

# **Cancer Ward Study Guide**

**Cancer Ward by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

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## Plot Summary

The Cancer Ward is a novel about a Soviet man, Oleg Kostoglotov, who is admitted to a Soviet hospital somewhere in Asia, and is treated for several months for a tumor. As Oleg communicates with his fellow patients and interacts with the physicians treating him, he learns to define himself and his future. Emerging from years of prison camps and exile, Oleg discovers he still has the capacity to love. He also learns that even a strong man as himself can be brought down by disease, and can be brought down by the overwhelming cruelty of the Soviet system.

Through a series of incidents, examples of other citizens, and conversations between the patients, the faults of the Soviet system are exposed and criticized by the author.

The story begins with Pavel, a member of the Soviet secret service, being admitted into the cancer ward, and his evaluation of each patient. The story of each patient is outlined, and their thoughts about their predicament and disease.

The doctors and nurses and orderlies of the cancer ward are also described, along with their motivations for working within the Soviet medical system. It soon becomes clear that this medical team is a mix of inept political appointees and dedicated physicians. The dedicated doctors must deal with Soviet rules and regulations, inadequate staff, antiquated equipment and the lack of updated scientific information.

The patients in the ward come and go, with some being discharged, some moving to surgery, and some dying. The men keep up a continuing conversation about life, their reading material, the government, and about the cancer itself.

Oleg and Pavel become opposite ends of each argument, and they resent each other for different reasons. Pavel sees Oleg as a barbarian, and Pavel represents the authority that has ruined Oleg's life.

Oleg questions his treatment, but Zoya and Vera both persuade him to go through each phase as prescribed. He has a physical attraction to Zoya and an emotional one with Vera, and cultivates both relationships throughout his hospital stay. Oleg's disease takes its course, with him feeling better after the x-ray treatments, then feeling very bad during the injections. When he is finally released, Oleg has been cured, but told to come back in six months.

On the day Oleg is discharged, he has invitations from both Vera and Zoya to stay with them, but chooses to visit the town and the zoo before he goes to either one of them. Oleg is giddy with freedom, love and joy. The town's banality, the blank faces of the citizens and the overwhelming choices at a market cause Oleg to feel confused and lost. He goes to the zoo, a place long discussed and described by Dyomka, to regain his feeling of joy. He is happy to see the animals until he comes to the monkey exhibition. There is a sign on one of the cages that the monkey has been injured by a careless act, and this depresses Oleg immensely.



Oleg goes to Vera's house, but she is not home. He goes to the exile office and gets his train pass so he can return to his village. He is regaining his feeling of composure and strength, and uses his prison experience to manipulate those around him so he can get a good spot on the train.

As he settles down for the two day train trip, he suddenly remembers the blinded zoo monkey and Oleg is plunged into despair.



# Chapter 1-2

## Chapter 1-2 Summary

Pavel Rusanov is a very important man in the Soviet Union, and has a large tumor on his neck. He is told to report to the cancer ward of the hospital. When he asks his doctor, he is told he does not have cancer. His son, Yuri, drives Pavel and his wife, Kapa, to the hospital. He and his wife made many calls to bypass the normal treatment regimen so that Pavel can have a private nurse and a private room. They are consistently told that such private care is impossible. When they arrive at the hospital and are directed to Wing #13, Kapa tries to offer the admitting nurse money, but the nurse says she cannot take it, and if she did, there is no one to give it to, as there is no possibility for private care.

Pavel is able to wear his own purchased pajamas, but that is the only concession. He is assigned to a ward with eight other patients, all of whom have cancer. When asked by one of the other patients what kind of cancer he has, Pavel says he has none. The other patients laugh, then point out if he did not have cancer, what is he doing in the cancer wing? In Chapter 2, the eight patients who share the ward with Pavel are described, as they are seen through Pavel's eyes. He does not care to learn their actual names, and assigns them degrading nicknames in his mind, or refers to them by their regional heritage, such as Uz Becks, instead. He is miserable and in much pain.

Pavel is proud of his wife and his station in life, but appalled that a man of his power and privilege is subjected to the same treatment as common men.

## Chapter 1-2 Analysis

These beginning chapters serve as an exposition of the setting and mood of the novel. Seen through the eyes of a man who is high on the political ladder of the Soviet Union in the height of the Cold War, the cancer ward of the hospital is a place where Pavel's hard won power has little effect. The doctors, nurses and administrators are tasked with treating patients and keeping them as ignorant about the procedures and diagnosis as possible.

The author uses Pavel's condescending view of his hospital roommates and the staff to introduce these characters to the reader.

The author uses Pavel's cancer to create a situation in which he is forced to lie in a hospital bed next to men of every level of Soviet economic and social strata.

Pavel has been assigned to the cancer ward, and he has a tremendously large tumor on the side of his neck, yet he clings to the doctor's diagnosis that he does not have cancer. There are two ironies here. Pavel's tumor prevents him from turning his head from side to side, forcing him to see what is right in front of him. The other irony is that

as a representative of the Soviet government, he is mimicking that entity's habit of ignoring the tumors of unrest, poverty and the failure of the communist way of government that are growing all around them.



# Chapter 3-5

## Chapter 3-5 Summary

In Chapter 3, Zoya is the night nurse and is trying to get her work done, but there are too many patients and not enough nurses. The orderly, Nellya, only does part of her cleaning job, then goes away for a nap. Zoya is left with Sibgator, a man who has constant pain because of the cancer on his back. Sibgator chooses to stay in the hallway and not have a bed because he cannot lie down without aggravating his condition. He has been a patient in the cancer wing for many years. Kostoglotov, one of the ward patients who has earned the nickname "bone crusher" from Pavel, comes to Zoya's desk for conversation.

Zoya is an attractive woman who flirts a bit with Kostoglotov. They tell each other their life stories, and as Zoya describes her medical studies, Kostoglotov asks to borrow her medical book on tumors. She decides she will break the rules against educating patients about their diseases and loans him the book. Zoya goes back to embroidering, and takes her nurse's cap off, revealing golden curly hair. Oleg Kostoglotov thinks Zoya looks like a teddy bear, and tells her she should consider moving to the steppes of Kazakhstan when she obtains her license to be a doctor. She asks why, and he asks how do you know which part of the world you would be happy in?

As Chapter 4 begins, Dr. Vera Gangart is doing her rounds in the cancer wing, and various patients are described. Accompanying her are Dr. Dontsova and their administrative assistant Olympiada. In Pavel's ward, he grows increasingly angry at the behavior of these women. When they arrive at his bed, he tells them he will report them to the authorities. Vera says you can have an injection in your tumor at 11:30 am today or you can check out. He begins to protest further, but she and the other two women move to the next patient. Oleg tells the women he is ready to go home, Dr. Dontsova says his treatment is incomplete, and she grows angry. As the women are leaving the ward, Pavel calls out and says he will take the injection.

In Chapter 5, Vera is frustrated with Pavel, and remembers another patient who was well connected and falsely accused her of poisoning him. She and the other doctor, Dontsova work tirelessly for many hours every day, with no appreciation for their efforts. They try to balance the needs of the patients with the demands of their boss and the alarmingly small budget they work with in the cancer wing. She thinks of Oleg, who has made it to the ward, is responding well to treatment, yet has decided he wants to go home. She remembers when he first arrived at the hospital, and how he was difficult even then.

Oleg was told to come back the next day, the hospital admitting was closed, yet he stayed in the waiting room, sleeping on the floor. She remembers that he was kind but insistent, and she finally gave in and got him a room just to remove him from the waiting area.



## Chapter 3-5 Analysis

These chapters expand on the exposition section of the novel. The mood is set with the introduction of the overworked and understaffed doctors, the acceptance of substandard work by orderlies, and the crowded conditions.

The protagonist of the novel, Oleg Kostoglotov, receives more attention in these chapters. He is gruff and strong and represents the true Soviet citizen who has spent his life caught under the wheels of the Soviet political machine, yet remains hopeful and strong.

Zoya, the beautiful nurse, is the only shining light in this sea of gray gowns, dismal architecture, and exhausted staff. Oleg is immediately drawn to her, and her golden hair is symbolic of the ray of hope she represents to these dying men.

