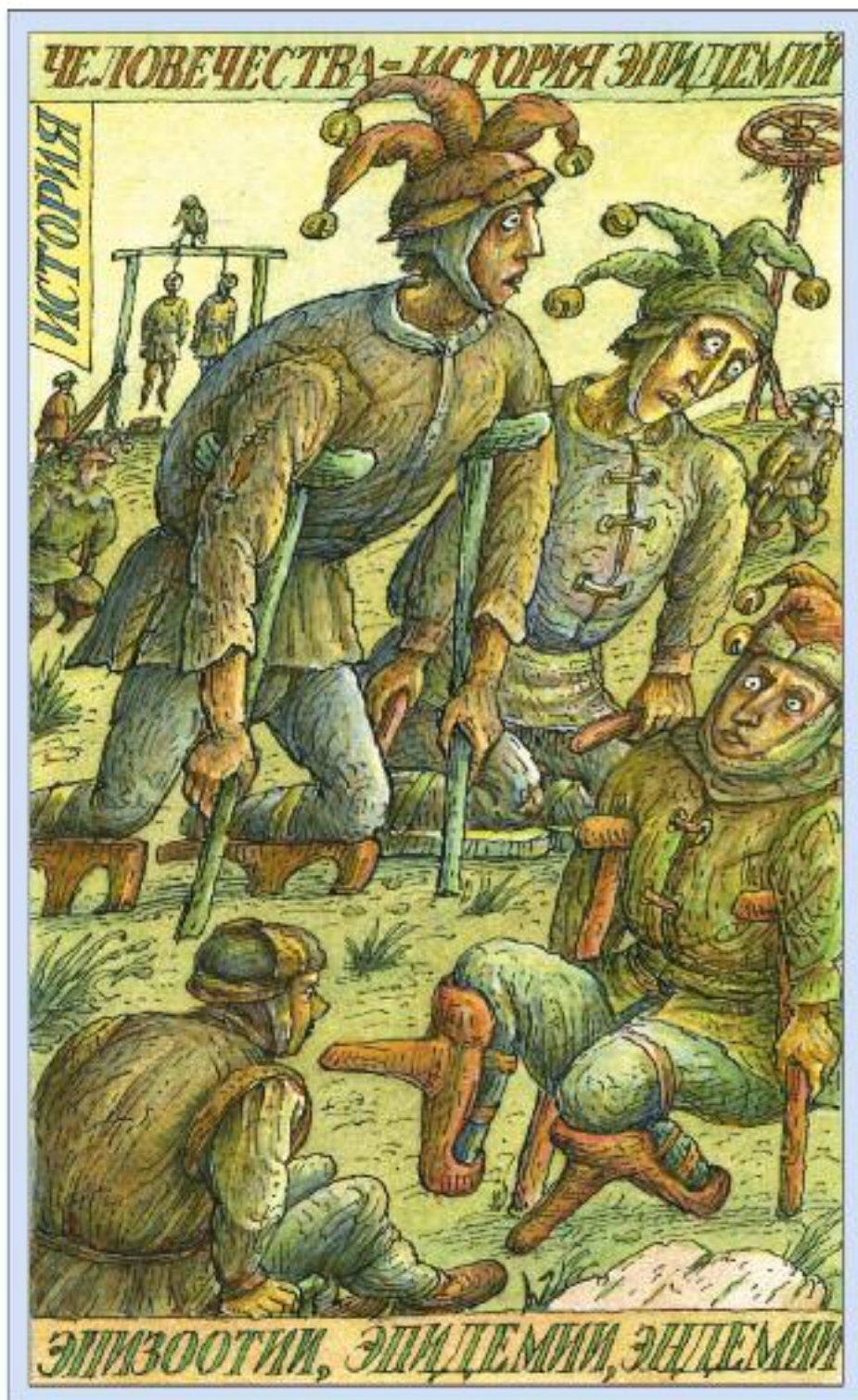


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Chapter 1.

Chickenpox Case in Form 7B

This happened to Cyril and Da'ut in the autumn, when they moved from form 6 to form 7. It was Monday, and the class started with the lesson of literature. Viksa, the name schoolchildren used to call (among themselves, of course) their teacher of literature Viktoriya Sergeevna Samokhina, announced that form 7B was in quarantine as Salikov and Bobrov had fallen ill with chickenpox. That sounded really disappointing: no running about the school, no visits to the canteen, just sitting locked up in the classroom during the recesses, with all the teachers coming straight to the classroom. They even put a placard on the door of the school – infectious disease and all that stuff, so far form 7B affected only.

On the other hand, this had brought some changes – everyone felt like a Spiderman on the day he discovered his superabilities. During the recesses, boys were happy to scare girls “Hey, look, you have your ear all red, and I bet you have got it too”, or poke the girls with allegedly infected finger making them scream in pretended horror. The game seemed to be funny, with the boys laughing and the girls protesting too loudly, calling funny names and slightly striking those who demonstrated excessive familiarity. Three days later the disease took Pinegin and two girls, with another three absentees not appearing next Monday. The classroom looked somewhat empty. Then rumours spread that Salikov had a bad case of chickenpox – he had some half-forgotten problems with his kidneys and was now facing complications, so he was taken to the hospital. According to the doctors, his condition was medium, and it sounded pretty bad.

Everyone was getting nervous. Games like “beware-of-my-disease” no longer seemed interesting or funny to the prisoners-of-quarantine, the recesses looked dull, and the classroom was cold because it had to be aired constantly. Every morning our school doctor would come in and examine each pupil in a business-like manner, and would then summon some of them to the doctor's room. After

Salikov had got complications, she interrogated everyone in our form to learn about any chronic illnesses, and kept special medical record books for each of us, and had our parents to sign there. Da'ut's parents were the only ones who did not sign in the record book, so Viktoria Sergeevna made notes several times in his daybook and was intending to call his parents to explain how important it was to observe doctor's instructions.

Our school doctor was new, fresh from the institute. She had a serious attitude toward infectious diseases and was working diligently. Cyril once told Da'ut that he understood that the daily examination was really needed and there was nothing to fear about it, although the examination was quite an unpleasant thing. Da'ut just shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. Cyril recalled the talk between his parents on the previous day and said that the doctor was just thinking about her career and wanted to be on the safe side. That was merely chickenpox, but the doctor, he said, was fussing about as if it were smallpox or plague or AIDS. Da'ut did not reply, but closely looked into Cyril's eyes, and Cyril felt ill at ease as if he had said something stupid.

Before the fourth lesson Vera Kiseleva, an all-round "A" pupil, a quiet girl wearing huge spectacles and a couple of ridiculous pigtails, came. This time she was also wearing a gauze mask. Cyril tried to reach her with his red-worn hand, but Vera suddenly screamed, threw her literature lesson book at him, and burst out crying. She sobbed, pressing her forehead against the desk, and Cyril stood nearby bewildered, shrugging shoulders and pointing to his head. Someone giggled, but most of the kids reverted eyes. There was a tense silence in the classroom.

It was Da'ut who saved the situation. He sat next to Vera and said loudly that he was sorry for his stupid and senseless friend. Then he turned to Cyril, who was striving to look indifferent, and added that each man should apologize for his silly acts on his own.

"Me? To apologize? I was just joking."

"You were rude."

"Why? Maybe Kiseleva is off her head? Or maybe she had yesterday a brick falling onto her head, or maybe she has fled an asylum



just to attend this lesson? Why should I apologize?”

Vera stopped crying, removed her tear-soaked mask, and said boldly:

“Please don’t quarrel... Thank you, Da’ut. And you, Cyril, just don’t understand many things. My head is all right, and I was not in asylum. I was just playing hooky! Three lessons on end! I just didn’t want to go to school at all, or, I would say I wanted to, but I couldn’t.”

Vera stopped speaking and just sat down, biting her lip and moving her hand on her copy books lying on the desk. Cyril and Da’ut had a brief talk in whispered voices in a corner, waiving their arms. Then Cyril forced out his apology, and Vera twinkled her eyes and started crying again. Her story ran as follows.

Two years passed since her parents had divorced, and now Vera lives with her mother in her Moscow flat, and comes to her father’s place in the countryside on weekends. Her father lives there with his new wife and Vera’s brother Seryozha. However, this weekend father’s new wife Larisa said that she did not want to see Vera, but father did not agree, and when Vera arrived there was a quarrel. Larisa shouted that she would leave for her mother’s place for she did not want any chickenpox at home and their baby was not inoculated, but Vera’s father insisted that his daughter would come because they were a family, they could protect themselves



against any infection, and there was no use shouting because the sooner a child had chickenpox, the better. The quarrel lasted for the whole evening. Vera was sitting and listening, feeling ill at ease, wishing to disappear and vanish. All of the weekend she wore her mask, had her lunch with her father, whereas Larisa no longer showed her usual friendliness, did not talk to Vera, did not let her come close to Vera's brother, constantly aired the house, and reminded Vera to fix her mask whenever it went off. And now, if Vera is taken ill, she may infect her little brother, and Larisa, who is now a nursing mother, and her father, and she feels guilty and does not understand how it all happened.

Viktoria Sergeevna had quietly entered the classroom some time ago, but did not interrupt Vera and was now sitting next to Vera and asked her to carry on. Everyone silently listened to Vera until she finished.

"I was a moron to have said this, I am sorry," Cyril said.

"As a matter of fact," said Viksa, "I think it's high time to discuss it. The lesson of literature will be different today, but I think it's for the better. Please tell me what you think about quarantine."

Now it was Sasha Poskrebyshev's turn to surprise everyone. He had always been such a quiet boy, but now he said with an air of challenge that everyone in fact wanted to be ill to have a valid excuse for not going to school, a good opportunity for keeping at home, while those who expressed any different opinion were liars. He, Poskrebyshev, didn't give a damn that he might infect anybody, he had his own problems to handle. In the end Sasha said triumphantly that he did not mind this situation, but what he did not quite like about it was that the lesson of literature was cancelled although he had prepared to answer the lesson because he wanted to correct the bad mark he had got the day before yesterday, and by the next lesson he would forget what he had learned. Viktoria Sergeevna listened to him attentively and requested Sasha to recite the poem right away lest he should forget it. Poskrebyshev unwillingly moved to the blackboard and stammered out a fragment from "Poltava" by Pushkin about Mazepa's treason, but did not come to the end: he stopped, kept silent and finally said in a sullen voice that he knew it well, but forgot all of it as soon as they said that the lesson was cancelled.

Form 7B was back in quarantine. Almost all of the kids seemed to be nervous. Each of them imagined at least once that he/she fell ill by mistaking a mere sneeze or a pimple for the onset of disease. Yet, general talk calmed them down a little.

EPIDEMICS, EPIZOOTICS, EPIPHYTOTIES AND ENDEMIAS IN HUMAN HISTORY

Everyone knows the word “epidemic”. Yet, words like “endemia”, “epizootic” or “epiphytoty” sound quite unfamiliar to many people. “Epizootic” and “epiphytoty” are epidemics, too, only with the animals (epizootic) and plants (epiphytoty). Everyone heard about epizootics of bird flue and mad cow disease which pose threat to human health, too. They do not normally cure ill animals, but just destroy them.

The word “endemia” applies to humans and means that the number of cases does not grow abruptly, but remains about the same year after year. Endemias may sometimes depend on social and natural conditions, or are just caused by steady infection. For example, the horrible endemia of tuberculosis kills about three million people worldwide every year.

It is exactly epidemics that pose utmost threat. Vast epidemics are sometimes called **pandemics**. Some of research specialists call human history the history of epidemics — outbreaks of infectious diseases used to shake the world no less than the wars. Epidemic of smallpox in V B.C. cut out the army of Persian tsar Xerxes and thereby saved Greece from Persian conquerors, and enabled the Greeks to stay independent and create their great culture.

