

Reading 5 : Yori Nagibin, Winter Oak

In this moving story set in a Russian village in the mid-twentieth century, the schoolmistress rediscovers the rich experience underlying the sterile categories of grammar.

Winter Oak

Overnight it has snowed heavily and only a faint, intermittent shadow traced the narrow footpath leading from Uvarovka to the school. The schoolmistress was walking warily, ready to pull back her foot in the small, fur-trimmed overshoe should only the snow become treacherous.

It was only a half mile's walk to the school, and she had thrown on a short fur-coat and covered her head with a light woolen kerchief. The frost was bitter, and the wind raised a flurry of fresh snow, sprinkling her from head to foot. But the twenty-four-year-old schoolmistress liked it—the frost that pinched her nose and cheeks, and the raw sting of the wind, reaching under the coat. Turning her back to the wind, she saw the dense trail of her sharp-nosed overshoes that so resembled the tracks of some little beast, and she liked that, too.

The bracing radiance of the January morning fostered joyful reflections upon life and herself. She had come from college just two years ago, and now she had the reputation of a gifted, experienced teacher. People knew her in Uvarovka and Kuzminki, Cherny Yar and all the nearby settlements, and thought highly of her and addressed her respectfully as Anna Vasilyevna.

A man was coming across the field. "What if he won't make way?" Anna Vasilyevna thought with playful fright. "The path is too narrow for two—just a step to the side, and the snow's neck-deep." But in her heart of hearts she knew that there wasn't a person in the district who wouldn't make way for the Uvarovka schoolmistress.

They came abreast of each other. It was Frolov, trainer at the stud farm.

"A fine morning, Anna Vasilyevna!" he said, doffing his fur cap and exposing a sturdy, short-trimmed head of hair.

"Why, it's cold! Put it back on instantly!"

Frolov was eager enough, probably, to pull the cap on again as quickly as he could, but now he delayed a bit to show his contempt of the frost. The sheepskin coat went well with his slim, light figure, and he was beating his white, turned-down felt boot with a thin, snake-like riding-crop.

"How's my Lyosha?" he asked civilly. "Not very naughty, I hope."

"Of course, he is.. All healthy children are. Just so they don't overstep all bounds," Anna Vasilyevna replied with a sense of pedagogical sagacity.

Frolov grinned.

"Lyosha's a quiet boy, takes after his father!"

He stepped to the side, sinking knee-deep into the snow, and became as small as a schoolboy. Anna Vasilyevna nodded to him indulgently and went her way. The two-storied school building, its large windows adorned by the ornate tracery of the frost, stood behind a low fence near the highway, and a glowing reflection of its red brick walls tinged the snow up to the road. The school had been built here, some distance away

from Uvarovka, because it was attended by children from the entire district—the nearby villages, the stud farm settlement, the oil-workers' sanatorium and the far-away settlement of peat workers. Hoods and kerchiefs, caps, ear-muffs and bonnets were converging towards the school-gates along the highway from two directions.

“Good morning, Anna Vasilyevna!” their greetings came in an unending stream, now clear as a bell, now muffled by kerchiefs and scarves wound tightly up to the eyes.

Anna Vasilyevna's first lesson was in Form 5. The bell sounding the beginning of school hadn't faded away when Anna Vasilyevna entered the classroom. The pupils rose, greeted her in unison, and took their seats. The noises subsided slowly. There was the slamming of desk-lids, the creaking of benches, and somebody's deep sigh—a rueful leave-taking of the carefree liberty of the morning.

“Today we shall go on with parts of speech...”

A hush fell over the class, and the rumbling of a heavy lorry, creeping past along the highway, became clearly audible.

Anna Vasilyevna recalled how excited she had been before this lesson last year, like a school-girl before an examination, repeating over and over under her breath: “A noun is a word used for naming ... a noun is a word used for naming...” She also remembered the tormenting doubt: would they understand?..

The memory brought a smile to her lips, she adjusted the hairclips in her thick hair, and began in a smooth, calm tone, the sense of calmness pervading all of her being like a comforting warmth:

“A noun is a word used for naming a thing. In grammar a thing is any person or object replying to the questions, ‘who is it?’ or, ‘what is it?’. For example, who is it?—A pupil. Or, what is it?—A book...”

“May I come in?”

A small figure stood in the half-open door, the cold-bitten face blazing like a beet-root, eyebrows white with hoarfrost, and the snow spangles on its outsized felt boots melting and losing their sparkle.