Zoya would never be happy in the remote provinces of the Soviet Union, and her beauty and golden hair would soon pale and suffer in the harsh conditions of those areas. Oleg talks about only the beauty of his exile, not the truth, because he is beginning his courtship of this young woman. Oleg may deride Pavel for his ability to use influence and power, but Oleg is just as capable of manipulation, as he convinces Zoya to loan him the forbidden medical book. Pavel is brought up short as he threatens to call Dr. Dontsova's superiors, as she delivers a veiled threat about withholding his treatment. The doctors work under unbelievable conditions at the hospital, and symbolize ethical socialism.





# Chapter 6-7

## Chapter 6-7 Summary

In Chapter 6, it is revealed that Ludmila Dontsova has had far more exposure to radiation than is healthy, but there is no tracking mechanism. She is assisting with Oleg's treatment today and asking about his medical history. When he was first diagnosed he was in a field hospital and the orderlies kept being transported out to other areas, so he never was told of the results of the biopsies on his primary tumor. Dontsova has trouble believing conditions were so haphazard. Oleg explains that he came to the hospital to be relieved of pain, he feels better, and now he wants to go home. Dontsova argues that she wants to cure him. They agree to continue treatment for a while longer.

As Chapter 7 begins, Dontsova is thinking about her thesis, but there is no time to work on it. Her life is described, along with an explanation of how x-ray machines in the Soviet Union work, and how they are overworked and overused. She is concerned about patients who have received the treatment for their tumors, only to suffer from radiation sickness for the other parts of their bodies. Dontsova is experiencing some serious abdominal pain, but tells no one about it. She takes the bus home, stopping first for groceries. She comes home to cook, clean and do the domestic chores of the family.

Dr. Dontsova is a woman committed to healing her patients, supporting her co-workers and teaching them. She tries to be everything, a good doctor, a good wife, and a good mother, but the truth is she is dying of radiation sickness and is afraid to admit her weakness.

## Chapter 6-7 Analysis

The author begins to elaborate on his theme of the brutal Soviet government, and uses Oleg's experience with the medical system. Incomplete records, no communication with the patient, and being moved around the country as a political prisoner with no rights, Oleg offers little for his doctors at this hospital to work with in achieving a diagnosis. Dr. Dontsova, working tirelessly for the Soviet system and within the restrictive Soviet lifestyle, ironically is being mortally wounded by her own lifesaving techniques.

Oleg's plea to return home is not even considered, as that would remove him from the system that keeps the doctors on their breakneck rate.

Again the author displays the leveling and equalizing power of disease, showcased in Dr. Dontsova's dreams of completing her thesis, being a good wife and mother, and contributing to her country. Her country has failed her miserably, though, with faulty machines and failure to provide her with adequate assistance in her work.



# Chapters 8-11

## Chapters 8-11 Summary

Chapter 8 begins with a description of Yefrem Podduyev, one of the patients in the ward with Pavel and Oleg. He is a very strong man, a construction worker who travels all over the Soviet Union doing the hardest work. He is fighting death, and considers it his personal goal to let all the other patients know they are going to die, too. He reads a book of short stories and is intrigued by one entitled "What do men live by?" He asks each of the patients in the ward their answer to the question, and then tells them the author says the answer is love. Pavel demands to know who the author is, and when he is told it is Leo Tolstoy, he laughs. Dontsova has learned that the administrative assistant Olympiada will be absent from the ward for ten days to attend a political event, and Dontsova is very upset. Dontsova tries every avenue to get the trip cancelled, but instead is told of the importance of political events.

Chapter 9 begins with a description of Yevgenia Ustinovna, the senior surgeon at the cancer wing, who does all of the surgery. She is a chain smoker, and sometimes even uses her two smoking fingers to raise her lips when she is not holding a cigarette. She is very good at her work, but she does not love it. Today she is doing the rounds alone, and is in Pavel's ward. She observes each patient, knowing most of them very well. She stops by Yefrem's bed and he says he is tired of cutting and wants out. She hints that maybe on Monday she will let him go home. He realizes this means he is a goner. She stops by Proshka's bed and tells him he will be discharged today. He asks about going back to work and she says she will explain his certificates to him before his discharge.

The doctor leaves, and the patients are abuzz with conversation. Pavel is thinking about his tumor, and how the injection did not shrink it much. All of the men are thinking about their cancer, and how difficult it was to get admitted into this cancer wing. Once there, they cannot consult with their families because it would take too long, and they have no knowledge about their diseases. When Proshka returns with his certificates, he shows them to Oleg who can read a little Latin. Oleg sees that the doctor has written "untreatable tumor" on the boy's certificate.

In Chapter 10, Dyomka is in the ward, soon after Proshka has left. He is thinking about how the doctor looked when she touched his leg. A new man enters the ward, and takes Proshka's bed. Dyomka goes back to reading. He thinks of his life, and how unfortunate he has been. He has a friend, an older woman, from the women's ward, and she says it is all God's will. One day while looking for his friend, he meets a beautiful golden haired girl named Asya. She is just at the hospital for a standard three day check up and in their brief conversation she makes him forget about his leg for awhile, and he is a normal young man for just a moment.

As Chapter 11 begins, Dyomka returns to the ward after his conversation with Asya, and the patients are in discussion, led by Oleg and Pavel. It is a Saturday evening and the



men do not have to meet with the doctors or take treatments. Men from other wards are listening to the conversation, mainly a lecture from Oleg about the possibilities of other forms of treatment. It begins as a scientific discussion, but soon becomes political as Pavel tells Oleg there is no speculation beyond what had been prescribed by the Soviet Union government, Lenin and Stalin. Pavel hastens to end the argument, thinking he should be spending his time checking up on Oleg, where he came from, and what should be done about him.

Suddenly Pavel is overcome with pain from his tumor and stops trying to argue. The other men ask Oleg to continue, especially with what he had learned about birch fungus for a possible cure. Oleg warms to his subject, feeling like a man after all these years. The men are listening and full of hope. Oleg has begun a correspondence with a rural doctor who has been studying birch fungus and the tea the locals drink because so few of them come down with cancer. The bark is available at a high cost from men who cut it down. The logistics of getting the bark is now being discussed within the ward, and Pavel is shocked that such a capitalistic adventure even exists. The other men ignore Pavel and one man in particular wants the address of the suppliers and the doctor. Oleg decides to go for a walk and begins dressing. The man who is most persistent is a philosophy lecturer and follows Oleg to the door. Oleg gives him the addresses, then goes out for a walk. He feels very good about himself.

## Chapters 8-11 Analysis

To add insult, literally to injury, Dr. Dontsova's assistant is pulled away from the hospital for ten days, not for medical training, but for political training. Here in this hospital, political duty is the last thing on everyone's mind except Pavel.

Pavel is not faring well in his exposure to his microcosm of Soviet citizenry, as he is constantly assaulted with ideas and concepts that go against his strict procedures and policies. At first he refuses to believe the stories of underground capitalism, then he becomes angry at the men who are discussing the ideas.

Yefrem is another typical Soviet citizen, who cannot believe he is dying, when he has always been so strong.

The female surgeon's story is poignant. She has done so many operations and seen so much cancer she can no longer see people outside of the hospital without wondering what limbs are hiding the tumors in their bodies. She has no desire to change her circumstances, just accepts the job she is doing.

The extent of the helplessness of the cancer ward patients is further explored by the author as the doctors inform patients they must have immediate surgery, and the patients cannot consult with another doctor or their own families. These patients have been brought great distances and waited for some time to be admitted to this hospital. Contact with their families would involve considerable time, and there is no time.



In these chapters, the author introduces his theme of the purpose in life, using one of the patient's contributions to the Saturday night ward discussion to begin that chain of thought for all of the patients. Each man has a different answer, and these answers give the reader insight to the characters.

In these chapters also, the author expands on his analogy of cancer and the Soviet government, each eating away the larger body and each unstoppable.



# Chapter 12-14

## Chapter 12-14 Summary

In Chapter 12, Zoya is on her way to work at the cancer wing, and she catches the trolley. She is thinking about her life. She is a single woman in a town where there are many single women and few good men. She has worn a dress that Oleg has mentioned he likes. Zoya is resourceful, pretty, and determined not to end up like her parents or her friends. She wants a good man for her husband. When she reaches the hospital, she is happy to see Oleg, and enlists him to help her with her administrative duties. She is surprised how well he does the work. After she finishes her rounds, she asks Oleg to join her in the doctor's lounge while she works on her embroidery. Oleg immediately begins talking to her about the part of the country where he lives. She asks about his status, and she learns that he is an administrative exile, prevented from living in Russia because of his nationality. They have an honest conversation and she realizes this is the sort of man she has been looking for. Oleg feels very alive.