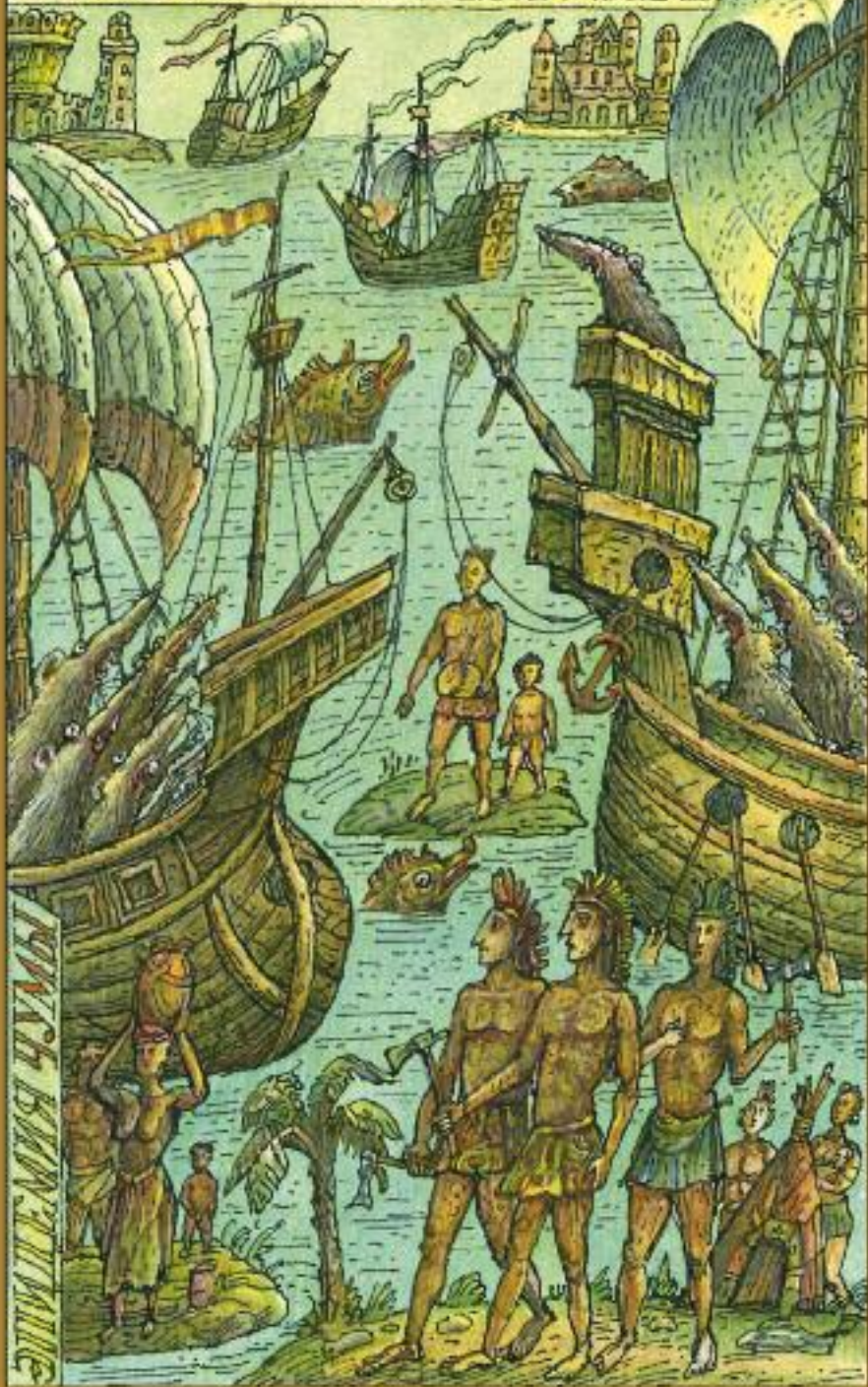
In 165 A.D., the Roman Empire lost 5 million people from epidemic of plague, including its emperor Marcus Aurelius. This epidemic was described by famous doctor Galen and was called Antonin plague.

In the Middle Ages, Europe was shaken by bubonic plague which came from the East, killing more than 100 thousand people



ЭПИДЕМИИ У ЖИВОТНЫХ

РАЗНОСЧИКАМИ ЯВИЛИСЬ КРЫСЫ



ИМУТ ВАНЧЕ ИЛИ

in Florence alone, — almost the entire population of the city. In Europe, there were millions of victims.

The latest epidemic of plague dates back to late XIX century, with the rats traveling in the ship holds acting as the vector. This epidemic was the last one because humans at that time discovered the plague's agent and found the treatment methods.

In XV century the world was shaken by an epidemic of syphilis, a terrible disease that could not be cured at that time. The agent was brought to Europe by the Spanish discoverers coming back from the American continent. Many believed that syphilis was the visitation for human sins: the faithful often blamed epidemics on the Lord's will rather than the natural causes.

With time, the number of syphilis-affected people has become steady, turning the epidemic into endemia. Today, syphilis is easy to cure. Earliest treatment is important, though.

In XVIII and XIX centuries, epidemics of cholera spread from the east to the west, taking millions of lives.

Today, many people are affected by yearly epidemics of flue. Almost all people fall ill with flue, but few people know that this traditional virus changes about every 40 years by mutating to a new, more dangerous form. A sample of catastrophic result of mutation is the Spanish flue, an epidemic that broke out in the end of the First World War and took 25 to 40 million lives.

The 70-s saw the emergence of Ebola hemorrhagic fever, with over 90% of infected people being a fatal case.

And, of course, there is the latest pestilence — AIDS. In just about 30 years of epidemic, about 25 million people have died of AIDS, including 4 million children. In XXI century, about 3 million people die of AIDS every year.

Thus, humankind has not yet resolved the problem of fatal infections.

When everyone had his/her say, Viktoria Sergeevna said that she, too, felt fear for her little daughter. Besides, her husband had not been ill with chickenpox in his childhood, while the disease ran quite severely with the adults. Then she asked a catchy question.

“Please, tell me whether you are angry with Salikov and Bobrov for their having fallen ill?” she asked. “Maybe you feel offended?”

For a moment no one answered. Finally, Poskrebyshev snarled, without standing up, that Salikov and Bobrov were morons and caused others to suffer.

“Yes, I am angry with them. That is to say, not only with them,” Sasha Poskrebyshev added and cast an unfriendly glance at Viktoria Sergeevna.

Vera Kiseleva said she was angry only with herself as she was stupid enough to come to her dad for the weekend.

“So, for how long are you going to refrain from the visits to your father?” asked Viksa. “Quarantine will last for twenty-one day since the date of the latest case registered. It seems you are not going to see your father and brother for quite a long time, right? And you are not going to be angry with anyone for this?”

Vera, who had never had a reputation of a crybaby before, quietly wept again.

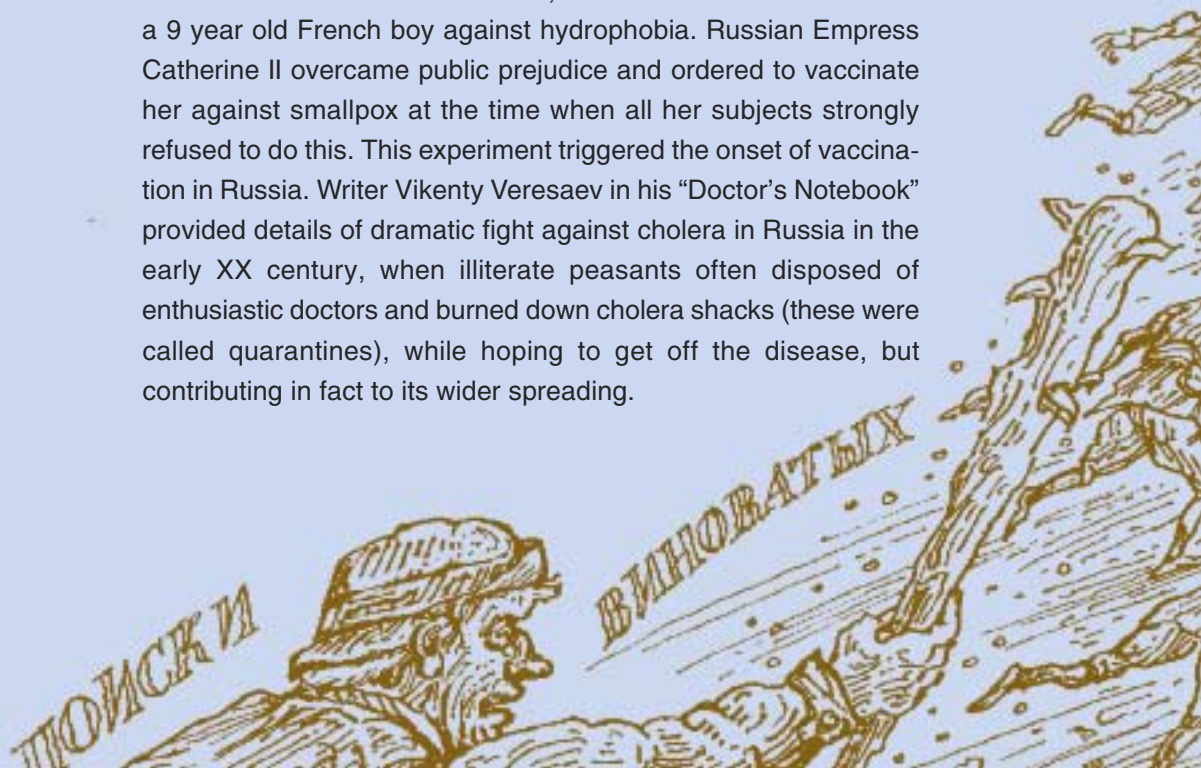
WHO IS TO BLAME?

In the past, humans feared diseases much more than any visible threat. Diseases, especially infectious ones, were unpredictable, and in the Middle Ages even educated doctors did not perceive any logic in their spread, assuming this was the Lord's will. However, absolute helplessness sooner or later turned to a sort of witch-hunting. The blame was shifted on those who was easier to be angry with or who was easier to find fault with. Those who looked different or who were the objects of envy were among the suspects. People, mad with fear, were searching for bedeviling witches, and even the most ridiculous evidences of guilt started to look quite convincing. Someone used this blind public wrath to put it across with the enemies, political opponents or business competitors. They seized at the opportunity to blame it on the neigh-

bouring countries and to raise the nation's morale. For example, the Spaniards and the Germans called syphilis a French disease, the French used to call it a Neapolitan disease, while the Greeks called it a Syrian disease. In any case, the infection was believed to come from the "neighbours".

Of course, the blame was also put on the diseased. Humanism and compassion most often conceded to unfriendliness and fear. Those infected were often facing a fate that could hardly be envied. It sometimes happened that the diseased were left all alone, with no one attending to them. Sometimes, there was even no possibility to bury them. The houses of those diseased used to turn into the vaults, shared by the dead and those dying. The only way to somehow respond to the disease was to isolate the carriers. Back in the Middle Ages, people often burned the diseased together with their houses. This practice was certainly not a part of the government policy, but the arsons were often initiated by neighbours, quite pleasant and friendly people as recently as the day before.

A crucial point in human efforts against epidemics was vaccination, although in the beginning people feared vaccination even more than disease. French microbiologist and chemist Louis Pasteur identified the agents of a number of diseases such as anthrax, parturient infection, cholera, hydrophobia, and proposed a preventive vaccination method. In 1885, he was the first to vaccinate a 9 year old French boy against hydrophobia. Russian Empress Catherine II overcame public prejudice and ordered to vaccinate her against smallpox at the time when all her subjects strongly refused to do this. This experiment triggered the onset of vaccination in Russia. Writer Vikenty Veresaev in his "Doctor's Notebook" provided details of dramatic fight against cholera in Russia in the early XX century, when illiterate peasants often disposed of enthusiastic doctors and burned down cholera shacks (these were called quarantines), while hoping to get off the disease, but contributing in fact to its wider spreading.



The discussion rolled on. Cyril, who was usually quiet, now said, after thinking for a while, that he was angry neither with Salikov nor Bobrov, but he was still irritated with the situation because the vacation would start in just two months, his dad had already bought a tour to the castles of Loire for three persons – Cyril, his stepsister Alya, and himself, – but if he (Cyril) was taken ill there would be no trip to Loire. Of course, no one was to blame, but if the trip was cancelled, then both his dad and Alya would be mad at Salikov, at Bobrov and at the entire Russian education and healthcare system.

The classroom went noisy. The general idea was: it was impossible to stay cool if your plans were ruined. Even Vera Kiseleva noted cautiously that, although she was a well-brought girl and understood that the diseased boys were not to blame, the whole situation sort of irritated her.

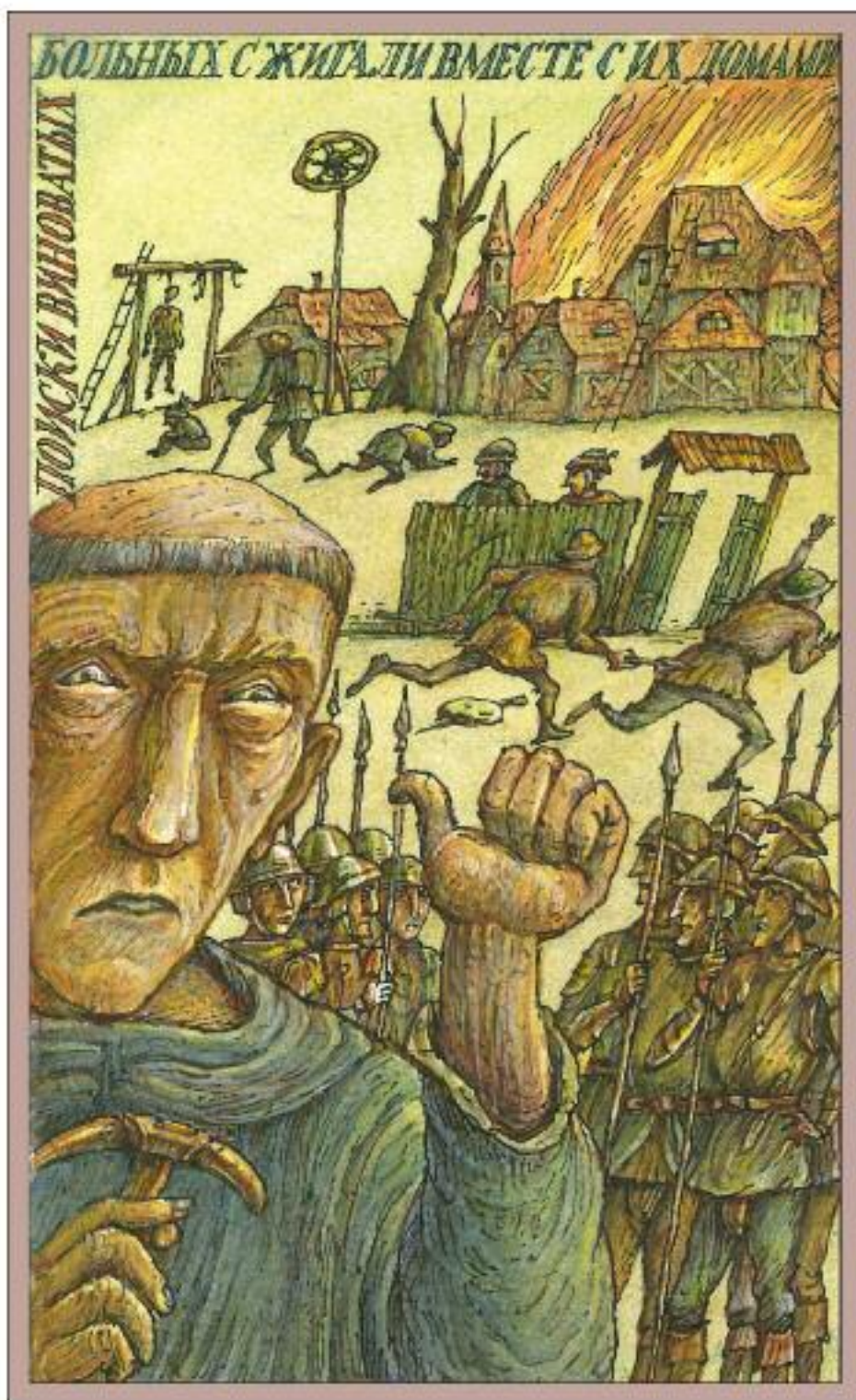
Da'ut was silent and, when asked by Viksa to tell them his opinion, just remarked in a sulky voice that there was nothing to be angry with, chickenpox was almost nothing, and everyone was mad because they were not let out of the classroom to fool around during recesses. Then someone let off some joke about the school doctor, but Viktoria Sergeevna stood up for her:

