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VLADIMIR NABOKOV

NOVELS

Mary
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The Eye
Glory
Laughter in the Dark
Despair
Invitation to a Beheading
The Gift
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight
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Mary

a novel

Vladimir Nabokov

*Translated from the Russian by Michael Glenny
in collaboration with the author*

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Having recalled intrigues of former years,
having recalled a former love.

Pushkin

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introduction

The Russian title of the present novel, *Mashenka*, a secondary diminutive of *Maria*, defied rational transliteration (the accent is on the first syllable with the “a” pronounced as in “ash” and a palatalized “n” as in “mignon”). In casting around for a suitable substitute (*Mariette* or *May*?) I settled for *Mary*, which seemed to match best the neutral simplicity of the Russian title name.

Mashenka was my first novel. I started working on it in Berlin, soon after my marriage in the spring of 1925. It was finished by the beginning of the following year and published by an émigré book company (Slovo, Berlin, 1926). A German version, which I have not read, appeared a couple of years later (Ullstein, Berlin, 1928). Otherwise, it has remained untranslated for the impressive span of forty-five years.

The beginner’s well-known propensity for obtruding upon his own privacy, by introducing himself, or a vicar, into his first novel, owes less to the attraction of a ready theme than to the relief of getting rid of oneself, before going on to better things. It is one of the very few common rules I have accepted. Readers of my *Speak, Memory* (begun in the Nineteen-Forties) cannot fail to notice certain similarities between my recollections and Ganin’s. His Mary is my twin sister of my Tamara, the ancestral avenues are there, the Oredezh flows through both books, and the actual photograph of the Rozhestveno house as it is today—beautifully reproduced on the cover of the Penguin edition (*Speak, Memory*, 1969)—could well be the picture of the pillared porch in the “Voskresensk” of the novel. I had not consulted *Mashenka* when writing Chapter Twelve of the autobiography a quarter of a century later; and now that I have, I am fascinated by the fact that despite the superimposed inventions (such as the fight with the village rowdy or the tryst in the anonymous town among the glowworms) a heady extract of personal reality is contained in the romantization than in the autobiographer’s scrupulously faithful account. At first I wondered how that could be, how the thrill and the perfume could have survived the exigency of the plot and the ostentation of fictional characters (two of them even appear, very awkwardly, in Mary’s letters), especially as I could not believe that a stylish imitation should be able to vie with plain truth. But the explanation is really quite simple: in terms of years, Ganin was three times closer to his past than I was to mine in *Speak, Memory*.

Because of the unusual remoteness of Russia, and because of nostalgia’s remaining throughout one’s life an insane companion, with whose heartrending oddities one is accustomed to put up in public, I feel no embarrassment in confessing to the sentimental state of my attachment to my first book. Its flaws, the artifacts of innocence and inexperience which any criticule could tabulate with jocose ease, are compensated for me (the sole judge in this case and court) by the presence of several scenes (convalescence, barn concert, boat ride) which, had I thought of it, should have been transported virtually intact into the later work. In those circumstances, I realized as soon as my collaboration with Mr. Glenny started that our translation should be as faithful to the text as I would have insisted on its being had that text not been mine. Revampments of the lighthearted and highhanded order that I used for the English version of, say, *King, Queen, Knave* could not be envisaged here. The only adjustments I deemed necessary are limited to brief utilitarian phrases in three or four passages alluding to routine Russian matters (obvious to fellow-émigrés but incomprehensible

to foreign readers) and to the switch of seasonal dates in Ganin's Julian Calendar to those of the Gregorian style in general use (e.g., his end of July is our second week of August, etc.).

I must close this preface with the following injunctions. As I said in reply to one of Allen Talmey's questions in a *Vogue* interview (1970), "The best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style. Only in that light can one properly assess the relationship, if any, between my first heroine and my recent Ada." I can as well say that there is none. The other remark concerns a bogus creed which is still being boosted in some quarters. Although an ass might argue that "orange" is the oneiric anagram of *organe*, I would not advise members of the Viennese delegation to lose precious time analyzing Klara's dream at the end of Chapter Four in the present book.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

January 9, 1977

“Lev Glevo. Lev Glebovich? A name like that’s enough to twist your tongue off, my dear fellow.”