As Chapter 13 begins, it is Sunday, and Pavel's wife Kapa comes to see him. She has brought provisions, and he is very happy to sit with her and gossip, complain about his circumstances, and be with the woman he loves dearly as a wife and a friend, even after all these years. He is growing weary and almost forgets to tell her to research the possibility of the birch tree fungus. As he mentions it to her, Kapa tells him she has a letter from her brother, who lives in their old flat in the town she and Pavel and their children were evacuated from. Pavel is devastated to learn that someone named Rodichev has been rehabilitated and is returning to the town.

In Chapter 14, Pavel's fear of Rodichev is explained. Pavel was instrumental in having the man expelled from their town. Rodichev and his wife were living in the apartment next door to Pavel and Kapa, and when their friendship deteriorated, Pavel used his considerable influence to have Rodichev and several other people Pavel did not like, sent away. Not only was the Rodichev family removed from the town, but many others, all tied together by Pavel's witness against them. Pavel is a personnel records supervisor, and therefore has huge power over people's lives.

He and his wife claim to love people, but they do not want to be too close to them. Pavel uses his position to move up the political ladder and receive those perks only the political bosses retain, such as use of a motorcar, reserved hotel rooms, and special treatment in a world where no one is supposed to receive special treatment and everyone is supposed to be treated the same. Pavel and his wife take great pride in their accomplishments and believe themselves to be shining examples of the success of Soviet socialism.

Pavel thinks fondly of his powerful manipulations of the lives of others, then must walk down the hall of the hospital to the communal lavatory. He returns to his bed with thoughts only of his tumor, and knows his power is useless there.



## Chapter 12-14 Analysis

The beautiful Zoya, laden with dreams of a perfect husband and an exciting life, begins to consider Oleg, the rough country boy, as a possible mate. She toys with his affections, and he manipulates her into special favors. This series of events show Oleg's return to health, and how few available men must be in the village for Zoya to choose a cancerous patient for her affections.

Oleg's descriptions of the village he was finally exiled to after prison show a man who knows how to make the best of a bad situation.

Kapa, Pavel's wife, is symbolic of the Soviet wife of a politically powerful, yet physically and emotionally weak man. She provides him with news, gossip, support and the type of friendship shared by co-conspirators.

The story of Pavel's ex-neighbors being returned from an exile he engineered reveals the true cowardly nature of Pavel. The statement in the book that explains how much Pavel and Kapa love the Soviet people, followed immediately by the extreme pains the couple take in order to avoid being anywhere near those Soviet people who are not on their social level, is indicative of their true feelings.



# Chapter 15-16

## Chapter 15-16 Summary

As Chapter 15 begins, the men in the ward are sleeping and some are talking. The new man and Dyomka are talking about their past lives, and the new man says it is better to live as a cripple than to die. Yefrem is nearby and says they should talk about what a man's life is for, and the new man says it is to work and be creative. Pavel likes this answer and begins to lecture Yefrem. Yefrem is not listening, he is thinking about his disease and about the birch bark fungus. He feels his spirit receding. Yefrem is told he is being discharged and he feels very remote. Oleg stops him when he comes back to the ward, and the two men are talking when the nurse delivers the paper. Oleg takes it and Pavel is furious because he does not think anyone can understand the paper but him. Oleg begins to hand it to Pavel, then an article catches his eye. When he finally hands the newspaper to Pavel, Pavel finds out the entire Supreme Court of the Soviet Union has been suddenly replaced. The nurses arrive to give Pavel his injection.

In Chapter 16, Pavel has a long and terrible dream. He is in a long tube and trying to get out by following directions from an unseen voice. He encounters a woman in the tunnel and remembers her husband was one of the men he made disappear over the years. He remembers she had a daughter, and he put that child in a school and changed her name. He is explaining to her, without remorse, that he did what he was paid to do. Next he finds a telephone and when he calls out for a drink, he is told to come to the Supreme Court, the new one. Pavel sees other people from his past, and his neck hurts, but he does not remember why. He calls out again for water, and awakens to see Dr. Gangart next to him. She pours him some juice and tells him the injection was stronger this time, and will continue at this rate.

## Chapter 15-16 Analysis

The patients in the ward are learning quickly that discharge from the cancer ward means the doctors have given up curing them. Without radical surgery and constant x-ray treatments, the doctors have no way to stave off death for them.

Yefrem is dwelling on the theme of the purpose of life, and feels his own spirit weakening, the old strength and zest for life withering away.

Pavel's feelings of superiority knows no bounds when he thinks he is the only one in the ward who can understand the daily paper. His injections are causing him some ironic dreams where he justifies his actions to people he has harmed in the past.

The Soviet Union has cut the Supreme Court out of the country exactly as the surgeons remove a cancerous arm or leg.



# Chapters 17-19

## Chapters 17-19 Summary

In Chapter 17, Vera Gangart is concerned about Pavel, so she spends more time in the ward than usual, watching him. She enters into a conversation with Oleg, and they learn about each other. Oleg is very attracted to this woman, but he knows she is married. Vera learns there will be an inspection the next day and tells the ward they must put away the items that are not issued by the hospital. She begins with Oleg's cabinet and finds a brown liquid substance. He tells her it is a magic root he has been taking for his cancer, and she insists he give it to her. He says no, let us go outside and I will pour it out. They go outside and he pours it out and watches her walk back inside. Vera is actually not married, but ashamed of the fact, so allows people to assume she has a husband.

As Chapter 18 begins, it is Tuesday evening, and Oleg is waiting for Zoya to come on duty. She arrives and he begins following her around. He tells her about the inspection today and how the head man wanted to throw him out of the hospital because he thought he was not from Russia. When Oleg and Zoya are filling an oxygen bag in a supply room, they begin kissing and he asks her to come to his town in the virgin lands and be his wife. She tells him not to take the injections because the medicine will affect his virility. Oleg is very concerned about this and begins studying the medical book for answers.

Chapter 19 covers the story of the new man in the ward, Vadim. He is a young man, only twenty-six, and he knows he has only a few months to live. He has made a scientific discovery and decides his legacy will be to give this to the world. He is ready to sacrifice everything to do this, and every moment is precious. Nellya the orderly comes in and announces that Yefrem is dead. Pavel gets another injection and the orderlies come to take Vadim for his X-ray treatment.

## Chapters 17-19 Analysis

These chapters outline the routines and systems of the hospital, and how soon a bed is filled after the occupant is taken for surgery or dismissed. There seems to be no end to the number of Soviet people who have been afflicted with deadly cancerous tumors.

Oleg has emerged from years of prison camps and exile, where survival was his only concern, to a world where there are attractive and intelligent women. He begins relationships with both Zoya and Vera in these chapters, only to find that he is still engaged in a battle to survive, this time against cancer and not the government.

The new man, Vadim, represents the glorious Soviet youth, ready to sacrifice themselves for the supposed good of the people. Ironically, Vadim is willing to die if only he can leave this scientific legacy. Then he begins to believe that this legacy makes him



more important than the other men in the ward. It is not a coincidence that Vadim is the only man in the ward that Pavel likes.



# Chapter 20, 21, and Part Two, Chapter 22

## Chapter 20, 21, and Part Two, Chapter 22 Summary

As Chapter 20 begins, Oleg is walking on the grounds of the hospital, thinking of Ush-Terek, where he had been exiled and was living before the tumor appeared. He was assigned to this wild, empty land forever by the government, but instead of hating it and being bitter, he loved the land. He did not marry, even though there were women living there. He felt he needed to wait. Oleg thinks also of the corruption in his small exile town, where government programs were used only for the privileged, and the people all worked around the regulations. The poor were still poor, the rich and politically connected still did better than everyone else. Oleg feels exile is wonderful, compared to the prison camps.

Oleg thinks of the Kadmins, an older couple who befriended him, and how they found joy in everything that happened to them. They had been exiled from Russia because Mr. Kadmin's mother, who lived with them, had allowed a deserter to stay in their house for a couple of nights. For this infraction, the Kadmins were banished for ten years. The deserter was released during an amnesty time, but the Kadmins constituted an organization of two, and therefore were assigned to exile in perpetuity. They were exiled to two different locations, but after a year of writing letters, they were finally reunited in the town where they met Oleg. The Kadmins are an industrious and happy couple, and even their dogs include Oleg in the family. Oleg wants to get healthy, return to his village, marry and have children.