“Well, boys and girls, you should understand that there have been no chickenpox case in any other school forms because the quarantine was arranged so fast. Our doctor did a great job. Usually, chickenpox spreads to cover the entire school in just a week because it is transmitted through airborne droplets, the fastest way of spreading. On the other hand, we know how to protect ourselves, although such methods may not work sometimes.

INFECTION TRANSMISSION WAYS

A disease is called infectious if caused by pathogenic microorganisms. Only few of the known varieties of bacteria are dangerous for humans. Some bacteria are even needed, for example, to improve digestion. Dangerous microorganisms are called pathogenic, whereas infection is the disease-related process of interaction between microorganism and human organism. It should be noted that most of pathogenic germs do not live long if exposed to environment, and are adapted for life in human organism only. Infection does not spread unless there are conditions for efficient





transmission of pathogenic germs from an infected person to a non-infected person. Infection can be transmitted in a variety of ways, and we should know them to avoid disease.

With enteric infection used as an example, the following ways of transmission are described: **through water** (use of infected water for drinking, bathing, or use of water for domestic/household needs), **through food**, **through airborne droplets** (agent is transmitted through air in droplets of mucus released from respiratory passages of the diseased), **through soil** (some agents stay in the soil for a long or short time), and **through contacts**. Contacts can be either direct (direct contacts of skin or mucous membranes) or indirect (through shared items). Another way of transmission is **arthropod-borne** transmission of infection through infected insects (mosquitoes for malaria, lice for spotted fever, etc.).

The contact transmission is certainly much easier to control than the airborne-droplet one. The way of transmission is the most important parameter of disease. For example, flue spreads perfectly through airborne droplets, while the probability of being infected is so high that few people have not been taken ill with flue. Fortunately, flue does not normally entail any severe consequences. If we take another example — Human Immunodeficiency Virus — this virus triggers an incurable disease in human organism that can be transmitted through direct contact only. It should be admitted, though, that probability of infection is quite low as compared with flue.

There was very little time left until the end of the lesson. Viksa looked closely at sulky Poskrebyshv, thought for a moment, and said:

“You, Sasha, look so unhappy because of the quarantine. And you even wanted to talk nothing else but literature. Please, tell me who of the Russian writers had to change his plans because of quarantine and came up with beautiful books. Is there anybody who can recall those books?”

Poskrebyshev moved his arms in an ask-me-another-question way: “Well, Viktoria Sergeevna, this question is not in our curriculum.”

Everyone started to talk because Viksa had recently told them about it and many pupils knew the answer:

“It’s Pushkin who was quarantined!”

“He was on his way from Boldino, but was stopped at cholera checkpoints, and Alexander Sergeevich had nothing to do but spend the whole autumn in the village, although he needed to go to Moscow”

“While in quarantine, he wrote “The Shot”, “The Snowstorm”, “Mozart and Salieri”, “The Stone Guest”, “Feast in Plague”...

“But he also committed to flames Chapter 10 of “Evgeny Onegin”!”

“That was just two months before his wedding with Natalya Goncharova...”

“That’s it,” Viktoria Sergeevna said, “it was during the quarantine, during the unwanted idleness that the genius wrote his best pages! So cheer up and try to use this period the way Pushkin did.”

Chapter 2.

Something is Wrong with Da’ut

It so happened that Cyril and Da’ut were getting more and more apart. The previous year they used to frequently visit one another, play football, sit at computer, and just hang around together, sharing secrets. After summer vacation, however, Da’ut no longer visited Cyril’s place. Moreover, when Cyril once dropped in on Da’ut for just a moment, Da’ut almost pushed him out.

Also, this strange attitude to Vera Kiseleva: why should Da’ut bring apology for Cyril? It’s not the way real friends act...

Cyril tried to broach this subject on a number of occasions, but Da’ut would not give a straightforward reply. On one of the weekends Cyril talked to his father, and he proposed to try to get everything clear.



“You see,” he said, “Da’ut comes from Caucasus, you might have done some wrong thing you had no idea of. Some people are very sensitive when it comes to traditions.”

Cyril decided to consult his stepfather Phil so as to be on the safe side, but Phil said about the same, and added that Da’ut was a good type and he had proved it many times.

Next day, Cyril did not give Da’ut any chance of sneaking away after classes, and requested explanations. Da’ut insisted that he had not taken any offence at anything and was just busy with his studies and had no spare time. Then Cyril used a decisive argument in that if Da’ut did not feel like talking, then it was on account of national enmity toward Cyril. Da’ut gave up:

“All right, but first swear not to tell anyone.”

“I swear!” Cyril said. Disquiet gave him the creeps.

“Swear your mother’s name!” Da’ut insisted.

“My mother’s name...” Cyril stuttered, deeply worried.

“No, repeat after me: I swear my mother’s name!”

Cyril repeated.

Da’ut stood up silently and gestured to Cyril to follow him. Cyril was now regretting his persistence.



Chapter 3.

Family Secret

Da'ut brought Cyril in the anteroom of the neighbouring house. They used the lift to mount the top floor, got out to the flight of stairs and sat down on the windowsill. Da'ut said:

“This is our family secret. I am now going to disclose another person’s secret involving my blood sister and the whole family. That is why I caused you to give an utmost swear. You can still take it back, Cyril.”

But Cyril understood there was no way to retreat. He nodded.

“Then listen to my story. It’s about Leila. Do you remember the case when Leila was a second-year student of medical college and my grandfather happened to see her on TV dancing in some theatre class, wearing just her bathing suit, and all that stuff...?”

“I sure do. She was afterwards kept locked up in the room for a month.”

“Well, they all then made it up and she stopped visiting the theatre class. Well, she actually would not go out in the evening. So, what happened to her was...”

Cyril was afraid to hear the story given such an ominous preamble and gloomy mood of Da'ut. He was ready to retreat so as not to listen to any gruesome stories. It was too late, though.

“Leila got a fiancé,” Da'ut went on. “His name is Mario. He comes from Spain. A surgeon, working for Medecins Sans Frontieres.

MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS

There are people across the world who help the residents of poor counties needing medical aid, but having neither the money for medical treatment nor any well-developed medical service. These volunteers feel compassionate for other people’s troubles and want to make the world better, so they are attempting to make life easier for those in trouble. Medecins Sans Frontieres,

MSF, is just one of organizations uniting such enthusiasts. MSF was established in 1971 by French doctors, and today this is an independent international organization rendering free medical and humanitarian aid to those who suffered man-made disasters or acts of war. MSF has been working in over 70 countries on all continents, in all “hot spots”. MSF comprises about 2,500 people, both volunteers and regular staff. MSF exists on private donations, and does not depend on any government. Voluntary

donations come from over 2 million people every year. MSF traditionally advocates human rights and attempts to attract public attention to the crises and their consequences. In post-war Chechnya, for example, MSF arranged mobile clinics for the residents of Grozny and its vicinities, as well as for the residents of the neighbouring Ingushetia. MSF reconditioned polyclinic premises in Grozny and opened a free chemist's.

In 1999, MSF was awarded the Nobel Prize. During the awarding ceremony, president of the French division of MSF said: “We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we are absolutely sure that silence may kill.”



Cyril was astonished – that was not a big deal of a secret! Then it occurred to him:

“This fiancé is probably going to kidnap Leila? Do you remember telling me about this custom among mountaineers? Do you need my help? You can count on me!”

“No, it's not this. It's different. Well, her fiancé is still staying away. He seems to have left her for good.

“Left her? ”Cyril asked indignantly. “I wonder where these scumbags come from.”

“Well, it's a long story to tell. This Mario used to deliver lectures and hold training sessions on Saturdays in her medical college,

MSF РАБОТАЕТ В 80 СТРАНАХ МИРА



but almost no students attended these, unlike Leila, who found them interesting. Mario worked in Asia, in Africa and in Latin America. He told her about the initiative against poverty and famine. About various new approaches they did not use before. About the measures against AIDS. They used to meet for some time although Leila did not tell this to her folks – she was afraid they would lock her up in the room again. Then this Mario left and came back in a few months. He met our parents, and told our grandfather that his intentions were serious, and invited all of us to visit him in Baqueira. He also said there were mountains back in his home country, like in Abkhazia, so it turned out he was a mountaineer, too. Mom had white nights for two weeks, sitting up until midnight waiting for Leila to come home or make a call, everyone was so nervous, with my mother and father discussing in whisper what to do as Leila was in for disgrace or probably had already disgraced herself. All of us generally liked Mario, he is an interesting person, graduated from Sorbonne University and is now working for Medecins Sans Frontieres. He stayed in Moscow for several weeks and left for Africa. He said there was a lot of work to do there as many people needed help. Poor Leila – my folks nearly sent her to the grave – she used to date with him and now he left her... I did not understand what they were suspecting her of. I know my sister, she would never let herself do anything wrong. To cut a long story short, Mario called in three days and said he had arranged an invitation for Leila. He also inquired about passport details of our parents to arrange an invitation for them, too. The parents seemed now to calm down, and they even started to check how much they would have to spend to buy the tickets. But Leila showed her teeth, saying: “No. You’ll come for the wedding party only.” Father and mother were vexed, dad told mom that their daughter was as stubborn as mom and that the world would collapse if children did not obey parents. Then they talked in their room in low voices, I heard almost nothing, but it seems that mom reminded dad that they had not obeyed their parents, either. Well, Leila left and came back in a couple of weeks. She looked happy. She said she had been met at the airport

by Mario and all of his family, not just three or four people but twenty or thirty – uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. They had a big house, and everyone liked and respected Mario, and they took an utmost care of Leila, fiancé of the elder son. Well, they decided to marry in autumn.”

“So he left her after all these events?” Cyril asked, bewildered.

“I haven’t finished my story yet. Leila got the visa to Zaire, have you heard about that country? It’s in Africa. Mario flew to Zaire to work, and Leila, too, was invited to work as medical attendant in a hospital. They recognize our diplomas down there. I can’t describe how my parents felt. Father first took away Leila’s passport, and you know what she did? You won’t believe! She was absolutely cool, and she told dad that she was full age, she got her degree, and she was offered a most interesting job, and she had her fiancé waiting for her there. So why dad was assuming he could direct her life? Well, Leila eventually left for Zaire and I was even proud of how tough and single-minded person my sister had grown.

HUMAN IMMUNE SYSTEM

Our organism is constantly exposed to various particles from the ambient environment. They enter our organism when we are eating, drinking or breathing; they also penetrate through microcracks, pores or scratches in our skin. Many of those are useful and helpful, some of them are neutral and our organism just ignores them, but there are also those that inflict harm or even pose threat of death. **Immunity** is the organism’s ability to resist infections and alien components. Over multimillion years of evolution organisms have been shaping a sophisticated, strong and reliable defence system. It sometimes happens that immunity to a certain microorganism is generated right after the first contact. This principle is used for vaccination: a weakened virus, unable to cause any serious harm, is made to enter organism to trigger a life-long defence reaction. Most of threat is posed by the viruses that are capable of frequent





mutations, thus denying a life-long defence. Sometimes, however, the immune system acts wrong by mistaking dangerous microorganisms for innocent ones, and the organism turns helpless when exposed to such crafty virus wearing the mask of neutrality or friendliness. One of these is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). More details on this virus will be provided below.

The immune system works well provided that the organism is not debilitated, is sound, and possesses an appropriate amount of nutrients. Yet, the immune system, like any other system of organism, becomes very fragile when exposed to excessive fatigue and debilitation. It may become disrupted because of the disease or, sometimes, because of the side effects of medical drugs. This enhances the risk of any disease, and the latter will last longer and cause complications more frequently. A healthy person can recondition the immune system by having a full-time rest and staying in friendly climatic zones (conifer forest, seaside, etc.).