“Yes, it is,” Ganin agreed somewhat coldly, trying to make out the face of his interlocutor in the unexpected darkness. He was annoyed by the absurd situation in which they both found themselves and by this enforced conversation with a stranger.

“I didn’t ask for your name and patronymic just out of idle curiosity, you know,” the voice went on undismayed. “I think every name—”

“Let me press the button again,” Ganin interrupted him.

“Do press it. I’m afraid it won’t do any good. As I was saying every name has its responsibilities. Lev and Gleb, now—that’s a rare combination, and very demanding. It means you’ve got to be terse, firm and rather eccentric. My name is a more modest one and my wife’s name is just plain Mary. By the way, let me introduce myself: Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov. Sorry, I think I trod on your foot—”

“How do you do,” said Ganin, feeling in the dark for the hand that poked at his cuff. “Do you think we are going to be stuck here for long? It’s time somebody did something. Hell.”

“Let’s just sit down on the seat and wait,” the tiresome, cheerful voice rang out again just above his ear. “Yesterday when I arrived we bumped into each other in the passage. Then in the evening, through the wall, I heard you clearing your throat and I knew at once from the sound of your cough that you were a fellow countryman. Tell me, have you been boarding here for long?”

“Ages. Got a match?”

“No. I don’t smoke. Grubby place, this *pension*—even though it is Russian. I’m a very lucky man, you know—my wife’s coming from Russia. Four years, that’s no joke. Yes, sir. Not long now. It’s Sunday today.”

“Damned darkness,” muttered Ganin, and cracked his fingers. “I wonder what time it is.”

Alfyorov sighed noisily, giving off the warm, stale smell of an elderly man not in the best of health. There is something sad about that smell.

“Only six more days now. I assume she’s coming on Saturday. I had a letter from her yesterday. She wrote the address in a very funny way. Pity it’s so dark, or I’d show it to you. What are you fumbling for, my dear fellow? Those little vents don’t open, you know.”

“For two pins I’d smash them,” said Ganin.

“Come, come, Lev Glebovich. Wouldn’t it be better to play some party game? I know some splendid ones, I make them up myself. For instance: think of a two-figure number. Ready?”

“Count me out,” said Ganin, and thumped twice on the wall with his fist.

“The porter’s been asleep for hours,” droned Alfyorov’s voice, “so it’s no use banging like that.”

“But you must agree that we can’t hang here all night.”

“It looks as if we shall have to. Don’t you think there’s something symbolic in our meeting like this, Lev Glebovich? When we were on terra firma we didn’t know each other. Then we happen to come home at the same time and get into this contraption together. By the way, the floor is horribly thin and there’s nothing but a black well underneath it. Well, as I was saying, we stepped in without a word, still not knowing each other, glided up in silence and

then suddenly—stop. And darkness.”

“What’s symbolic about it?” Ganin asked gloomily.

“Well, the fact that we’ve stopped, motionless, in this darkness. And that we’re waiting. At lunch today that man—what’s his name—the old writer—oh yes, Podtyagin—was arguing with me about the sense of this émigré life of ours, this perpetual waiting. You were absent all day, weren’t you, Lev Glebovich?”

“Yes. I was out of town.”

“Ah, spring. It must be nice in the country now.”

Alfyorov’s voice faded away for a few moments, and when it sounded again there was a pleasant lilt to it, probably because the speaker was smiling.

“When my wife comes I shall take her out into the country. She adores going for walks. Didn’t the landlady tell me that your room would be free by Saturday?”

“That is so,” Ganin replied curtly.

“Are you leaving Berlin altogether?”

Ganin nodded, forgetting that nods were invisible in the dark. Alfyorov fidgeted on the seat, sighed once or twice, then began gently whistling a saccharine tune, stopping and starting again. Ten minutes passed; suddenly there came a click from above.