In Chapter 21, Oleg returns to the clinic, and bumps into Aviette Rusanov, Pavel's daughter, who is coming to visit her father. Pavel is on his third injection, and is feeling very weak, partly from the thought of facing the people he exiled years ago. Kapa has told Aviette about the problem and she is there to speak to her father about it. Aviette is very upbeat and encouraging. Pavel begins to feel better. He asks her about the phrase "cult of personality" and she agrees it is improper, but says they need to go with the times. It refers to the atrocities committed by Stalin, that the Soviet Union now is trying to justify. The conversation between father and daughter now switches to Moscow, the latest trends, and Aviette's activities.

Aviette is going to be a writer, and has good prospects for being in the Writer's Union. Pavel is concerned about her, but she assures him she will be writing novels that will be accepted by the officials. She has brought Pavel some books approved by the state. Dyomka, sitting in his bed nearby, asks Aviette about sincerity in literature and she expounds on the importance of telling people about the good things, not the bad things in life. Vadim is listening to this discussion and disagrees with Aviette. That upsets her, but she returns to her lecture for Dyomka, then leaves, telling her father everything is going to be fine.



In Chapter 22, it is March of 1956. Oleg is writing a letter to his friends the Kadmins, telling them his current condition. Since the x-ray treatment has begun, he is no longer feeling well and cannot take his walks anymore. He tells them he misses them and their little town and even the dogs, and longs for one more summer to sit in the little river and allow the water to run around him. He accepts Kadmins' offer to loan him some money and promises to look for the articles they have sent on their shopping list. He tells his friends about Vera and how he feels about her.

## Chapter 20, 21, and Part Two, Chapter 22 Analysis

These chapters are about optimism, whether real or misguided. Oleg is optimistic about his small town of Ush-Terek, and it is only natural that he would miss his friends the Kadmins, who are the embodiment of facing a bad situation with a good attitude. The author weaves this theme of optimism and attitude towards life throughout the novel, providing examples of people who trust in themselves for a good outlook on life, and comparing them with those who have placed their trust in a corrupt and rusting political state.

The Kadmins suffer drastically from a situation similar to the ones Pavel engineered against his neighbors. Torn from a comfortable existence with good careers, this plucky couple have found happiness in each other, and a new life. Oleg admires the Kadmins, and is unconsciously searching for a similar situation, as soon as he finds a woman who would fit into the harsh realities of Ush-Terek with him.

Aviette, Pavel's daughter, bursts into the ward to visit her father and oozes optimism, making everyone feel better. Her optimism though is based on a belief that her father will recover because he is such a faithful party member, and the party would never allow him to die. Aviette has dreams of being a writer, and is happy to work within the strict guidelines of appropriate writing outlined by the government.

Pavel is concerned about the shift in the Soviet policy regarding his beloved Stalin, and realizes through his conversation with his daughter that he will need to shift his allegiances as well, in order to continue a life of privilege.



# Chapter 23 - 25

## Chapter 23 - 25 Summary

As Chapter 23 begins, it is a few days later, and Dyomka is moved out of the ward because he has agreed to the operation. Vadim is offering him encouragement as Dyomka is packing his things, and Vadim is not looking too well. Every day is bringing more pain and less mobility. The man who takes Dyomka's bed, Shulubin, is old and has huge eyes. Shulubin's entry into the ward is not a pleasant one. Pavel is on his twelfth injection and the tumor is much smaller. Dr. Dontsova is worried that he will have secondary tumors and she keeps searching for them. Pavel believes he is almost ready to go home. Pavel and Oleg, who used to argue and fight about everything, are now both laid low, spending all their time lying side by side, suffering. A new man enters the ward, full of life and smart talk. His name is Chaly, and he takes the bed on the other side of Pavel, and starts making preparations for a card game with Pavel and some of the other patients. He is called away to see his wife and collect his things. Vadim enters the room with the newspaper, and Pavel is shocked to see that even though this is the second anniversary of Stalin's death, there is nothing but a small article in the newspaper about the leader.

Pavel worries about this, as his own success and reputation were molded after the teachings of Stalin. Chaly is called out and again returns, admitting that he has two wives. Chaly offers Pavel vodka, and the two men begin speaking of their lives. Chaly works outside of the laws and regulations, bribing everyone along the way in order to move his products. Pavel is drunk, but still manages a small protest. Shulubin comes to their beds to get the paper, and as he walks away, Pavel insinuates Shulubin is not a party member. The man says "on the contrary" and walks away.

In Chapter 24, Oleg is sitting outside in the hospital grounds, in pain, trying to get some sun to warm him, when the orderly comes to tell him to go inside. He does not want to, but when he arrives, he realizes they want him to get a transfusion. He lies down but protests that the blood is old. There is a different doctor, a different nurse, and then Vera comes in. She has been gone for a week, and Oleg is glad to see her. Vera takes over the transfusion. She and Oleg have an intimate conversation about reasons to live. Oleg finds his resistance to the treatments melting away as he listens to Vera.

Chapter 25 begins with Vera leaving the hospital and walking home. Everything is different to her now, as she is in love with Oleg. She goes to her communal apartment, decides not to eat but to listen to records in her room. She thinks of the young man who was her love, the man who was killed in the war. She put her efforts and love into her work after that and believed she would never find another. Then she finds Oleg. She sleeps that night but dreams many times and awakes. The next morning she is doing her rounds and one of the women patients says that Zoya gets a cuddle from Oleg every time she is on duty. Vera is very upset.



## Chapter 23 - 25 Analysis

The mood of the novel becomes gloomy, with the patients realizing the severity of their diseases, and the doctors knowing most of them will die. The old fighters, Oleg and Pavel, are too sick to argue.

Into this dismal environment comes Chaly, a wheeler and dealer type who has learned to work the system for his own profit. Ironically, Pavel changes his disapproval of Chaly the instant Chaly offers him an inside track on his deals and Pavel sees a benefit for himself and his family. This change of attitude reveals the inherent failure of a system that rewards an elite section of its people without respecting the ingenuity of the remainder.

Oleg has been fighting the transfusions, but his heart overrules his mind, and his need to be near Vera overcomes his objections. When Vera's affection for him changes a few days later because of rumors she has heard regarding Zoya, the resulting misunderstanding between potential lovers adds to the gloom of the cancer ward.

The further erosion of Stalin's importance in the Soviet Union is evident when the official newspaper gives only a small amount of column space in recognition of the man's birthday.



# Chapters 26-27

## Chapters 26-27 Summary

In Chapter 26, Dyomka is done with his surgery, and he is gray. His surgeon looks him over and is encouraging. Dyomka's surgeon, Lev, is rushing off to attend a five minute conference that is held every day by the senior doctor. Lev is looking at the other personnel in the room. Of the five doctors who were receiving pay, only two of them are capable of operating. Next, all of the doctors and the nurses go to the wards for the rounds, all together. The physicians and nurses are not allowed to let the patients know what is really happening to their bodies, so all of the conversations are generalized. Lev believes the purpose of the rounds is to cheer up the patients, so he does that.

On the smoke break, in a private room, the truth is discussed about everyone they have seen. Contrary to what the patients are being told, there are many serious, inoperable cases and a lot of the patients are dying. Lev wants a better conversation, so he finds Vera, but the conversation is not good, as Vera reveals that Dr. Dontsova has cancer and needs an operation.

Chapter 27 continues on the same day. Vera and Zoya are paired to do the rounds in the ward where Oleg stays. When she looks at Oleg, because he is next to be examined, he realizes she is angry at him. When he is being examined, Oleg is alarmed to hear Vera ask Zoya about the injections. He has been charming Zoya not to give him the injections, and it is not worth keeping Vera if he must have the injections. In one moment, Vera is done with Oleg, Oleg is done with Vera and Zoya is done with Oleg.

Pavel is feeling much better and now looks forward to the doctor's rounds. He has a new neighbor, Federau, and he tells him of his apartment, his terrace, his furniture. The two men become friends, as Pavel thinks of taking the lesser man under his wing. Shulubin is always quiet, walking around the ward, listening to all the conversations, but not contributing. Oleg and Vadim have become adversaries on every point. Vadim has begun to believe that his contributions to science make him more valuable than any of the other men, and he is frustrated that no one else sees this. Vadim and Shulubin have a strange conversation about what is interesting.