However, the immune system itself may be impaired and gradually destroyed, and it will no longer be able to perform its functions. HIV leads to an incurable disease of immunity.

In 1999, MSF was awarded the Nobel Prize. During the awarding ceremony, president of the French division of MSF said: "We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we are absolutely sure that silence may kill."

The boys had been sitting on the windowsill for more than one hour, and Da'ut was going on with his story. So, Leila left for Africa, and Mario met her on arrival. Leila made a call from Lubumbashi, Zaire, and said that we should not complain about our life. One should see the residents of Katanga Province to realise what a real poverty was, and she, Leila, now understood that we live a beautiful life and should feel happy every day we live. Mom agreed, but just asked Leila to come back as dad and grandfather were worrying. But Leila did not even think about coming back, and called regularly twice a week. She went through a snap training course, received a certificate of assistant surgeon, and assisted Mario with his operations. She was proud of Mario and told everyone that he was trusted to work unattended although he was quite an inexperienced doctor, and that he did his job very well. Then Leila did not call for several weeks. Mother did not sleep at nights sitting up by the telephone waiting for the call. Then Leila suddenly appeared. And she kept silent.

"That guy Mario must have left her?" Cyril asked with sympathy. No good, of course, but not fatal either, there is nothing here to keep secret about.

"No one knows so far," Da'ut said in a gloomy voice.

"You know what I'm gonna tell you? Was it just because of this that you made me swear my mother's name? No one surely likes to be left alone. But your Leila looks so nice, and she will have no problems finding a better guy. I just don't understand why to make such a fuss."

"Listen till the end first, and then you may come up with your silly comments. I have not yet told you the most essential thing. It's because Leila did not tell us for a whole month. It was only three weeks ago that we learned it."

"So what did you learn?"

"Well," Da'ut seemed to be weighing his words. He paused for a moment and continued: "During one of the operations Leila pierced her glove and hurt herself to blood."

"So what?" Cyril whispered. He was frightened.

"The fact is that 70% of the patients in that hospital had AIDS."

AIDS — ACQUIRED IMMUNODEFICIENCY SYNDROME

AIDS is a syndrome, or a course of disease. The virus causing this disease is called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). The disease manifests itself in a gradual destruction of human immune system. The organism ceases to resist infections, grows debilitated, and dies of any of the variety of diseases which a healthy organism would easily suppress. An HIV-positive person will die in a few years unless duly treated.

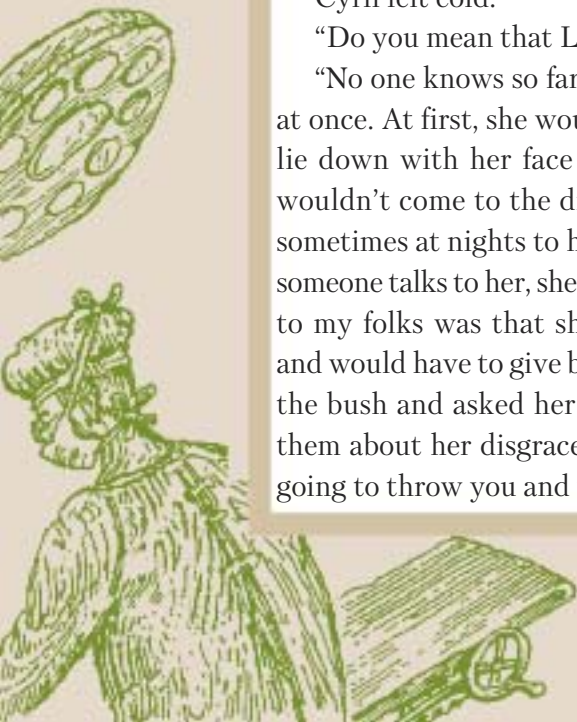
HIV is one of the youngest viruses known. Humankind has known it for some 30 years. During this period, short as it may seem, over 25 million of people have already died of AIDS, with another 33 million (as of late 2008) being infected, i.e. being HIV-positive.

The early XXI century has seen even a wider spread of HIV, with the number of those diseased close to 40 million, but thanks to great efforts made by many self-sacrificing people, by the year 2008 the spread rate of epidemic has somewhat dropped, although it is still very high in East Europe and in Russia where the current number of the diseased exceeds one million people.

Cyril felt cold.

“Do you mean that Leila has caught AIDS?”

“No one knows so far. She came back and had her analyses taken at once. At first, she wouldn’t tell anything at home. She would just lie down with her face to the wall and answer no questions. She wouldn’t come to the dinner-table to eat. She would just stand up sometimes at nights to have a quick bite. She grew thin... Whenever someone talks to her, she starts crying. The first thought that occurred to my folks was that she had disgraced herself and was pregnant, and would have to give birth being unmarried. Dad didn’t beat about the bush and asked her straightforwardly why she was not telling them about her disgrace. We are no brutes, he said, and we are not going to throw you and your baby out. This time she cried and told



us everything. Told us about the operation and how she had hurt herself. And what we will be in for if it comes to AIDS. You see, it takes at least three months to come up with the diagnosis. Or maybe half a year. That guy who was operated on was HIV-infected. And now we have to wait for half a year to know for certain whether Leila is ill. She insists that she poses no danger to others as HIV is transmitted through blood- or mucous membrane contacts.”

“Holy cow!” Cyril muttered.

“Do you understand now how tired I am of that chickenpox fuss? Much ado about nothing! Don’t even want to speak about it.”

“Maybe there is nothing to worry about?”

“Nothing? Dad thinks we can catch infection, too, and transmit it to others. Indeed, he has changed a lot since recently. I am not even allowed to come close to our TV set or computer as he believes we have been punished for all those obscenities we learn from TV programmes and Internet, and Moscow and other large cities are the demon’s place, and all normal people here are gradually turning evildoers.

“And what about Mario?” Cyril asked.

Da’ut frowned and said that no one knew it except, maybe, for Leila, but she wouldn’t tell, and would start crying if asked about Mario. She came back one month and a half ago, but they haven’t heard of Mario ever since.

“So, that’s it, Cyril. We’ll probably move elsewhere shortly, mom and dad have not decided yet, but they have been thinking about it. They say if Leila is found to be ill, we’ll have to leave Moscow. I don’t know, where to and why, especially bearing in mind that dad has just started to make success with his job...

“Is it true that you can...well...is there any probability that you may infect, for example, me?”

“I don’t know. Leila said no, but dad thinks one should not trust anything and... I don’t know, Cyril.”

“I still think you have no grounds to be that nervous...” Cyril attempted to bolster his friend, but he felt he was not much of a success as his words lacked confidence. Da’ut interrupted him, saying that he shouldn’t say anything, he would just go home, and they could speak the next day, and Cyril should just remember his oath. Cyril assured him that he would remember and never forget it.

Chapter 4.

Searching for a Wayout

There was nobody in. Cyril automatically walked into the bathroom, and washed his hands using the soap. Then it occurred to him that he did not normally wash himself after school so carefully, but he still used soap to wash his face and neck, and ended up by wiping his hands with his mother's toilet water. The very idea that one may catch an incurable AIDS instead of chickenpox and really die by rotting dead by the end of the school year boosted his heart and caused cold fear to take his mind away. Cyril tried to drive the fear away by repeating to himself that it was all but absurd, maybe

Da'ut's sister, let alone Da'ut, was all right, while he, Cyril, was further from AIDS than anyone. His memory readily reminded him that he and Da'ut had almost no communication that month, not even handshakes, they had not wrestled, they had not shared a pack of chips, Cyril had not drunk anything from Da'ut's glass, had not chewed the gum already started by Da'ut, had not mistaken Da'ut's tee-shirt for his own shirt in the school cloakroom, and even had not used Da'ut's towel after a football game. All these he had sometimes done before, but not that year.

Cyril was sipping his tea in the kitchen and was gradually calming down. He repeated to himself that there was no danger of AIDS for himself, and this helped. He thought that Da'ut was in fact a real friend, keeping Cyril away from danger for such a long time. Then Cyril found himself seated at his computer.

Internet offered plenty of information on AIDS, and every now and then Cyril was about to call Da'ut to share this information. But he did not feel like being distracted, and it would look stupid to call every five minutes. So Cyril started to generate important facts in a special letter, and printed it out once he was through.



CYRIL'S LETTER TO DA'UT ABOUT AIDS

Hi, Da'ut. I can imagine how you have felt all this month. Now it's all clear to me, and I know you are a real friend of mine. When you know just in theory about the existence of incurable diseases, they don't look that awesome. But when you really imagine that you can be affected, you feel creeps. Frankly speaking, I felt some fear after your story, you must have noticed this. Please, don't think that I am a coward. I did not allow panic to seize me, and started to read about this goddamned AIDS. Listed below are the data I learned:

1. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a disease involving human dysimmunity. This syndrome may occur not only from HIV infection, but also from other diseases (radiation disease and chronic debilitating diseases). The term "AIDS-infected" is therefore incorrect as AIDS is a form of the course of disease, but not an infection.

2. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus destroying the immune system and leading to AIDS. It is exactly HIV that people may be infected with, also called HIV-positive persons.

3. And now the most important thing! HIV is not transmitted in normal household conditions, through hand-shakes and even kisses, let alone through sneezing or coughing. Over the 30 years of AIDS existence no one has revealed any of the above-said ways of transmission. It's hard to believe, but all of related websites present same information. This HIV does not seem to transmit readily, and one has to really lay oneself open to problems to catch the virus. It turns out that people can live a happy life of husband and wife for years without infecting one another as long as they use condoms and do not suck each other's blood (this is a joke).

4. AIDS may be caused by the virus getting into a person's bloodstream. According to information presented on all related websites, the risk will be minimal even if a person scratches oneself with something, e.g. an item, that had a prior contact with HIV. If your sister scratched herself, but the blood was running in a way that denied any dangerous amount of virus access to the bloodstream, then she will not fall ill. Indeed, according to statistics, those who acquired HIV medically are very few — just about 0.3%.

5. The most widespread method used for diagnostics of HIV in the organism consists in the search of antibodies against the virus. This method is called ELISA (Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay). The fact is that the antibodies are not generated as soon as the organism is infected. Instead, it is not until 3 to 12 weeks following the infection that the antibodies will start to appear. The period while the amount of antibodies is too little to be clearly identified, whereas the person concerned might have already become the virus carrier, is called the “window period”. According to the specialists, this period is expected to last for a maximum of 3 to 5 weeks, although many visitors of AIDS-related websites claim to have witnessed the cases where HIV was identified not until 6 months and sometimes not until one year following the suspected infection, whereas any earlier antibody assays gave a negative result. That is why your sister relies on a 6-month period. All websites refer to a period of 3 months maximum. By the way, there are medical drugs that cause the virus to become less active. If someone, who found oneself in a situation involving a risk of infection, starts to use such a drug, then the virus concentration will drop, and the risk will therefore be still lower. But this only applies to the persons who live as husband and wife. As far as transmission through daily household activities is concerned, everyone insists that this kind of transmission is impossible. So it looks that you, Da’ut, as well as your dad and mom, may feel safe. There is no risk for any of you. Hoping for the best.

A few words about antibodies. I did not know what they are, but I checked. Antibodies are particles generated by organism in response to infection. It is often much easier to identify presence of antibodies than that of the infectious agent. Based on the presence/absence of antibodies in the blood, doctors diagnose presence/absence of virus in the organism.

Your friend,
Cyril.

Cyril felt he was making quite an expert. Now that he has learned so much, he felt calm. If information on the websites was reliable, then neither Da’ut, nor his parents, let out Cyril, could be infected



by Leila. Well, even the presence of infection with Leila did not look now indisputable. Cyril rushed to call Da'ut to calm him down, and then they met. Da'ut read Cyril's letter and they headed for a computer club where they spent several hours reading more about AIDS. The boys were resolute to gain as much information as possible about HIV and to convince Da'ut's family that this was not the end of life and that they did not need to move elsewhere. It occurred to Da'ut that the websites were deliberately presenting wishful information, but the reality might turn out to be much worse. Cyril said that he, too, was thinking about it, and that once they read everything they could get a free telephone consultation and get in touch, via the internet forum, with the real persons living with HIV and check which information is reliable and which is not. Anyway, both of them now felt much better. Before they parted, Cyril offered his hand for shaking, then hugged Da'ut. Da'ut said no one had ever been as helpful as Cyril and from now on he was going to treat Cyril as his sibling.

Chapter 5.

Friends Again

A

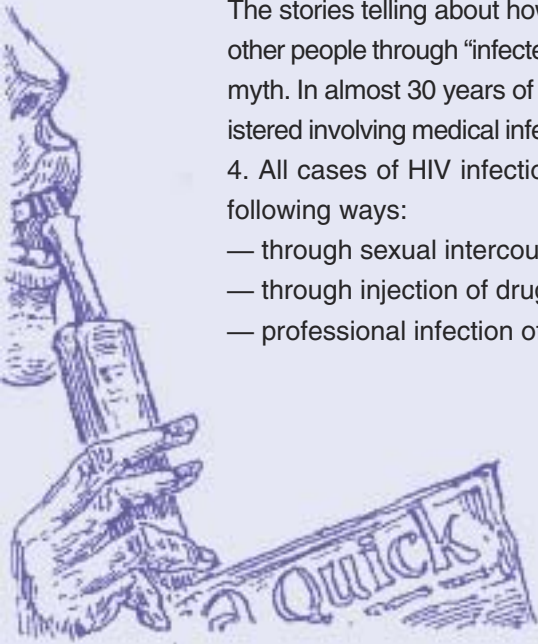
ll of the next weeks the boys, as Da'ut remarked, were "compensating for the time of estrangement". Both had a lot of things to tell and ask about. They would now part late in the evening and meet in the morning on the way to school. Cyril persuaded Da'ut to resume attending football training sessions and often brought him to his place. This aspect of life was getting better.