“That’s better,” Ganin said with a smile.

At the same moment the ceiling bulb blazed forth, and the humming and heaving cage was flooded with yellow light. Alfyorov blinked, as though just waking up. He was wearing an old, sandy-colored, formless overcoat—of the so-called “in-between-season” sort—and holding a bowler hat. His thin fair hair was slightly ruffled and something about his features reminded one of a religious oleograph: that little golden beard, the turn of that scraggy neck from which he pulled off a bright-speckled scarf.

With a lurch the lift caught on the sill of the fourth-floor landing and stopped.

“A miracle,” Alfyorov said, grinning, as he opened the door. “I thought someone had pressed the button and brought us up, but there’s no one here. After you, Lev Glebovich.”

But Ganin, with a grimace of impatience, gave Alfyorov a slight push and, having followed him out, relieved his feelings by noisily slamming the steel door behind him. Never before had he been so irritable.

“A miracle,” Alfyorov repeated. “Up we came and yet there’s no one here. That’s symbolic too.”

The *pension* was both Russian and nasty. It was chiefly nasty because all day long and much of the night the trains of the *Stadtbahn* could be heard, creating the impression that the whole building was slowly on the move. The hall, where there hung a bleary mirror with a ledge for gloves, and where stood an oak chest so placed that people naturally barked their shins on it, narrowed into a bare and very cramped passage. Along each side were three rooms, numbered with large black figures stuck onto the doors. These were simply leaves torn off a year-old calendar—the first six days of April, 1923. April 1—the first door on the left—was Alfyorov's room, the next was Ganin's, while the third belonged to the landlady, Lydia Nikolaevna Dorn, the widow of a German businessman who twenty years ago had brought her here from Sarepta and who the year before had died of brain fever. In the three rooms down the right-hand side—April 4 to 6—there lived Anton Sergeevich Podtyagin, an old Russian poet; Klara, a full-busted girl with striking bluish-brown eyes; and, finally, in room 6, at the turn of the passage, two ballet dancers, Kolin and Gornotsvetov, both as giggly as women, thin, with powdered noses and muscular thighs. At the end of the first stretch of the passage was the dining room, with a lithograph of the Last Supper on the wall facing the door and the yellow, horned skulls of deer along another wall above a bulbous sideboard. On the table stood two crystal vases, once the cleanest things in the whole apartment but now dulled by a coating of fluffy dust.

Upon reaching the dining room, the passage took a right-angled turn to the right. There, in the tragical and malodorous depths, lurked the kitchen, a small room for the maid, a dirty bathroom and a narrow W.C., whose door was labeled with two crimson noughts deprived of the rightful digits with which they had once denoted two Sundays on Herr Dorn's desk calendar. A month after his death Lydia Nikolaevna, a tiny, slightly deaf woman given to mild oddities, had rented an empty apartment and turned it into a *pension*. In doing this she showed a singular, rather creepy kind of ingenuity in the way she distributed the few household articles she had inherited. The tables, chairs, creaking wardrobes and bumping couches were divided among the rooms which she intended to let. Separated, the pieces of furniture at once faded, took on the inept, dejected look of a dismembered skeleton's bones. Her late husband's desk, an oaken monster with a cast-iron inkwell in the form of a toad and with a middle drawer as deep as a ship's hold, found its way to room 1, where Alfyorov now lived, while the revolving stool, originally bought to match the desk, was parted from it and led an orphaned existence with the dancers in room 6. A pair of green armchairs was also severed: one pinned in Ganin's room, and the other one was used by the landlady herself or by her old dachshund, a fat black bitch with a gray muzzle and pendulous ears that had velvet ends like the fringes of a butterfly's wing. The bookshelf in Klara's room was adorned by the first few volumes of an encyclopedia, while the remaining volumes were allotted to Podtyagin. Klara had also been given the only decent washstand, with a mirror and drawers; in each of the other rooms there was simply a squat wooden prop and on it a tin basin and a jug of the same material. She had been forced, however, to buy additional beds. This caused Frau Dorn considerable pain, not because she was stingy, but because she had derived a kind of delicious thrill, a sense of pride in her own thrift, from the way she had distributed all her previous furniture. Now that she was a widow and her double bed too spacious for her