## Chapters 26-27 Analysis

The author allows the reader to see the condition of the cancer ward doctors through Levi, and discovers that not only is the equipment faulty, and the hospital grossly understaffed, most of the doctors assigned are inept.

The author exposes the corruption of a system that promotes the inadequate simply to move them to a position where they work on the people who are not politically important. The competent doctors work frantically to keep the incompetent ones from doing any harm.



The policy of not telling the patients the exact nature of their case is puzzling, unless one takes into consideration the overall secrecy and lack of communication present in every level of society under the Soviet regime. The author's intent to expose the government's failures is ruthless: a political prisoner, Oleg, spends years in prison under unbelievably harsh conditions, without a trial; he is exiled to a vast wasteland with little provisions, and no opportunity to better himself in society; he contracts a deadly disease and is placed into a hospital where half the doctors are incompetent, the x-ray machines are not calibrated, dosing everyone lethally, and the orderlies sleep through their shift rather than keep the hospital clean. The author's theme of a brutal government is all encompassing, yet weaved into the plot in such a way to make the protagonist endearing and the antagonist hateful but believable.



# Chapter 28-29

## Chapter 28-29 Summary

In Chapter 28, Oleg is able to find Lev in a private room and asks him if the hormone therapy will keep him from ever having sex with a woman again. Lev says he does not think so, but adds that women keep a man from accomplishing something serious in his life. At that moment Angelica, one of the ineffective doctors, comes in and talks to Lev as if Oleg is not there. Oleg brings the conversation back to him by asking Lev about the birch tree fungus. Lev says it is all the rage in Moscow. In the conversation between the two men, after Angelica leaves, Oleg learns that Lev had been in a prison camp once as well. Oleg runs into Vera on his way to see Dyomka, and they have a hopeful conversation. Dyomka greets Oleg like a brother, and they gossip about the ward. Dyomka makes Oleg promise to go to a zoo that has captured Dyomka's imagination and send a postcard from there. Dyomka's next visitor is Asya, who has come to tell him the doctors want to cut off her breast. She says no one will want her, and Dyomka says he will marry her. She is not listening, cannot be consoled. She demands that he kiss the breast she is losing, and that he remembers it forever. He does.

In Chapter 29, Yuri comes to visit his father Pavel at the hospital. Yuri has been on a business trip and tells his father about the case of a truck driver who was stuck in a blizzard, left his load, and when he returned a case of macaroni was gone. It was a state commodity load, and the truck driver was sent to prison for five years. Pavel believes justice has been done, but it is obvious Yuri does not agree. Pavel tries to explain the way of the Soviet world, a world Pavel believes in with all his heart, to his son. Yuri tells Pavel of more cases, and that he uncovered an illegal operation and had two female suspects. He takes them both out, thinking he will discover who is the thief when he sees their house. Yet that was not enough, they both lived sparingly. He involves a judge, who says they need to be reprimanded and made to pay back what they took, but no jail time.

Yuri is proud of his actions and expects the two girls to be appreciative, but they are angry. He is astounded. Pavel returns to the ward, very disappointed with his son. In the ward, there is a discussion about a party official who has been discovered to be hoarding valuables in his mansion, but when caught, turned the house into a children's home and apologized. He was not sent to prison. Pavel says people must be treated humanely, depending on their social origin. Oleg says that is propaganda, and Pavel is livid. Oleg calls Pavel a racist. Oleg continues screaming about the inequality of the system, and does not listen to anyone who is trying to calm him. Oleg finally wears himself out and his pain is too great, so he lies down.





## Chapter 28-29 Analysis

In these chapters, the mood of the cancer ward is somewhat more hopeful, with Vera and Oleg reuniting, and Dyomka's spirited conversations about a zoo in the nearby town. Any lift of spirits are soon dashed by poor Asya's condition, and Yuri's story about a truck driver.

The irony of Yuri's truck driver story and the political party member's mansion is another example of the inequity of the Soviet social system.

Oleg and Pavel's ideological differences are escalated, and Oleg's explosion gives the author an opportunity to expound again on his opinions about these inequities. Oleg's exhaustion after his outburst reflects the overwhelming futility the Soviet citizen must have faced on a daily basis.

By the end of these chapters, the mood in the ward has reverted to uneasy silence, brooding thoughts and a fear of the future of the patients and the country.



# Chapters 30-31

## Chapters 30-31 Summary

Chapter 30 begins with a description of the home of Dr. Oreshchenkov, who is seventy-five years old and retired. It is Saturday, and Dr. Dontsova has come to visit him at his home, and he knows it must be bad news. Just by being in his home, Dontsova feels better. Dr. Oreshchenkov has been jailed and persecuted many times in his career, just because he believes he should be able to have a private practice, and he has a low opinion of the type of doctor called an honored scientist. In this small town where he spent his life, Dr. Oreshchenkov had once saved the life of a VIP's son, and then more influential people came to him, and soon he found he was allowed to have the private practice he wanted all his life. Dontsova tells him of her symptoms, and he decides he will x-ray her on Monday. Then he offers her tea and cookies and they talk.

Dontsova is immersed in her fears about the diagnosis, but does not want to hear the truth, so Dr. Oreshchenkov begins talking about the present Soviet society that has robbed children of their trusted family doctor. This develops into a discussion about socialized medicine, and he soon sees he will never dissuade Dontsova from her opinion that free medicine is better. Just as Dontsova is tiring of holding up her end of the conversation, a huge dog, a St. Bernard, comes into the room. Dontsova is charmed by the animal, and begins to feel better. She leaves the doctor's office.

As Chapter 31 begins, it is Sunday, and Oleg is about to be discharged so he can return to Ush-Terek. He is feeling good, has been courting Zoya in the evenings and feeling sexual again. Oleg is walking in the hospital grounds and sees Shulubin. Oleg sits down on the bench next to the man, and asks him about his upcoming surgery. The two men discuss their diseases, then Shulubin tells Oleg it might have been better to go to the prison camps than to be in the groups that were called to witness against the people going to the prison camps.

Shulubin says that to keep his own life safe, he had to agree with the state, applaud the arrests, encourage the firing squads. Those who did not were rounded up and killed. Shulubin says he cannot believe millions of Soviets believe the lies they are constantly being told. Shulubin tells of being a professor at the Soviet Union's largest agricultural university, and of the purges and the humiliations he suffered, just to stay alive. Shulubin promotes the idea of ethical socialism, and is passionate about his arguments, but he soon tires and must lean on Oleg to return to the hospital.

## Chapters 30-31 Analysis

The story of Dr. Oreshchenkov and the conversation between Oleg and Shulubin continue the author's theme of inequity, corruption and cruelty of the Soviet system. The



plot stalls here as the characters indulge in long dissertations about the meaning of socialism and how it could work in the USSR.

Shulubin provides a twist in the traditional story of oppressed citizens as he describes how it felt to be among the oppressors, and he represents another type of Soviet citizen, the ones who are left behind to deal with life after the neighbors and the upstarts are exiled.

The patients in this novel speak passionately about their lives and their beliefs, then become exhausted and inert, representing the frequent uprisings or increases in spirit by the populace, then the fact that they are worn down from the effort and the seemingly endless power of the entity they are fighting against, whether it be the government or their own disease.

The story of Oleg is moving forward slowly in these chapters as he suffers from an embarrassment of riches in the opposite sex category. He is feeling better, he believes himself to be healing, and he begins to look to the future.



## Chapter 32-33

### Chapter 32-33 Summary

In Chapter 32, Dontsova comes in for her x-ray, and awaits the decision of the doctors. They decide because she is a doctor and one of them, she should go to Moscow for an opinion. Dontsova has become so destroyed by the knowledge of her illness that she will not look at the x-rays of her own body. She accepts their decision to go to Moscow, turns over the radiology department to Vera, and leaves. Vera knows that Dontsova is suffering from radiation sickness. Vadim's mother has found the special ingredient needed for his treatment, and it is coming to him through channels. Pavel believes himself to be completely cured and tells the doctors he will take the injections at home now. Dontsova is confused by his statement because he is not cured and the doctors are expecting him to develop secondary tumors at any moment. When the doctors reach Oleg, he asks once again to be sent home. Dontsova agrees, and tells Vera to give him some tablets before he goes.