But not in Da'ut's family, however. Leila almost stopped getting out, and would sometimes spend all day long lying in bed. She stopped crying, stopped arguing with her parents, and would say she was all right, she just didn't want anything. She ate almost nothing, and her parents worried about it most of all. Da'ut was

mostly afraid of how she smiled. She would smile an obedient smile, with her pale lips only, and Da'ut perceived this smile as that of a hopelessly dying person. His parents took this for the symptoms of the deathly disease and were black as thundercloud. They were short of money: father was really planning to send the family to the village and did not take any new work, saying that he should first finish what he had started, and then there would be the end. This "end" scared Da'ut. The word sounded most ominous when pronounced by his dad, a person who had never been disheartened before.

IMPORTANT DETAILS

1. The basic threat of HIV consists in that a HIV-infected person lives with HIV for many years without any pronounced symptoms and will inevitably die generally in some 9 to 11 years after having been infected.
2. HIV is only transmitted through four types of human fluids: blood, sperm, vaginal discharge and breast milk.
3. HIV is not transmitted through handshakes, hugs, items of personal hygiene and toilet. Nor is HIV transmitted through sanitary- and bathroom items. HIV will not be transmitted through clothing, bed-linen or towels even if HIV-infected fluid is spilled onto them, because HIV will die pretty soon if exposed to ambient environment. HIV is not transmitted in pools, saunas, through the insect bites or through kisses. The stories telling about how HIV-infected persons deliberately infect other people through "infected injections" in public transport are a mere myth. In almost 30 years of AIDS epidemic, no cases have been registered involving medical infection at the dentist's or at the manicurist's.
4. All cases of HIV infection registered worldwide occurred in the following ways:
 - through sexual intercourse — 70–80 %;
 - through injection of drugs — 5–10 %;
 - professional infection of medical personnel — 0.01 %;



— transfusion of infected blood — 3–5 %;
— transmission from pregnant or nursing mother to child — 5–10 %.

5. Generally in Russia, infection through drug injection occurs most often, but in the city of Moscow infection through sexual intercourse prevails.

6. Registered HIV-positive persons in Russia are eligible to a free treatment using the advanced medical drugs. This treatment is called antiretroviral therapy. This is used to decrease HIV concentration in the blood and to recover immunity.



7. A HIV-positive person needs to be going through antiretroviral therapy courses throughout his/her life. This therapy is efficient, but regrettably it does not guarantee that such a person will safely live to an old age. As the HIV-infected person goes through more courses, he/she will form a habit as to the medicines, and therapeutic effect may drop dramatically.

Da'ut's parents did not notice at first that their son had stopped staying in, and some days later his father explained to him in a resolute tone that their family was having troubles and that he, Da'ut, should not endanger innocent people outside. He added that his son was a man and should realise that he should refrain from attending football training sessions and visiting Cyril's place. Da'ut was going to tell his father about HIV and that the whole situation was not that bad, but he was unable to speak smoothly because he was so agitated that he forgot half of information. Father listened to him for a minute and then cut in: "No Internet websites can present truth. Whenever I want to learn the truth I just have to look at my daughter's face. Even if the truth is awesome, we have to accept it, 'cause we are men."

Da'ut found no words for reply. In the evening, he sneaked away for a minute to talk with Cyril. He also told him about his father's point of view. Both came to a gloomy conclusion that Leila might die of such an approach sooner than



of AIDS, if any. They decided that Da'ut should be well prepared for a serious talk with his father. So Cyril proposed that Da'ut should have a trial public speech. For example, deliver a report on AIDS for his classmates.

“For my classmates? You must be crazy!” Da'ut felt scared.

“If you have the guts to speak of it to your classmates, then you are sure to convince your dad.”

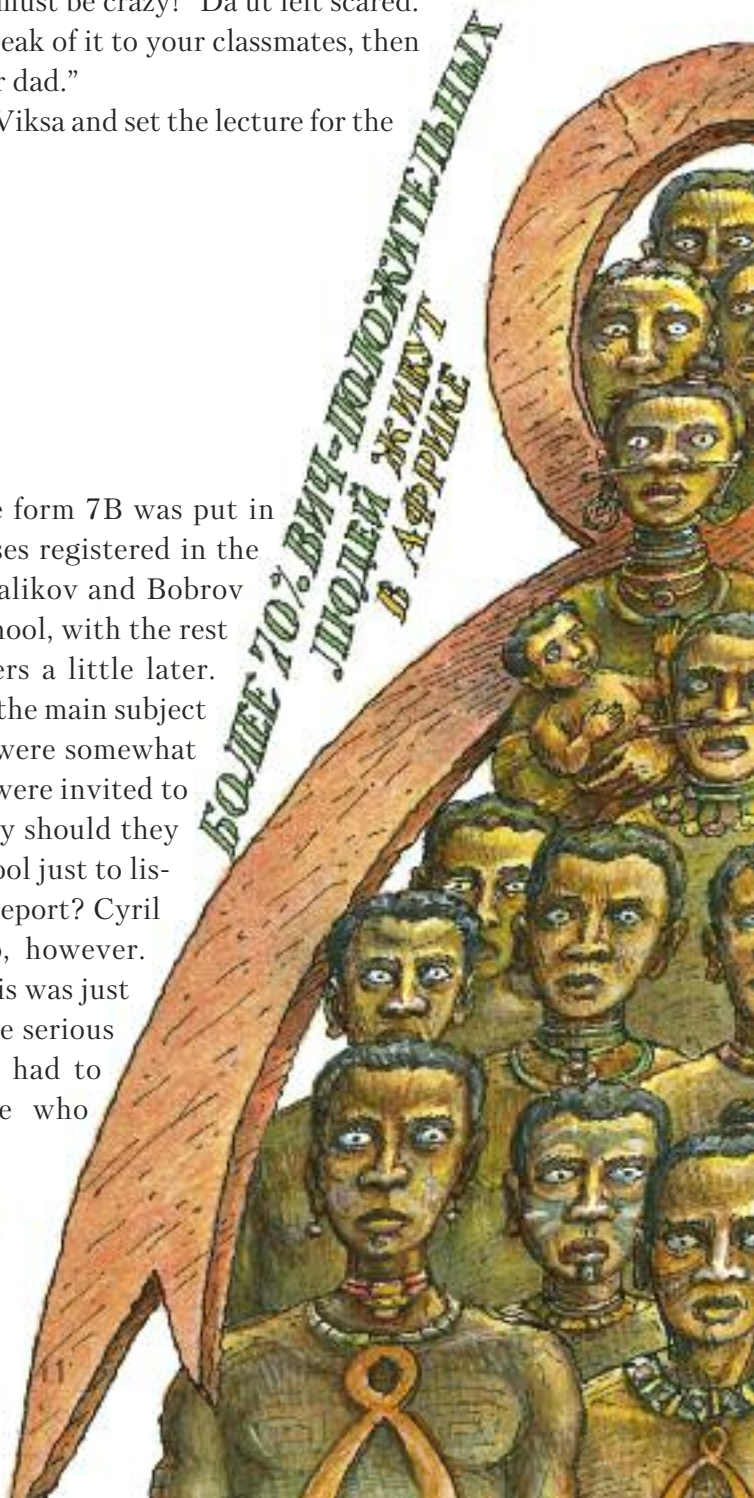
Next day they spoke with Viksa and set the lecture for the next internal lesson.

Chapter 6.

Trial Speech

One month had passed since form 7B was put in quarantine, with no new cases registered in the last two weeks. They said Salikov and Bobrov would soon come back to school, with the rest of the diseased to join others a little later. Chickenpox was not already the main subject of the talks, and the pupils were somewhat surprised to learn that they were invited to listen to Da'ut's speech. Why should they stay for an extra hour at school just to listen to some extracurricular report? Cyril and Da'ut did not give up, however. They told each other that this was just a sort of rehearsal, with more serious talks still to come, so they had to bring truth even to those who would prefer not to listen.

БОЛЕЕ 70% ВИЧ-ИНФЕКЦИОННЫХ
ЛЮДЕЙ ЖИВУТ
В АФРИКЕ



HIV WORLDWIDE AND IN AFRICA

Today, all people must know about HIV for their own sake and for the sake of their families. HIV is a mortal foe, it endangers the entire humankind and each of us irrespective of our nationality, religion and principles of everyday life.

In Russia, the number of HIV-positive people has doubled since 2001, and currently exceeds one million people. In Europe and in the USA, however, the rate of HIV-infected people is almost 10 times lower.

Russia has one of the world's fastest rates of growth of HIV infection, and this is a terrible fact. Yet, situation in Africa is still worse. With only 12.5% of the global population living in Africa, this continent accounts for 70% of all HIV-positive people. There are countries where almost a quarter of population has been infected with HIV, whereas in some countries, like Botswana or Swaziland, 35 people out of every 100 live with HIV. With this, only every tenth person gets the required medical treatment. Most of losses are suffered by sub-Saharan countries. This region is home to 25 million people living with HIV. Many of them do not even know about their diagnosis. Mothers give birth to HIV-infected children just because no one gets any current-level medical aid during the delivery. People, who would otherwise live and work, have to die in a few years in the absence of treatment.

Today, the global community spends over 8 billion USD a year on measures against HIV, but these funds are far from being sufficient. To ensure that treatment is provided to everyone in need, this amount has to be increased manifold.

Da'ut spoke about catastrophic consequences of HIV epidemic in Africa. He said that if all HIV-infected are brought together at one place, they will exceed population of Moscow four times, and will equal population of a medium-size country like Spain. He added that the number of those who died of AIDS – 25 million – is almost the number of casualties suffered by the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the most devastating war the world has ever seen. He talked confidently

and emotionally, Cyril praised him later for that. Yet, his classmates were not much interested – they did not seem to care.

Few minutes before the end of the speech Viktoria Sergeevna was requested to proceed to the deputy principal. Pupies started to fidget and talk, so the final portion of speech did not run smoothly. Then Da'ut offered to ask questions. Sasha Poskrebyshv was the first to ask his questions, although during the whole speech he seemed to be almost napping. Smiling sardonically and squinting at his classmates, he thanked Da'ut for the lesson of politics and said that he used to assume that Da'ut was a Georgian..., well, or some other Caucasian boy, but now it looked like Da'ut was also an African given such a close attention paid by him to the African life. Or, probably, Caucasus and Africa were the twin brothers, sharing same problems, but the Russians had nothing to do with that, and AIDS was actually a punishment thrown by God onto homosexuals, drug users and prostitutes, while decent people were not taken ill with it.

RISK GROUPS AND HIV INFECTION

According to statistics, HIV-infected persons often belong to the so-called risk groups. Risk groups normally include the injecting drug users, alcoholics, people open to promiscuous and unprotected sexual intercourses, prostitutes of either sex, and homosexuals (it is exactly during a homosexual contact that the risk of infection is the highest). It's all true, and each person has to understand that the probability of HIV infection is much higher if a person belongs to any of the risk groups.

Yet, one should not forget that many of HIV-positive people have never belonged to any of the risk groups. These include children (mother-to-child transmission), young people of either sex who were infected by those whom they used to trust. Some people were infected in medical institutions.

In today's society, many people are prejudiced against HIV-infected persons while assuming that every HIV-infected person is certainly either malicious or indecent. Such people do not take into account that a person in question may have once been an injecting drug user or involved in promiscuous sexual intercourses, endangering



his/her own and other people's health, but then radically changed his/her life. Incurable diseases often cause people to change. When facing such an ordeal, people often change, give up drugs, learn to feel responsibility, overcome problems and start to help others. But the diagnosis is made once and for all.

Our advanced contemporaries call for changes in our attitude to HIV-infected people. Otherwise, we will not differ too much from the people of the medieval epoch when the diseased people were left to die without any help and compassion from others. It is all too easy to plead God's visitation while trying to find an excuse for one's fear of the disease.

Today, scientists are developing methods to combat HIV infection, and the volunteers are rendering aid worldwide. Today's society is getting kinder and stronger, and is taking measures to save the lives of people in trouble.

Da'ut replied sullenly that he was an Abkhazian, not Georgian, and that both in the Caucasus and in Africa there lived many nations, having different problems, but AIDS was a common problem. Da'ut had also many other things to tell, but he was so mad at Poskrebyshev that he was mostly preoccupied not with his reply, but with how to get this rat by his scruff and shake him until his ugly smile vanishes from his fat mug.

Cyril saved the situation. He stood up and said that, while Viksa was out, he could take an opportunity to say in public that Poskrebyshev was a jerk, but if it came to the problems of AIDS, they were worth discussing. Especially if we bear in mind that undereducated portion of the Soviet people, and later the Russian people, used to think exactly like that quite recently. Many people used to believe that AIDS was the illness of immoral people, until almost 200 little children were infected in 1998 in the Russian hospitals in Elista, Volgograd and Nizhny Novgorod through negligence of medical personnel. Cyril added that he adhered to the opinion that AIDS was not a punishment on humankind, but an ordeal, both for the diseased

and for the healthy, and that our measures should focus on the infection itself rather than the infected people.