“Late again, Savushkin?” Like most young teachers, Anna Vasilyevna wanted to be strict but her question this time sounded almost plaintively _

Taking her words to be permission to enter, Savushkin rapidly slipped to his seat. Anna Vasilyevna saw the boy pushing his oilcloth bag under the desk-lid and whispering to his neighbour, without turning his head—asking, most likely, what they were passing...

Anna Vasilyevna was upset by Savushkin's coming late; it was a bother that had spoiled a well-begun day. The geography teacher—a small withered old woman, much like a night butterfly in appearance—had also complained of Savushkin's latecomings. She always complained—of the

noise, of inattentive pupils... "First lessons are terribly difficult!" she had sighed.

"Yes, terrible for people who can't hold pupils in check and don't make the lessons interesting," Anna Vasilyevna had thought self-confidently, and proposed to swap lessons. Now she felt a sense of guilt, for the old woman must have discerned the challenge, the rebuke in Anna Vasilyevna's cordial proposal...

"Clear?" Anna Vasilyevna asked the children.

"Clear!... Clear!" a chorus came back.

"Fine... Make up examples of your own, then."

It was quiet for a moment, then someone uttered uncertainly

"Cat."

"Right you are," Anna Vasilyevna said, remembering that it had been "cat" also last year. The ice was broken:

"Window!... Table!... House!... Road!..."

"Correct," Anna Vasilyevna kept repeating. The class brimmed over with satisfied joy. She was surprised how much satisfaction the schoolchildren derived from naming familiar objects, as though seeing them in anew, unusual light. They named more and more things, but these first few minutes it was the most familiar objects, material things: wheel... tractor... well... bird-cage...

And from podgy Vasyata's hindmost desk it came thinly and insistently:

"Nail... nail... nail."

But then someone said timidly:

"City..."

"Good," Anna Vasilyevna approved, and it rained thick as hail: "Street, underground, tram-car, cinema..."

"That'll do," Anna Vasilyevna said, "I can see you've understood."

The voices died down somewhat reluctantly, and only podgy Vasyata still chanted his unacknowledged "nail". All of a sudden roused from his dreams, as it were, Savushkin got up and exclaimed in a ringing voice:

"Winter oak!"

The children laughed.

"Quiet!" Anna Vasilyevna said, striking the desk with the palm of her hand.

"Winter oak!..." Savushkin repeated, oblivious of the laughter and the teacher's outcry, and the way he spoke was strange. The words seemed to come from the bottom of his heart, like a confession, a cherished secret that his brimming soul was powerless to contain any longer. Not understanding his strange excitement, Anna Vasilyevna was barely able to hide her irritation, and snapped:

"Why 'winter'? Simply-'oak'."

"Simply 'oak' is nothing! 'Winter oak'-that's a real noun!" the boy retorted.

"Take your seat, Savushkin. See what comes of coming late? 'Oak' is a noun, but we haven't passed yet what 'winter' is in this case. Please come to the common room during the long break."

"That's what comes of winter oak!" somebody smirked on a back bench.

Savushkin sat down, smiling at some inner thought, not in the least upset by the teacher's menacing words. "A difficult boy," Anna Vasilyevna thought.

The lesson continued...

"Sit down," Anna Vasilyevna said, when Savushkin came to the common room. The boy sank into the soft arm-chair with undisguised pleasure and bounced up several times on its springs.

"Be good enough to tell me why you're continuously late!"

"I don't know, Anna Vasilyevna," he said, shrugging his shoulders like a grown-up, "I leave the house with an hour to spare."

How difficult to get at the truth in even the most trifling matter! Lots of children lived much farther than Savushkin, but none more than an hour's walk from school.

"Don't you live in Kuzminki?"

"No-at the sanatorium."

"And aren't you ashamed of yourself, saying that you leave the house with an hour to spare? It's no more than fifteen minutes from the sanatorium to the highway, and no more than half an hour along that."

"But I never take the highway. I cut straightwise through the wood," Savushkin said with a look that seemed to say that he himself was surprised by the whole thing.

"Straight-not straightwise," Anna Vasilyevna corrected him. A sense of grief and displeasure gripped her, as it always did when children lied. She kept silent, hoping that Savushkin would say: "Sorry, Anna Vasilyevna, but I played snowballs with the other chaps and..." or something just as simple and straightforward, but he only stared at her with large, grey eyes, and his look seemed to say: "Well, everything's settled now, what else do you want?"

"A poor state of affairs, Savushkin, very poor! I'll have to see your parents about it."

"But I only have a mother, Anna Vasilyevna," Savushkin smiled.

She blushed, and thought of Savushkin's mother-the "shower nurse", as her son called her. She was employed at the hydropathic baths at the sanatorium-a worn-out woman with hands that were white and flabby from all the hot water, and looked as if they were made from cloth. Alone, without her husband, who was killed in the Great Patriotic War, she was bringing up three more children besides Kolya.