In Chapter 33, it is Friday, and Pavel is scheduled to be discharged. His family arrives to collect him. As they are leaving, Chaly comes out to see the family car. At first Pavel does not want to give Chaly his phone number, but Chaly says he can get Pavel a set of good tires, so Pavel hands him the information. As they pull away, they see Oleg walking down the road away from the hospital, but they do not offer him a ride. Oleg begins making arrangements for his things when he is discharged, and he goes to Vera to see if she will discharge him immediately. She says she must write a resume of his illness, and in the meantime he can stay at her house. He is astonished, but he accepts.

### Chapter 32-33 Analysis

The crisis of the plot is reached as Dontsova is finally diagnosed with cancer, and Oleg and Pavel are set to be released and returned to their former lives.

Dontsova so firmly believes in the regulations of the Soviet government regarding patients and doctors that she does not allow herself to see her own x-rays. She accepts whatever diagnosis her colleagues deliver, and turns her life over to them. This act would be out of character for such a strong woman without the knowledge that she has been living by the Soviet regulations all of her career.

Pavel obviously has learned nothing in his forced interactions with the real people of the Soviet Union, and his behavior as he returns to the land of the privileged is despicable. Pavel scorns Oleg and demeans Chaly, laughing at them with his shallow family. Little does Pavel know that he is doomed to return to be with the commoners in the cancer ward soon, as he is not cured, but only in a short remission.



# Chapter 34-36

## Chapter 34-36 Summary

In Chapter 34, Oleg cannot sleep, so he walks the halls. He finds one of the older female orderlies, one who always does her job without complaining. She was exiled too, and lost her daughter. Her husband is in a camp, allowed two letters per year. She talks about the trials of raising a son in these circumstances. Oleg realizes his problems are not as bad as those of others.

In Chapter 35, Oleg is released from the hospital and takes the trolley into the town, where he wanders around, going from store to store, enjoying the freedom of his life. He expects great joys in this day, but ends up being depressed and confused at all of the stores and the things he cannot buy. He goes to the zoo, and is further depressed by all the animals in cages, with no freedom. The most depressing moment is when he sees a sign on one of the monkey cages saying that the monkey has been removed from exhibit because someone has thrown tobacco into the poor animal's eye and blinded him. This outrages Oleg and upsets him like nothing else. He goes finally to see Vera.

As Chapter 36 begins, Oleg approaches Vera's house and buys some violets for her. He is apprehensive about the outcome of his arrival, but when he finally locates her house, her roommates treat him badly and tell him she is gone. He wants to wait, but they discourage him. He leaves and heads to the exile office to secure his ticket to Ush-Terek, thinking he will go by and see Vera again later in the afternoon. He gets on a crowded trolley and decides to stay on it to the train station.

At the station, he feels his old self coming back, able to work the system, trick people into allowing him in line first, and using his big body to get what he wants. At the last moment, he writes a letter to Zoya, to Vera and to Dyomka. In the letter to Dyomka, he tells him about the monkey who was blinded by a careless act. While waiting in the train line, Oleg recognizes a bully in the crowd and forces him to wait until the others have gotten on the train. Oleg is able to secure a good place to sleep for the duration of the ride, and is stretched out on the rack, thinking he is ready to go home now. Suddenly he is torn with anguish about the monkey in the zoo. It is the end of the story.

## Chapter 34-36 Analysis

The end of the novel is a strange fantastical trip that Oleg takes on the day he is released from the hospital. Filled with optimism and facing the option of Vera or Zoya for his evening entertainment, Oleg walks about the town, goes shopping, goes to the zoo, encounters all sorts of citizenry, and rides the trolley. Slowly but surely the realities and cruelties of Soviet life beat Oleg down, as he encounters disappointment and disillusionment. There are piercing moments of optimism and beauty, but it is not enough to bring Oleg back to his optimistic self.



Oleg keeps expecting joy at every corner, but finds more and more cause to despair. The zoo monkey symbolizes this happy, optimistic man, who finds love and loses it, finds happiness in simple things like a apricot tree, and learns to live well within captivity; yet at the end, he is blinded by a cruel act from someone who has the power to inflict pain for no reason.

The author's theme of a man's purpose in life is left to the consideration of the reader. The plot and characters are constructed to deliver the author's overriding message of the failure of the Soviet government to provide for its citizens.



# Characters

## Oleg Filimonovich Kostoglotov

Oleg is a citizen of the Soviet Union in the 1950s. He recently spent eight years in prison camps because of Article 58, a law that gave the Soviets considerable leeway in sending unwanted people to Siberia for extended times. Oleg now lives in Ush-Terek, on the steppes, and is a topographer's assistant there. He was diagnosed with cancer when he was in the camps, but results of a biopsy were lost in government files.

Oleg is a big man with rough features. He has coal black hair that is not controlled even with repeated combing. He is not afraid to express his opinion, and has learned through his armed service experience and then his prison life, how to work the system and how to read people well.

Oleg likes to learn the story of each person he meets and has gathered a lot of knowledge because of this curiosity. He has never read many books, but knows a little bit of Latin, understands the medical terms, and constantly seeks to become smarter.

Oleg had a girlfriend before the exile, but no one since then, and he is now in his mid-thirties. It is his plan to find a woman to marry, and to make a life in Ush-Terek. He is not allowed to live anywhere else, but if there is an amnesty, he will move to Leningrad.

Oleg is the main character of *The Cancer Ward*. His life story is told through conversations with other characters and his memories. Oleg has strong opinions about the mistreatment of citizens and objects to the party line.

When he first arrives at the hospital by train, he is told he must wait until the next day to be admitted, so he sleeps on the waiting room floor. Vera finds him there and tries to make him leave, but he is calmly persistent, so the next day she finds him a bed. Oleg shares the ward with eight other men, all of whom have some form of cancer.

Oleg continues to question every form of treatment he receives, which aggravates the older doctor and intrigues Vera, the younger doctor. Oleg has missed feminine companionship, and is attracted to Vera and Zoya, a young nurse in the ward. He courts them both, learning about his disease and the treatments as he speaks to them.

Oleg is finally released from the hospital to return to Ush-Terek, and discovers he has invitations from both Vera and Zoya to stay with them for a few days before departing. He is full of promise and joy as he leaves the hospital and decides to go to the town and to the zoo before he cashes in either invitation. Oleg is struck by the cruelty of the people and the world, and chooses to get on a train and go home, rather than even visit either of the young women.



## **Pavel Nikolayevich Rusanov**

Pavel is a personnel records specialist in the Soviet Union, which is a euphemism for the secret service. He has learned to manipulate the system too, but from a position of great power. Pavel has a nice home, a car, and is able to send his children to university. His wife wears fur coats, and he travels in elite circles with powerful friends. Yet cancer does not recognize political power, and Pavel is forced to be admitted to a hospital and stay in a ward with regular people. This bothers him almost as much as the cancerous tumor.

While in the hospital, he does not change his attitude towards the men, and especially not towards his own importance. He demands special treatment, but it simply is not available.

Pavel leans heavily on his wife, and his position of authority. When his son Yuri tells him of an injustice, Pavel's concerns are not for the person being unjustly treated, but about Yuri's future prospects and how this event affects Pavel's position. Pavel is a greedy man who justifies his greed and manipulation by believing he is doing good work for the Soviet Union. He believes that his superiors are correct in all their judgments, have made the best decisions regarding exiles and justice, and are doing the best for the country. His beliefs are so strong in this regard he cannot listen to any opposing arguments.

Pavel is released from the hospital within a day of Oleg and thinks he is cured, but the doctors know he will be back soon with more tumors.

Pavel is the opposite of Oleg, and serves as the antagonist in this novel. Pavel represents the continuation of ignorance in the Soviet Union, blind faith in a government rather in the goodness of all men.

## **Nurse Zoya**

Zoya is a young woman who is serving as a nurse at the cancer ward and studying to become a doctor. She has golden hair, fragile features, and all of the men in the ward are happy to see her. She does an adequate job as being a nurse, but her focus is really to have fun, someday get married, and to enjoy life. Zoya begins a flirtation with Oleg that increases to kissing and hugging in stolen moments while she is on duty. Zoya gives Oleg important information about his treatments, especially regarding the effect the injections will have on his virility. When Oleg is discharged, Zoya tells him he can stay with her.