“Well, Poskrebyshev, what would you propose to do with HIV-positive people?”

“Kill them right on the spot,” Poskrebyshev replied immediately. “By the way, it’s yourself who is the jerk.”

“Kill? That’s the way the Nazi did! At the times of Hitler, too, they thought about killing the disabled and ill! But you’d better think about this: if we prosecute HIV-positive people, then they would not confess they are ill, trying to conceal the disease, and the infection will thus be spreading dozens of times faster! So, what do you tell me now, Poskrebyshev?”

“Well, then such people should be isolated...”

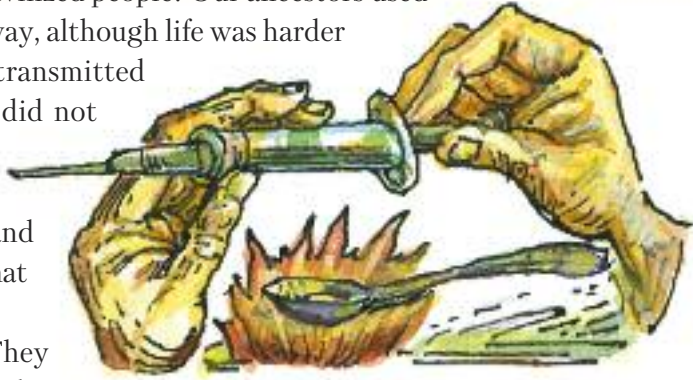
“But who is going to pay to maintain them? And how do you expect to isolate forty million people? Lock them up in prison? They will probably start to hide, or maybe unite their efforts to fight for freedom...”

“I don’t care. They may try to hide, but they will be sought for. Besides, everyone will be assayed. I am neither HIV-positive nor am I going to become one, but those who are HIV-positive are posing danger to me. HIV poses danger to me no matter what they say about the ways of transmission. The diseased are anyway dangerous to the healthy! So why should I tolerate this danger, or even like and take care of those infected? I wish they all perish some day, and I will not regret at all. And everyone thinks so. And if Da’ut is looking for an extra “A”

mark for his report, this does not mean that we all have to stay here for an extra lesson.



“But we presume that we are civilized people! Our ancestors used to resolve the issue in a different way, although life was harder then. Deathly epidemics were transmitted through many things. Yet, they did not kill the diseased. Even the lepers used to walk around the towns and villages, ringing their bells, and others gave them food, although that was really unsafe.”



“Just the other way round! They used to burn the diseased with their houses, and that is why they survived,” Poskrebyshev objected.

Now came Vera Kiseleva’s turn to have her say. She said that deep in her mind she seemed to agree with Cyril, but, to tell the truth, she would prefer to have nothing to do with anyone living with HIV, even if someone claims that the virus is not transmitted through airborne droplets. She would prefer not to have such a person as a neighbour living next door or use the same bus with her while on the way to work.

“Did you like it when the new wife of your dad made a scene because of chickenpox?” Cyril retorted.

“Well, Cyril, I don’t know. You lacked tact that time. I don’t want to say that I agree with Sasha, – he could have used milder words to express his idea, but if this AIDS is somewhere far from here, like in Africa or America, I will just stay away. And, of course, I will not be taking care of the diseased.”

Like before, Viksa quietly walked into the classroom to hear Vera Kiseleva finishing her remark, supported by cheers of the audience. Viktoria Sergeevna silently listened till the end. Then Da’ut stooped his head and asked in a muffled voice whether anyone had any more questions or comments. The pupils were impatient to be dismissed, but it was Viksa who raised her hand:

“As I can see, most of those present are already bored with this talk, and they do not even think to suppress their irritation, but our internal lesson is not over yet, so I will take this opportunity to tell

you something. To begin with, I will tell you some names: Bill Gates, Elton John, Richard Gere, Vladimir Pozner... Quite a company, right? These are just a few from an extensive list of famous, esteemed and popular people who are spending a lot of time, money and efforts to combat AIDS. And they are doing it not because of a fashion or public opinion. They are acting to save human lives because they feel this is the right way. The years 2006 and 2007 have seen a decrease in the number of people, newly infected with HIV during each year, by hundreds of thousands. In 2007, 33 million people were affected by AIDS. Compare this with the year 2002, with as many as 38 million diseased. Moreover, the average length of life of HIV-positive persons has increased. In Thailand, for example, the number of newly infected people has decreased seven times in just a few years! Humankind, that is to say, the better part of humankind, have been making attempts to stop any further progress of the epidemics. Had it not been for their efforts, the world would have now had ten million more of those diseased, and the number of those who died would have been four to five million more than we have today. And what is most important, the percentage of HIV-infected persons is minimal in those countries where other people treat them well, compassionately and mercifully.

The audience was silent. Viktoria Sergeevna offered to call it a day and go home. The pupils silently left the classroom.

Chapter 7.

Unexpected Ally

Da'ut was striding home. Cyril caught up with him and they went together in silence. Then Cyril proposed to sit down on a bench and discuss what had happened. Da'ut, quite indifferent, silently sat down on the nearest bench. There seemed to be no chance of a useful talk. Suddenly the boys saw Poskrebyshev trotting down the path. Both of them stood up, without any prior discussion, and slowly moved toward Poskrebyshev. When Sasha saw them, he stopped and looked around as if searching for the ways to retreat, but then walked on in a resolute

manner. He continued to walk until he almost bumped against Cyril and Da'ut. Plump Poskrebyshev, five or so inches shorter than his classmates, looked quite funny despite his warlike resoluteness.

“Give way.”

“Sasha, we are not going to beat you, but we want to understand whether you were sincere or just kidding.”

“But why?”

“Nothing special. We are trying to figure out what kind of a person you are, Poskrebyshev. You are not always that mean, you are mostly quiet, and you even cribbed my records during two recent math tests, and I let you do it although I could have refused. So why did you go at Da'ut back in the classroom?”

“Because he shouldn't tell about things he doesn't know. And he shouldn't try to get an “A” mark this way...”

“What do you mean by “doesn't know”? You mean that we don't know?”

“I don't give a damn what you are going to say...”

Sasha Poskrebyshev made a severe attempt to struggle his way. He succeeded in pushing Cyril off, but Da'ut held his ground. Sasha was pushing and panting, and was trying to bully Da'ut into giving way. Da'ut caught him by the shoulder and then by the wrist, but Sasha intensified his struggle and caught Da'ut's arms. For some time they took turns holding one another, and neither of them knew why they were doing it. Cyril tried to pull Poskrebyshev away from Da'ut lest they should start a real fight. So, they kept on pushing in that silly way until the three of them fell down on the ground, where they continued in a free-for-all way until Da'ut and Cyril managed to hold that pot-belly (quite a strong one, it should be admitted) to the ground. No one noticed at first that Sasha had scratched his hand against Da'ut's wrist-watch, whereas Da'ut had his finger bleeding because some its skin was gone. Peacemaker Cyril, too, took a hard one: Poskrebyshev's back of the head heavily struck Sasha's chin to make him bite his lip to blood. When Poskrebyshev was finally immobilized, the three of them could see that each of them was stained with blood, both his own and others'.

Cyril and Da'ut silently got on to feet, while Poskrebyshev was still sitting on the ground, looking in bewilderment at his bleeding scratch. Then he babbled that they got what they deserved, it was their fault,



НЕ ДАВАЛ ПРОЙТИ

it was them who started all this, and now it was up to them to decide what to do next. Then he cried bitterly and repeated between sobs that Cyril and Da'ut were morons, it was not his fault, he, Sasha, was not going to be put in prison, while they might have caught HIV.

Da'ut stood, closely examining his bleeding finger, while Cyril was wiping blood from his face and spitting to his best.

And then Poskrebyshev came up with his terrible story. His mom worked as a medical attendant in contagious isolation ward in a hospital, and also took a part-time work as a home medical attendant and a nurse for seriously ill patients. One month ago she found a well-paid job: she had to attend to a guy living with HIV. He was dying. Her job was paid by his parents — they lived separately and did not seem to be on friendly terms with their son. And that was no surprise: he had been using drugs since long ago. Besides, he stole various stuff from home, uttered threats to his mother and father, and spent some time in prison until he was released. In the recent years his parents knew nothing about him, and actually did not wish to know anything. The guy became HIV-positive a few years ago, but he would not go through medical treatment, and some time ago his parents learned from some social organization that their son was dying. They decided not to put him to asylum, and rented a flat for him in the same house and hired Sasha's mother to attend to him.

Poskrebyshev suspected something wrong when his mother allocated for herself her personal plate, cup, fork and spoon, stopped leaving her towel in the bathroom, started to hide her toothbrush, and stopped kissing him good-bye before he walked to school, but would just waive her hand instead. Then he happened to hear her telephone conversations with her friends. Finally, he asked what had happened. Mom did not conceal anything, went crying, and told him that she herself was going to tell him all. She now regretted having taken that job. She just had to take it for they needed money. And although everyone insists there is no threat, she does not believe it, her heart tells her she will be infected, and will then infect her son, and she has even seen a dream in which both of them die. Well, it anyway will be the punishment for their sins, she was sure, and they are now ill or will fall ill, that's for sure. And the most horrible thing is that she watches every day how that guy is dying of AIDS, — very thin, you could almost see his skull through his skin,

covered with abscesses and bleeding sloughs. He has a running temperature, although not too high, and he had two cases of pneumonia in just one month. He is constantly cursing, uttering threats and insisting on having drugs. He even told Poskrebyshev's mother that she had been infected by him since long ago, and started laughing, and said he had gone through a plenty of pleasures in his life, whereas she was going to die for her peanuts-like pay and would infect her son, too.

"Why doesn't she quit this job," Cyril advised.

"She has taken her two-month pay in advance, and she bought me a used computer, and a huge refrigerator for herself, with a deep-freeze compartment, to keep food for wintertime.

"And what about you, Sasha? What do you think about it?"

"I don't think anything, I am afraid to think anything, but I definitely hate him, like all those HIV-infected. Mother said that if she got a cut or a scratch, I should not touch her wound trying to fix it with plaster, not even come close to her, because HIV is directly transmitted through blood, and one should not even look at this blood. You and me, we scratched each other and didn't even notice it. Mother also told me that spreading HIV was criminal offence, but this was not my fault..."

CRIMINAL PROVISIONS

The Russian Criminal Code contains Article 122, reading that if a person knew that the other person might get infected, but still "endangered" such person, then he/she would be sentenced to up to three years of imprisonment. If a person knew that he/she was HIV-infected, and infected another person, then he/she would be



sentenced to up to five years of imprisonment. If such an offender infected an under-age person, then he/she would be sentenced to up to eight years of imprisonment.

Practice is different, however, and these strict measures are applied very rarely. Many public activists believe that criminal prosecution, or, criminalization of HIV infection, as they call it, does not help to combat AIDS. They even insist that such approach will do more harm than use.

In France, for example, there are no criminal laws calling for any statutory punishment for transmission of HIV to another person. They assume that any voluntary involvement in sexual intercourse is based on the principle of “mutual responsibility”. In 2004, however, two French women — Aurora and Isabelle, succeeded in sending behind the bars, for six years, a man who had transmitted HIV to them. Since then, Isabelle has been trying to cause the state to adopt special laws on criminal prosecution for HIV transmission. In 2001, at the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Russia and other countries signed the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. This document states inter alia:

“...Poverty, underdevelopment and illiteracy are among the principal contributing factors to the spread of HIV/AIDS...

...Stigma, silence, discrimination, and denial, as well as lack of confidentiality, undermine prevention, care and treatment efforts and increase the impact of the epidemic on individuals, families, communities and nations...

...Prevention, care, support and treatment for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS must be integrated in a comprehensive approach to combat the epidemic.”

Poskrebyshev was about to start crying again, but the friends helped him to stand up and got him seated on the bench. Then they went stepped aside for a counsel.

“I have nothing to say... the decision is yours,” Cyril said.

“What do you want me to decide about? If we tell it to Poskrebyshev, then all our classmates will be in the know...”

“Maybe not, given that he, too... Well, we are now in the same boat... If what we have learned from the Internet is true, the risk is not that high, and we have nothing to be afraid of. But what if Poskrebyshev’s mother is right and we should not even look at the infected blood lest we should get infected..., or probably we have already got the infection”

“Provided that Poskrebyshev was not lying to us...”

“That’s it. But I don’t think he was. He could have concealed all this. And he had been gravely concerned all that time like you, Da’ut, so he had a breakdown.”

While they were talking, Poskrebyshev stood up and joined them. With his eyes fixed on the ground, Poskrebyshev said that he had made up the whole story, and if they believed it they were fools, and he did not care what they were going to do next. Sasha turned and went away. Two other boys followed him. Da’ut made Poskrebyshev swear not to tell anybody, and told him what was going on at his home, and the three of them ended up swearing to keep it in secret, help one another and join efforts in learning more about HIV and AIDS.

Chapter 8.

The Three Friends

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asha Poskrebyshev turned out to be quite uneasy and obstinate. One thing was that he did not look grateful for having been allowed to join the company, but the worst thing was that he used every chance to show his fault-finding and suspicious manner. He would not take anything on trust, and he was expecting some trick and malice from everything. His mistrustful and mocking-style behaviour resembled the cynicism of a weary, sour adult. Sasha believed, however, that he was just voicing the things that others had in mind only, so he was honest and bold like no one else. Sasha’s mom, too, was a straightfor-

ward and resolute type. If she was angry with Sasha, she would beat him with her wash-cloth, towel or even mopstick, repeating that she was bringing up her son alone and hurt her hands beating him since his childhood. Poskrebyshev respected his mom for her honesty, and said that she did not bear malice even when she was beating him, she was just worrying too much. And when she praises or hugs him, she is doing it open-heartedly and with no pretence.