Surely Savushkin's mother had cares enough, but Anna Vasilyevna just had to see her.

"I shall have to go and see your mother."

"By all means, Anna Vasilyevna, mother will be very happy!"

"Unfortunately, the news she'll hear from me won't be very good. What's your mother's shift?"

"She's in the second shift, starting at three..."

"Fine. I stop at two. You'll take me home after lessons today."

The path along which Savushkin took Anna Vasilyevna, began at the back of the school grounds. As soon as they stepped into the wood and the snow-laden fir branches closed behind their backs, they found themselves in a different, enchanted realm of peace and quiet. Flitting from tree to tree, magpies and crows shook the branches, - knocked down fir-cones, and broke an occasional dry, brittle twig. But nothing begot sounds here.

It was white all around. Only above, the windswept tips of the weeping birches showed black, their thin branches resembling strokes of black paint on the azure smoothness of the sky.

The path wound along the edge of a brook, now hugging its bank, submissively following its every twist and turn, now rising higher and winding along the slope.

Occasionally the trees stepped aside, opening up sun-bathed gay meadows, criss-crossed by hare spurs that looked so much like watch-chains. They also came across tracks that bore a resemblance to the shape of a clover leaf, and belonged to some larger beast. The tracks led into the thick of the wood.

"The elk's been here!" Savushkin said, as if speaking.. of an old friend, when he noticed Anna Vasilyevna's interest in the tracks. "But don't be afraid," he added reassuringly in reply to the glance she threw at the wood. "Elks are docile."

"Have you ever seen one?" Anna Vasilyevna asked animatedly.

"A live one?..." Savushkin sighed. "No... But I've seen his droppings."

"What?"

"His dung," Savushkin explained in embarrassment.

Slipping under an archway formed by a bent white willow, the path ran down to the brook again. In places the stream was covered with a thick blanket of snow, in others it was en-chained by smooth ice armour, and here and there live water emerged to view, dark and sinister among the ice and snow.

"Why isn't it all ice?" Anna Vasilyevna asked. "There are warm springs here; see a jet over there?"

Bending over the patch of water, Anna Vasilyevna saw a thin thread rising from the bottom; it burst into bubbles somewhere below the surface, and this frail stalk and the bubbles looked much like a lily of the valley.

"There are lots of springs hereabouts," Savushkin said with animation. "The brook is alive under the snow."

He brushed away the snow, and slate-black, transparent water came to view.

Anna Vasilyevna noticed that the snow didn't melt when it dropped into the water, thickened at once and hung suspended in it, a jelly-like greenish weed. This struck her fancy and she pushed more snow into the water with the toe of her overshoe, delighted when a large clot of snow assumed an especially grotesque shape. Carried away by this, she didn't notice at first that Savushkin had gone ahead and was waiting for her, seated high on a forked branch overhanging the brook. She hurried after him. The warm springs remained behind, and the water here was covered with a film of ice. Quick, gliding shadows darted across its smooth, marble-like surface.

"Look how thin the ice is," she said. "Even the current is visible!"

And she had thought she was a skilful teacher! Why, she didn't make a single step along the path for which even a lifetime was too short! Besides, where was it, that path? It wasn't easy to find, as hard as a key to a magic casket. But in that inexplicable joy with which the children shouted their "tractor ...well ... bird-cage ..." she glimpsed its dim outlines.

"Well, Savushkin, thanks for the walk. Of course you can take this path, too, if you want."

Savushkin blushed, he wanted to promise that he would never come late again, but the fear of telling a lie prevented him. He raised his collar and pulled down his fur-cap.

"I'll walk you back..."

"It's alright, Savushkin, I'll go alone."

He looked dubiously at his teacher, picked up a stick, broke off its crooked tip, and gave it to Anna Vasilyevna.

"If you meet up with the elk," he said, "strike him over the back and he'll take to his heels. Better still, just warn it, that'll do! Or he may take offence and leave our wood for ever!"

"Very well, Savushkin, I shan't beat him."

Having walked off a bit, Anna Vasilyevna turned round to look at the oak, pink and white in the rays of the setting sun, and saw a dark little figure at its foot-Savushkin hadn't left, holding guard over his schoolmistress from afar. And it suddenly dawned on Anna Vasilyevna that the most wonderful thing about this wood wasn't its winter oak, but this little man, this wonderful and enigmatic citizen of the future, son of a soldier who had given his life for his homeland, and of the "shower nurse".

She waved her hand to him, and started off at a leisurely pace along the winding footpath.