## **Dr. Vera Kornilyevna Gangart**

Vera is one of Dontsova's best doctors, and cares deeply about her work and her patients. However, she is also an unmarried woman and acutely aware that the men





who survived the war are interested in younger women like Zoya. Vera lives in a communal apartment, with a tiny room of her own, but dreams of a husband some day. When Dontsova is sent to Moscow for treatment, Vera becomes the head of the radiology department. In the story, she becomes increasingly interested in Oleg, and when he is discharged, hopes that he will come to stay with her.

## **Dr. Ludmila Afanasyevna Dontsova**

Dr. Dontsova is a hardworking doctor who has firm beliefs about how to cure her cancer patients. She does not allow any deviation from what she has been taught. Her life is full of drudgery: working at the hospital all day, then shopping for the family, cooking dinner and cleaning. Dontsova represents the Soviet citizen who accepts what has been handed down from the state and lives her life without any hope of change. She does not fight the system, or even understand the people who do fight the system. Without workers like Dontsova, the Soviet Union would have failed earlier than it did. Dontsova is the head of the radiology department at the hospital, and spends far too much time near the x-rays. There are no safety measures or warnings for the doctors, so she ends up with radiation sickness. When diagnosed, she realizes she is no longer one of the wise doctors, she is one of the unknowing patients, and she does not even attempt to see her own x-rays of her tumors.

## **Kadmins**

The Kadmins are friends of Oleg from Ush-Terek. They are symbolic of a typical exiled couple in the Soviet Union of that time. As a result of a mistake by the mother-in-law, the couple are sentenced to ten years in Siberia, then exiled to one of the remote republics. Oleg observes that the couple make the best of a truly horrible situation. The Kadmins have a small house in Ush-Terek that they make homey and comfortable, even keeping two dogs with them. Mr. Kadmin runs a weather station and busies himself with swimming in a river several miles away, learning about the town. Instead of becoming bitter and sad, the Kadmins are constantly upbeat, not allowing the system to ruin their lives.

## **Vadim**

Vadim is a young scientist who has cancer in his leg. He is industrious and practical, and as his tumor grows and the pain continues, he is angry that he, of all people, should die. He knows his tumor is incurable, and sets a goal to finish his project by the time he dies, thinking his contribution to science is far more important than anything the other men in the ward could provide. He reads constantly, makes notes, and only participates in discussions in the ward that relate to something he is vitally interested in.



## Shulubin

A latecomer to the ward, Shulubin is quiet and moody. He contributes to the arguments in cryptic words and keeps to himself. The most telling conversation is one he has with Oleg a few days before Shulubin's operation. Oleg is complaining about his life as an exile, and Shulubin says it was worse to be part of the loyal citizenry, expected to cheer on the shooting squads, and to turn in their neighbors. Shulubin says ethical socialism is the only way Soviet Union will ever work, but he believes in the system.

## Kapitalina Matveyevna Rusanov

Wife of a secret service man, Kapa is fiercely proud of her husband's rank, and indulges heavily in the privileges afforded him. Kapa has no regard for the suffering of others, wearing her fox stole blithely to the cancer ward and bringing exotic foodstuffs to her husband while he is there. She has been her husband's staunchest ally, assisting him in scheming and fighting his way to the top of the political party.

## Yuri Rusanov

Yuri is the son of Pavel and has followed in his father's footsteps for a career, but he does not have the blind faith of Pavel. When faced with clear injustice, Yuri hesitates to accept the state's party line, and speaks of this doubt to his father. Pavel is afraid Yuri will hurt his own chances for promotion. Yuri represents the next generation of Soviets, the ones who will question the ability of the state government to be all knowing.



## Objects/Places

### Oleg's boots

Oleg has kept these boots from his army service, and will not give them up to anyone, even during inspections. These boots represent his own independence, and are among the few items he truly owns.

### Ush-Terek

Oleg and the Kadmins have been exiled to this small town on the steppes of the Soviet Union, far from Moscow. The town is full of exiles and guarded by a camp of soldiers. Life is very hard there, but the landscape has a harsh beauty that Oleg loves. He has come to think of this small village as his true home.

### Cancer Ward

The hospital is in a remote part of the country, but not too far from Moscow. It is a large, gray brick building, about seventy years old, and is surrounded by poplars and maple trees. The cancer ward in the hospital is the scene of most of the action and conversations of the story. There are no private rooms for patients, and each ward has as many beds in it as can fit. Male patients are separated from female patients, except in the cafeteria. Patients lie in their beds or walk about the grounds if able, and are shuffled from their beds to x-ray treatments, to surgery. Most of them are discharged if their cancer is inoperable.

### Doctors' Lounge

This is an area reserved for the doctors and their conferences. It was once an elegant room, but neglect and the years have made it shabby. It is here where the doctors can truthfully discuss the patients, as the state does not permit them to be honest with their patients about their conditions.

### Kommendatura

This is the Russian term for the person and place that controls the comings and goings of the exiles.



## **X-Rays**

The x-ray machines are being used in this story to diagnose the extent of a tumor, and then to attack that tumor. The science at the time of this story is inexact, and the doctors do not really know if the amount of radiation they are applying is curing or damaging the patient further. The doctors themselves are not aware of the dangers they have placed their own bodies in by exposing themselves to so many of the rays. These machines represent salvation or death, and although the Soviet state has determined exact treatments, the system is severely flawed, and people are dying.

## **Zoo Monkey**

When Oleg goes to the zoo near the hospital on his first day out of the hospital, he is enjoying himself until he sees an empty monkey cage with a sign on it that the monkey has been withdrawn from display because a man threw tobacco into the monkey's eyes and blinded him. This information enrages Oleg and he does not understand why it has such an impact on him. The zoo monkey is just as helpless and damaged as Oleg himself.

## **Siberia**

This wasteland in the USSR was the location for dissidents, criminals and exiles during the 1950s. Article 58 was a rule that allowed people to be sent away for 8-10 years based upon a suspicion that they were plotting against the government.

## **Moscow**

Moscow was the center of Russia, the capital of the USSR and represented the home base for the Soviet party. Moscow was where the Soviet Supreme Court reigned, where the premier lived, and where all the rules and regulations were generated and disbursed.

## **Soviet Union**

The Soviet Union is the common name for the USSR, a communist state in the 1950s. It was a totalitarian government, whose citizens were occupied with keeping tabs on each other, witnessing against each other, and following an incomprehensible maze of regulations, policies, and loyalties.



# Themes

## Optimism vs Pessimism

When faced with a situation over which someone has no control, people generally develop either an optimistic or pessimistic approach. An optimist thinks other people have it worse, so decides to make a good life from the situation no matter how uncomfortable. The pessimist always believes other people have it better, and is never happy.

The theme of acceptance and choosing whether to be an optimist or pessimist is constant in this novel. The Kadmins, a couple who have been through a horrible dislocation of their lives and careers, find happiness in a small village for exiles. Pavel, who actually has a privileged life, is constantly questioning himself and his family, desperate to continue climbing up the promotional and party ladder. Oleg and Shulubin have moments of optimism and pessimism, and are using their reasoning powers of intelligence to work out which is the logical course of belief for them.

Zoya, Vera, Dyomka and Vadim are optimistic, thinking that the present system for medical care and citizen processing is logical and workable. These characters have other priorities in their lives, and believe things will work out for the best. Yefrem, one of the early patients in the ward, is a good example of a pessimist. Not only does he know he is going to die soon, he wants the rest of the ward to know they are all dying as well.

The author's message is to be pessimistic enough to question authority, but optimistic enough to work towards making an intolerable situation better.

## The Soviet Union's Brutal Socialism

This novel was tremendously controversial because it questioned the blind faith Soviet citizens had in the Soviet Union government. The author uses fiction as a form of giving examples of gross injustice, brutal retaliation against dissidents, and the maze of regulations and corruption within the system.

Pavel represents the neighborhood spy, sending his neighbors to Siberia with just the right words to just the right political committee. Pavel justifies his every action, and truly believes he is helping his country, all the while he is collecting the benefits of being a snitch. Men like Pavel move upward in a society that rewards treachery and manipulation.

Oleg and the Kadmins represent the unwitting victims of an unjust society, who are yanked from their lives and sent to a harsh wasteland, deprived of rank and situation, wealth, careers and even of a future.