A friendship of three persons usually runs hand in hand with jealousy and rage. Cyril had every chance to feel it. But they managed to keep their company. Poskrebyshev paid respect to Cyril for his quick mind and mental grasp. Whenever they needed quick wits, Cyril was an indisputable authority to Sasha. Strange enough, but Sasha used to repeat that Cyril was a silly and unserious dreamer, a bookworm, needing protection and care. Unlike this, Sasha's friendship with Da'ut was based on the common fears regarding HIV and AIDS, both for themselves and their families. Both were interested to hear from Cyril any new information, supported by statistics, expert opinions and understanding of physiological process. They readily asked to repeat or provide details, nodded, and asked Cyril to tell them more, and did not feel like arguing too much. But deep in their mind, neither Sasha nor Da'ut trusted scientific data, and both were suspecting that all sources were lying, and tried to support one another, as Cyril would say, in their gross and irrational persistence. Cyril occasionally succeeded in persuading his friends that they had no AIDS and that they could close this subject, and they agreed, but next day they would run across new data in the Internet claiming the invention of some new medicine that would enable one to live with HIV to the old age, and they would forget all previous talks and start to figure out where to get money to buy that medicine. Cyril would lose his temper and shout that all medicines for HIV-infected in Russia are free, and would request them to cut it out. Sasha and Da'ut would nod and agree, but in no time would resume hot discussion, insisting that, in the event of a careful treatment, those who were infected with HIV at the age under 18 would live longer than those who were infected after the age of 30, so Leila would fit in a "safer" category, and the sooner they start medical treatment, the better. There were

also other issues to discuss: how to graduate from school, how to get a job, which way to choose: to conceal the diagnosis or not. Both believed it would be better to conceal it so as to avoid unfriendly attitude, especially bearing in mind that they would not pose threat to their anybody. The struggle against discrimination of HIV-positive persons in Russia was only beginning.

In the long run Cyril came up with his own diagnosis: both of them were ill, but not with AIDS – with AIDS-phobia! In other words, the fear of the disease turned into disease of a psychological sort nature!

WHERE TO GO FOR CONSULTATIONS?

There are special organizations across the world that render aid, free of charge, to HIV-positive persons, to persons belonging to risk groups, and to anyone who is experiencing problems in finding support and understanding for various reasons. These are AIDS service organizations, and they give support to people living with HIV, sex workers, homosexuals, drug users, former inmates of corrective institutions, and teenagers. **AIDS service organizations** have hotline service, psychological support service, and legal support service.

These organizations are funded from a variety of sources, but most frequently from social support funds. It is very important that a person who has learned about his/her diagnosis or suspected disease should have some place to go for sharing his/her problems, getting





help and support, and meeting those who have already gone through similar problems. Many acquire hope through this kind of communication, and some even change their life for the better. AIDS service centres provide free consultations on any issue, including psychological support. Visitors can occasionally get help in solving some of their everyday life problems. Personnel in the centres are making efforts to save, help and advise.

Quite often, such centres are established under the auspices of medical institutions, and their personnel normally cooperate with the doctors, help to go through assays and get medical treatment. We can name three of Moscow-based AIDS service organizations: *Doverie* (tel: 8-800-200-5555), *Yasen* (tel: 8-495-421-5555), and *Most* (tel: 8-901-532-4646).

Besides, such organizations cooperate with the underage affairs commissions, and with custody and guardianship authorities. Many of AIDS service organizations personnel are HIV-positive people, having experience in responding to chemical addiction. Such people are called “equal consultants”.

СПИД-СЕРВИСНАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ



РАВНЫЙ КОНСУЛЬТАНТ

USEFUL DETAILS

There are two major medical indicators for any person living with HIV. These are the immune status and the viral load. The fact is that HIV attacks the CD4 cells, a crucial component of the immune system. The stronger is the viral attack, the less is the number of active cells, the weaker is the protection against infections, and the higher is probability of cancer-related diseases. The number of the CD4 cells contained in one millilitre of blood is called the **immune status**. The number of the CD4 cells in a healthy organism may vary from 500 to 1,500 cells per millilitre. If, as a result of HIV impact, the number of these cells decreases to 200 to 500 cells, this level is called low; and if the number of these cells drops below 200, organism becomes extremely vulnerable.

Viral load is the number of viral copies contained in one millilitre of blood. The larger is viral concentration in the blood, the faster the CD4 cells are destroyed. If antiretroviral therapy succeeds to decrease the viral load, then the number of the CD4 cells will grow, and the immune function will gradually recover. In Russia, each HIV-positive person is eligible to this kind of medical treatment at the government's expense.

Chapter 9.

Hot Discussions

he three of them understood now that it was not easy to live with HIV in Russia. Cyril and Da'ut believed that things would change with time for the better. Obstinate Poskrebyshchev insisted, however, that nothing needed to be changed and that humans were making a gross mistake by allowing 40 million of those living with the deadly virus to walk among healthy people, and Russia would not probably concede to this stupidity and would stay as the last resort of human hopes for survival. Sasha noted proudly that if he happened to fall ill, he would be ready to sacrifice himself to save the world and would not cling to his miserable, useless life. Da'ut retorted, saying that he had only one life and considered it neither



miserable nor useless, and if he happened to become HIV-positive, he would still fight his way through to life, and not just a life, but a full-scale life. The discussions sometimes turned to shouting. Da'ut insisted that if he had a chance to marry a healthy girl and get a healthy child, he would live for the sake of his future son or daughter. "So it looks you don't want to marry an unhealthy girl?" Sasha asked acidly. "And suppose your child is ill anyway, then you might also infect your wife?" Cyril cut in with his figures and assured that this was quite improbable, and, if a person was taking precautions and receiving medical treatment, he/she would probably never infect anyone and would be able to work and even get healthy children. Cyril said: "For example, they say that if a woman gives birth at the age older than 35, the child may have grave genetic diseases. But we are not going to prohibit women from giving birth at the age older than 40, are we? Same principle applies to HIV infection: probability of adverse consequences is higher than the norm, but it's still not so high as to prevent us from trying."

Poskrebyshev would not recognize any arguments. He would say that any problem could be turned upside down and buried under the weight of statistics, whereas Cyril was playing into the hands of the world medicine mafia whose main purpose was to sell expensive medicines in maximum quantities. Both friends retorted, saying that this looked like medieval fantasies resembling beliefs that the plague was brought by the Jews and the doctors were deliberately poisoning water wells with cholera.

Cyril said that HIV-positive persons should have the right for life, for a normal human life, and we should respond to the disease all

together. But when a person is denied job so that he/she is unable to earn money for medical treatment, when a person has no chances to arrange his/her life, then...

“But why should anyone give such a person a job? Why should I live near the carrier of a deadly virus? Why should I let someone pose whatever threat to myself and to my children? Doesn't a healthy person have the right to live the way he likes, without any threat of infection, without any communication with HIV-positive persons? Why are they shouting from the housetops about the rights of those infected, but no one is saying anything about the rights of the healthy ones? If I prove to be healthy, I will be insisting that all HIV-infected should be spotted so as everyone could distinguish them and decide whether or not to deal with them!” Sasha screamed.

“But unless you are certain about your health, you, too, will have to wear a shirt with inscription reading “I am probably HIV-infected” and will have to make Da'ut do the same, and that will not be easy to do. You see, Sasha, 33 million of infection carriers is a regretful fact, but this is still a fact. This has happened already and no one can turn it backward. We should live with them and think what we can do to decrease their number.”

Sasha Poskrebyshev, who was listening to Cyril as skeptically as always, uttered his conclusive argument:

“Imagine for a moment that HIV has mutated and can now be transmitted through airborne droplets. Indeed, it may start mutating, as it has existed for thirty years only. This is quite a young virus... So what will happen then? I'll tell you: the entire humankind will get infected in a few weeks, and then there will be a war for medicines, but the medicines available will be sufficient only for one hundredth of those in need, and then there will be the end of human civilization which once was strong enough to withstand the plague, cholera and even the Flood.”

Cyril answered that mutation was something that was borrowed from science fiction, and that if we went on thinking this way, then we could also assume that the flue would mutate, too, and would kill everyone in a couple of weeks, so there was no sense in fomenting hysteria, but one should proceed from the existing reality.



Da'ut added:

“Well, it occurred to me that AIDS is a kind of chance for the society. People have to think about social problems! Does anyone think about how the drug users live? Nobody, except for the police. But if such drug users are also HIV-infected they start to pose threat to everyone, and people start to be interested to know where those drug users come from. Or, those people who don't have their own families, who regularly change girlfriends or sexual partners, — are those people happy? I don't think they are, but no one cares... as long as such people are not infected with HIV. Indeed, HIV causes people to think that there is something wrong in our society. The root of all our troubles lies in unfairness, falsehood and cruelty. Had it not been for these, there would have been less drug users and more happy families, and HIV would have probably been gone of its own...”

Da'ut was going to tell something else, but Sasha interfered, saying that he was sick and tired of that idle talk, and that he detested all those drug users, HIV-infected and other bastards, and the whole society, as his mom noted, had just gone off nut with its humanism!

Cyril and Da'ut were stunned by this tirade. Cyril remarked that Sasha had not the least idea of tolerance.

“I don't care about tolerance!” Sasha hollered.

“That's bad! Tolerance is the sign of wise brains, both of society and individuals. And what you have said is the viewpoint of savages!”

Da'ut said with important air.

Suddenly Cyril laughed:

“My mom is an anthropologist, and she would feel much offended for savages.”

USEFUL DETAILS

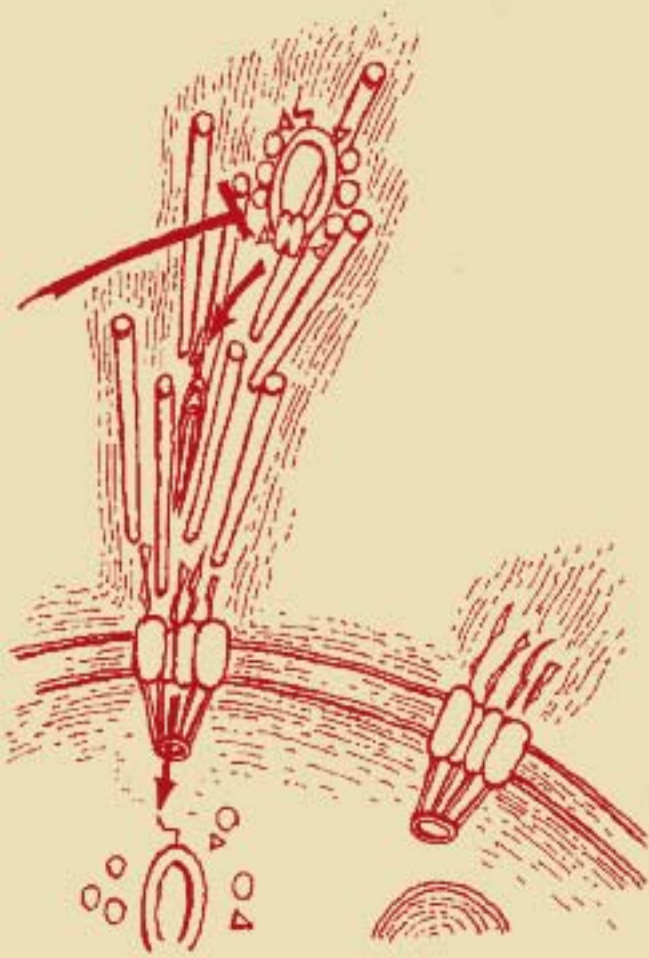
Life of each HIV-positive person depends on the indexes of viral load and immune status. If these indexes are good, the person may have no symptoms of illness. The person does not feel the illness at all. Sometimes, HIV-positive persons cannot find any signs of dysimmunity for years. Yet, doctors recommend taking precautions anyway: avoid any risk of infections, do not expose the immune system to strains, and regularly go through medical



examinations. If the disease runs without causing problems, a HIV-positive person may establish family, have a healthy child and live a full-scale life. It is important that such persons should take appropriate measures so as not to spread the deadly virus, and not to infect anyone else, and not to cause any new infection to oneself. The latter is important, too, because unless a HIV-positive person takes precautions, he/she may get infected with a new type of the same virus, and combination of two or more types will disrupt the organism severely.

It is also important to know that antiretroviral therapy will not always bring the best results. Many of the diseased complain about side effects of the medicines. Sometimes, despite the efforts made by doctors, treatment does not work or works only half way (this is called “the resistance to treatment”). The risk of such problem increases significantly if the person takes medicines irregularly or in a way other than prescribed.

Nobody knows the answer to the question as to the length of life with HIV. Statistics insist on about 10 years, but this figure is quite conditional. Many examples give hope for a far longer life, although there are occurrences of abrupt relapse for unclear reasons and the person dies in a few weeks or months. HIV infection has not yet been studied in full, while the treatment methods progress at a rapid pace, thus giving more hope to HIV-positive persons.



Chapter 10.