The cancer ward shows how disease and death are the great equalizers; even the great and wise doctors are struck down in its path. Doctors are forbidden from discussing the patient's disease and condition with the patient; this confusing rule is adhered to without question, and the doctors are angry with those patients, like Oleg, who continue to ask questions after being advised of the rules.

The idea of socialism was that all men are equal and all resources shared among the country equally. This book gives many examples of how that concept is not a reality in the USSR. Pavel is given a car while others must ride trains and trolleys. A party member caught hoarding goods is let off with a reprimand while countless others are sent to Siberia for lesser charges. Pavel and his cohorts look down on Soviet citizens who are not from Russia but one of the outlying provinces. Dr. Oreshchenko is denied the privilege of having his own practice until he befriends a VIP and their family; suddenly he is allowed to practice as he wants.

The Soviet Union's policies and practices were corrupt and riddled with abuses of power when this novel was banned from being published in that country. This novel allowed unique insight into the USSR when published in the West.

## What Does a Man Live By?

One of the ward patients, Yefrem, reads a story by Leo Tolstoy, which poses the question: what does man live by? Yefrem asks the ward patients and a discussion ensues. This theme is repeated throughout the novel, as different men find different values to propel them through life. Tolstoy's story says a man lives for love, an idea Pavel finds humorous and incorrect. Pavel lives for power and privilege. Oleg lives for love, Vadim for scientific discovery, Dontsova for helping her fellow man. Dyomka lives for love, as do Vera and Zoya.

Each character is searching for the answer to this question in their lives. Oleg emerges from years of prison and exile to discover he still has the ability to love. Dontsova realizes after years of tireless dedication to curing her patients that she has given her life for them by dying of radiation sickness. Whether it be love of fellow man, love of science, or love of the opposite sex, the author concedes that Tolstoy is correct, man lives by love.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel is written with an omniscient point of view. There is an unseen narrator who does not participate in the novel but allows the reader to see action of all the characters and dialogue between any of them. This view also allows the reader to know the thoughts of many of the characters. The novel weaves a large number of prominent characters together in thoughts, conversations and observations to form the story.

The main character is Oleg Kostoglotov, and it is his mind the reader learns best. Each chapter includes the point of view from a number of characters.

By using the omniscient point of view, the author gives the reader a point of trust, and the ability to see everything that is happening to everyone, rather than just one person and their observations.

## Setting

The story takes place in the USSR in the mid-1950s, and sometimes the exact date is listed above the beginning of the chapter. The plot evolves within a hospital in an unnamed town located within a few days' travel of Moscow. In this hospital is a very busy cancer ward and patients are sent there from all of the outlying provinces of the USSR.

The hospital is run by the strict and unrealistic guidelines of the Soviet Union government. The science of the 1950s is embracing radiation therapy as the answer to cancer tumor healing, but there are no exact guidelines for the use of these powerful and invisible rays.

The hospital is over seventy years old, older than the revolution and the Soviet Union, and is being used to its maximum capacity. The cancer ward has two x-ray machines that are utilized far beyond their original design, and do not receive regular maintenance. The doctors are overworked, and even though there are five doctors assigned to the cancer ward, only two are actually capable of performing surgery. Due to corruption and party favoritism, the other doctors are inept but being constantly promoted.

Men in the cancer ward are lumped together and treated through a prescribed and arbitrary program. There is no opportunity for a private room or a private nurse or special food.



## Language and Meaning

The story is translated from Russian, and it is an easy translation to read. There are many references to Soviet history, and these are annotated. There is a lengthy appendix at the end of the book, and there are historical references to the banning of the book and the party's reaction to it in the letters at the beginning of the book.

The Soviet system is explained thoroughly in the novel, through examples and opinions. This allows the reader to understand why Pavel is afraid when one of his old neighbors returns to their home town after exile and why Oleg is considered a traitor because he speaks out against the mindless regulations. By weaving in stories about citizens who have been unjustly exiled, of corruption and favoritism, the author expands the reader's knowledge of the Soviet Union at the time of the novel, and engages in much social commentary at the same time.

The characters speak clearly, and there are no local idioms. Some conversations between characters are lengthy, especially when the subject is ideology.

## Structure

The novel is 36 chapters, over 532 pages and has an appendix. There are two letters printed in the book previous to chapter 1. Part One is chapters 1-21, and Part Two is chapters 22-36

The story is told through observations by major characters, dialogue, and correspondence. The main plot is the story of Oleg's experiences in the cancer ward, from his initial admission to his discharge day. There are several sub-plots: Dr. Dontsova's devotion to her duty, Pavel's manipulations of others, Yefrem's battle with the cancer, and the optimistic outlook of the Kadmins.

Oleg is a man who has already been on the receiving end of the Soviet political machine, and resists any further damage to his spirit. He questions every treatment option, but eventually succumbs to all of it, out of his search for love with one of the doctors. Oleg has learned to work the system, has adapted to being a captured human, but is brought to his knees by a simple sign regarding a helpless monkey who has been blinded in the zoo.





## Quotes

Part One, Chapter 1, Page 1, Pavel:

But Pavel Nikolayevich was tormented, no less than by the disease itself, by having to enter the clinic as an ordinary patient, just like everyone else.

Part One, Chapter 2, Page 16, Pavel:

And whatever direction the re-organization took—whether this way or that—no one, including Pavel Nikolayevich, ever suffered a drop in rank.

Part One, Chapter 3, Page 27, Zoya:

Zoya had not been working there long, but already she was beginning to understand the annoying principle that the one who doesn't pull her weight is not asked to pull, while the one who does, pulls for two.

Part One, Chapter 7, Page 85, Dontsova:

Ludmila Afanasyevna was unshakably convinced that any damage to the body was justified if it saved life.

Part One, Chapter 10, Page 120, Dyomka:

Here in the ward it was interesting listening and talking to people, but he couldn't talk to them in the way he now wanted. When you're with men you have to behave like a man.

Part One, Chapter 11, Page 135, Pavel:

"There are questions on which a definite opinion has been established, and they are no longer open to discussion."

Part One, Chapter 12, Page 154, Zoya:

Most of Zoya's girl friends, especially the medical students, believed that everything possible should be grabbed from life immediately and with both hands.

Part One, Chapter 14, Page 189, Pavel:

Everyone is guilty of something or has something to conceal. All one has to do is look hard enough to find out what it is.

Part One, Chapter 20, Page 259, Oleg:

The cells of the heart which nature built for joy die through disuse. That small place in the breast which is faith's cramped quarters remains untenanted for years and decays.

Part Two, Chapter 30, Page 419, Dontsova:



By her confession she had excluded herself from the noble estate of medical men and transferred herself to the taxpaying, dependent estate of patients.

Part Two, Chapter 31, Page 443, Shulubin:

"A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to."

Part Two, Chapter 34, Page 483, Shulubin:

"Sometimes I feel quite distinctly that what is inside me is not all of me. There's something else, sublime, quite indestructible, some tiny fragment of the universal spirit. Don't you feel that?"

Part Two, Chapter 35, Page 485, Oleg:

He walked out through the hospital gates thinking to himself, it's just like leaving prison.

Part Two, Chapter 35, Page 506, Oleg:

Up to then he had been strolling along, smiling with knowing condescension, but now he felt like yelling and roaring across the whole zoo, as though the tobacco had been thrown into his own eyes.



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the optimism of the Kadmins. Are they truly optimistic and upbeat, or have they lost their sense of reality after all the years of brutality?

Re-read the section where Shulubin and Oleg are discussing socialism. Is it possible to have ethical socialism as Shulubin described?

Discuss the irony of Yuri's story of the truck driver and the missing boxes, in contrast to the story of the party member who, when caught stealing from the people, turns his mansion into a children's home.

Who do you think Oleg should have asked to marry him, Zoya or Vera? Why? How do you think these two women dealt with the letters they received from Oleg?

What is the symbolism of these events: 1) Kadmins' dog Beetle being shot; 2) the elderly orderly moving Oleg's boots carefully while cleaning under his bed; 3) Dontsova's diagnosis of radiation sickness?

Why would the Soviet Union restrict doctors from telling the patients the truth about their diseases? What would be the purpose?

Do you think the character of Yefrem represents the personification of cancer? Why or why not?

Discuss the characters and outlooks of Vadim and Dyomka. Are they both optimists? Do they both believe in the communist party?

What do you think men live by? Develop your answer with examples.

How does socialized medicine, as practiced in this novel, compare with the American healthcare system today?