Love with Problems, or Problems with Love

Once on Thursday, during the large recess, Da'ut said he needed help from his friends. Last evening they received a telegram message with the mark "receipt to be acknowledged", and Da'ut's dad signed to acknowledge the receipt and could not resist reading the message. The message had come from Mario, Zaire. He was asking Leila to answer his letters or, at least, give a definite reply because he, Mario, loved her and could not live without her. Mario also wrote that he saw Leila in his dreams every night, but lately his dreams were somewhat uneasy, so he worried very much. Mom brought the message to Leila, and Leila burst out crying at first, then denied everything, and finally explained that Mario did not know the reason for her sudden departure from Zaire and thought that she had fallen out of love with him and had fallen in love with some other guy instead.

Late in the evening Leila confessed. It turned out that if she told Mario that she had probably been infected with HIV, he would certainly come to marry her, because he is such a good man. But she does not want him to live with a HIV-infected wife because she, too, loves him very much. Dad said that she should have followed her parent's advice not to go to Africa, and Leila cried more, and mom did a most unusual thing — she told dad that he was sometimes quite a fool, and dad, too, did something unusual — he said that mom was probably right this time. Then he kissed Leila on the back of her head and quietly left. So now Mario wants to have a reply, and no one knows what to tell him. Parents insist on telling the truth so as to let him make a man's decision, but Leila wants to suspend her reply for another few months until it is absolutely clear whether she is ill or not, especially bearing in mind that her Mario has always been very popular among the opposite sex, and back in Zaire there was one woman doctor from the Netherlands (a doctor, not just an assistant like Leila) who used to steal promising glances at Mario.

Poskrebyshev listened attentively and said that Leila was a good girl because she, like him, was ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of humankind by deciding not to marry the beloved man and not to give birth to a child from him. Cyril objected, saying that this was silly, and that they should call Mario or write him a letter with an invitation to come here and marry Leila. Da'ut readily agreed as if he were waiting for this kind of support, and even showed Mario's e-mail address which he had copied furtively from his sister's computer. Sasha proposed not to interfere with the private life of others, but that same evening Cyril and Da'ut wrote Mario a letter. They signed as Leila's brother Da'ut and his friend Cyril. Poskrebyshev asked to omit his name because he was strictly opposed to such idea.

The letter was sent, and since the next day the habitants of Da'ut's flat started to receive flowers. Every day, about noon, one and the same person would bring a bouquet of flowers, deliver it, with a polite bow, to whoever opened the door, and leave without saying a word. Leila's cheeks were no longer pale for the first time in many weeks, and she told mom that Mario would probably come soon.

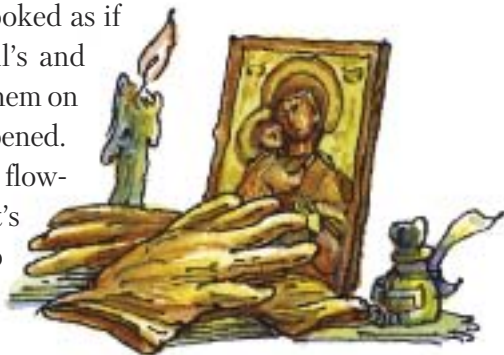


Chapter 11.

Unexpected News from Sasha Poskrebyshv

While Cyril and Da'ut were enjoying their little contribution to making Leila feel happy, they have almost not seen Poskrebyshv. Right after classes Poskrebyshv would take to his heels and would not answer their calls until late in the evening. It looked as if Sasha no longer wished to be a friend of Cyril's and Da'ut's. However, every morning he would join them on the way to school and chat as if nothing had happened.

They had received the eighth bouquet for Leila, flowers were here and there around the flat, and Da'ut's parents were looking forward to Mario's visit to their resurrecting daughter. Same day Poskrebyshv said he had important news to announce.



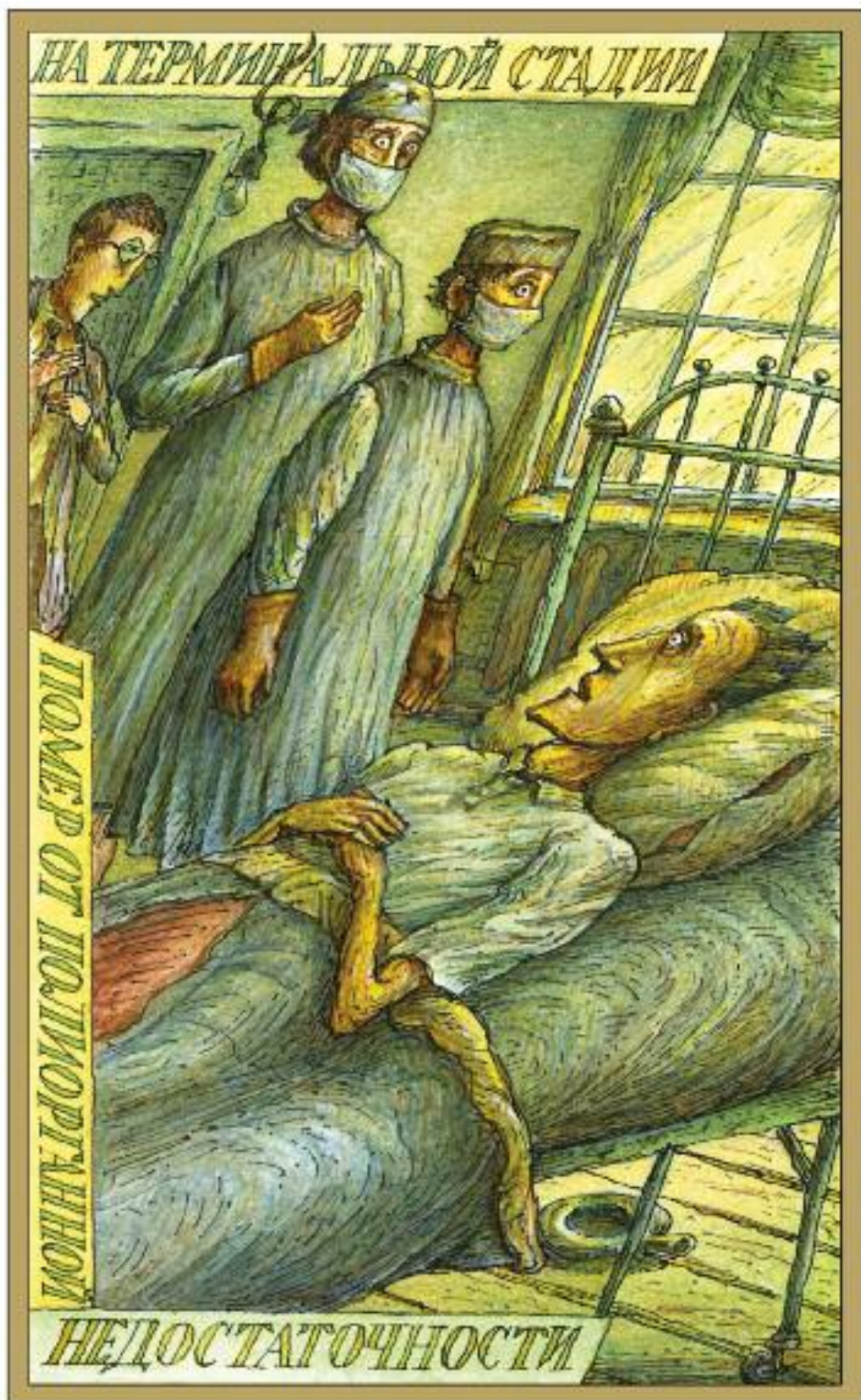
“It’s all over. He is dead.”

“Who is dead?”

“The drug user. He died of multiple organ failure. I did not tell you this, but lately I used to visit him together with my mother. It was too hard for her alone. She would cry at home, saying she could not stand it any more, she even wanted to sell the refrigerator, but didn't find anyone who would buy it. So I made up my mind to help her. Mother agreed, and gave me a medical gown, shoe covers, gloves and a gauze mask, and we would handle him together.”

“How come you were not afraid...”

“I was not afraid because I am not some idle talker, shirker or a mammy boy. Your sister, Da'ut, must have seen cases much worse than this one. Yet, I must say, when I came there for the first time I was about to faint because of the stink... He has sepsis, and he is rotting all over. With so many pustules and ulcers... These would never heal... And he has kept to bed lately for his leg bones might go to pieces. He had also cancer and metastases in the bone. Mom says this sometimes happens at the terminal stage. Each time we found him hollering and cursing. Mom would give him an injection and he would calm



down for a while. In the meantime, we would wash him and change his bed linen. While we were handling him, he would curse and ask for drugs. Or sometimes he would cry and ask to pat his head, saying he was afraid. He was quite educated in medical aspects, he knew everything, and he even knew he would die if his temperature started to rise. I have learned that, with those dying of AIDS, normal immune function no longer works, and the temperature never runs high. But the organism has another immune function, an archaic one, and this function is started in the very end, and it does not cure anything but just kills. He was constantly using antibiotic drugs, but none would help, and he had three cases of pneumonia in just two months, and he used to say it would be all over once the temperature rose. That's the way it happened."

"Did you ask him how he had been infected?"

"Yes, I did. He did not know himself. After he had been infected, he continued to pursue his way of life and injected drugs, can you imagine this? He might have infected lots of people."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I sure did. At first he was just cursing and uttering threats. Sometimes he would say maliciously: "I have infected you, too. Take my word for it..." But he has changed a lot since recently, when his temperature started to run high. He said he was dying and asked us to forgive him, and wanted to see his parents. My mom told them that he wanted to see them, and they came. Then they were crying in the kitchen. And he said thanks to my mother and me..."

"Come on..." Cyril felt like crying.

"Poor thing," Da'ut said and averted his eyes. He was probably feeling the same.

"And he told me an anecdote. Two embryos are sitting in their mother's belly, and one asks the other: "Do you believe in life after the delivery?" The other one says: "I don't know, no one has ever come back from out there." And he started to laugh at his own joke, and his laughter was terrible — me and my mother were really stunned... And you know what I want to tell you? I had no idea before what tolerance is. I thought there was no tolerance, and that those who were speaking of it were liars. But now I understand... I stopped hating that drug user my mother used to attend to. I don't know how, but I have forgiven him, and I feel much easier now..."

Chapter 12.

Mario

M

ario arrived on the next day. Leila quietly sneaked out without telling anything to anyone, and some time later she came back, this time with Mario, holding his hand. Da'ut's mom and dad stood for some time in the doorway, taken aback, just looking at their daughter peeping from behind her Spanish fiancé's shoulder, wide smile on her face. While Leila was out she had changed her hairdo, and now she looked so happy that no one asked her anything. Her parents pretended that nothing special happened and everything was running smoothly. Mario handed in little presents to everyone, and they sat down to drink tea with jam. Hardly had Da'ut's dad, mom and grandpa opened their mouths to ask hundreds of question, when the young couple got away again. Some time later Leila called her mother to tell her that

she and Mario, being in the status of future husband and wife, would stay at a hotel, bearing in mind that they would have their marriage registered in Moscow's principal marriage registration office.

Da'ut asked mom and dad cautiously what they were going to do with that AIDS and how Mario perceived the news, and some other

questions... Dad gave him a lecture, saying that Da'ut was allowed too much, and if Da'ut was sometimes permitted to listen to adults' talks, it was not because they wanted to know his opinion, and Da'ut should not have his say unless invited. That is to say, he explained nothing to Da'ut. It occurred to Da'ut that his dad, too, knew nothing and worried a lot, and the best thing would be not to interfere with questions.

The day after the next Leila and Mario went to the park and invited Da'ut, Cyril and Sasha to join them. The boys took quite a fancy to Mario – such a merry, friendly guy, they liked his company very much.



Mario told them that he thought that Leila had left him for some rich guy, and he was very anxious, he wrote her letters, but she would not reply. The boys did not understand English well, let alone Spanish, but Mario spoke Russian a little and tried to explain it to them to his best. Leila occasionally helped with translation. It turned out that back in Zaire no one knew that Leila had scratched herself during the operation. Mario did not know it, either, until he received a letter from Da'ut and Cyril. He was very thankful to them, and said he would render good for good when he had a chance. He said he had a younger sister and he would certainly introduce them to each other. Da'ut said solemnly that he would think about it, and everyone burst out laughing.

Then came the wedding party. Cyril and Sasha were invited, too. Leila's relatives were somewhat upset because they thought the wedding party was kind of "wrong". Ideally, they should have brought all their kin from the Caucasus and had a three-day feast. One week later, Leila and Mario left for Spain, and they had their wedding party there, too. Only Da'ut's parents, without Da'ut, went to Spain for the wedding as they could not afford to go there all. You may find it funny, but Mario's parents, too, thought that the wedding party was running in a "wrong" way, because Spaniards normally have their wedding ceremony in the church, but Leila was not christened, and they just had their marriage registered at the town hall. But their marriage turned out to be a real one — one year later Leila gave birth to a son.

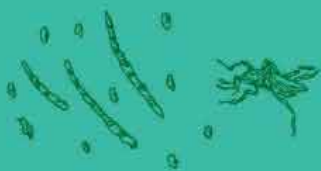
Mario and Leila had spent another year in Zaire, and by the time of delivery Leila came back to Spain. Perhaps, next year Cyril, Da'ut and Sasha will go to Spain to visit them — Mario and Leila invited them to come, and Mario promised to send them the tickets.

And the most important thing — Leila's assays did not reveal any HIV infection.



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