sleep in, she resented being unable to saw it up into the required number of parts. In a haphazard way she cleaned the rooms herself, but she had never been able to cope with food, so she kept a cook—the terror of the local market, a vast red-haired virago who on Friday donned a crimson hat and sailed off for the northern quarters where she traded her blows for charms. Lydia Nikolaevna was afraid of going into the kitchen and was altogether a quite timorous creature. Whenever her blunt-toed little feet brought her pattering along the corridor, the lodgers always had the feeling that this gray, snub-nosed little creature was not the landlady at all, but just some silly old woman who had strayed into someone else's apartment. Every morning, bent in half like a rag doll, she would hurriedly sweep the dust from under the furniture, then disappear into her room, the smallest of them all. There she would read tattered German books or look through her late husband's papers, whose contents she understood not a whit. The only other person to go into her room was Podtyagin, who would stroke her affectionate black dachshund, tickle its ears and the wart on its hoarse muzzle, and try to make the dog sit up and proffer its crooked paw. He would talk to Lydia Nikolaevna about his senile aches and pains and about how he had been trying for six long months to get a visa to go to Paris where his niece lived, and where the long crusty loaves and the red wine were so cheap. The old lady would nod, occasionally questioning him about the other lodgers, in particular about Ganin, whom she found quite unlike all the other young Russians who had stayed in her *pension*. Having lived there for three months, Ganin was now preparing to leave, and had even said he would give up his room next Saturday; however, he had planned to leave several times before and had always changed his mind and put off his departure. Lydia Nikolaevna knew, from what the gentle old poet had told her, that Ganin had a girl friend. And there lay the root of the trouble.

Lately he had become dull and gloomy. Only a short while ago he could walk on his hands quite as well as a Japanese acrobat, and with legs elegantly erect move along like a sail. He could pick up a chair in his teeth. He could break a string by flexing his biceps. His body was always burning with the urge to do something—to jump over a fence or uproot a post, or, in short to “bang,” as we used to say when we were young. Now, however, some bolt had worked loose inside him, he had even acquired a stoop and he admitted to Podtyagin that he was suffering from insomnia “like a nervous female.” He had an especially bad night from Sunday to Monday, after the twenty minutes spent with the effusive fellow in the stuck lift. On Monday morning he sat for a long time naked, gripping his cold, outstretched hands between his knees, appalled by the thought that today was another day and that he would have to put on shirt, trousers, socks—all those wretched things impregnated with sweat and dust—and he imagined a circus poodle which looks so ghastly, so sickeningly pitiful, when dressed up in human clothes. His inertia stemmed partly from his jobless state. He had no particular need to work at the moment, having saved that winter a certain amount of money. True, there was now no more than two hundred marks left of it: life had been rather expensive these last three months.

On arriving in Berlin last year he had at once found work and had worked until January on several different jobs. He had learned what it meant to go to work in a factory in the yellow murk of early morning; he had learned, too, how one's legs ached after trotting six sinuous miles a day carrying plates between the tables of the Pir Goroy restaurant; he had known other jobs too, and had sold every imaginable sort of goods on commission—Russian bun-

and brilliantine, and just plain brilliants. Nothing was beneath his dignity; more than once he had even sold his shadow, as many of us have. In other words he went out to the suburbs to work as a movie extra on a set, in a fairground barn, where light seethed with a mystical hi from the huge facets of lamps that were aimed, like cannon, at a crowd of extras, lit to a deathly brightness. They would fire a barrage of murderous brilliance, illumining the painted wax of motionless faces, then expiring with a click—but for a long time yet there would glow, in those elaborate crystals, dying red sunsets—our human shame. The deal was clinched, and our anonymous shadows sent out all over the world.

His remaining money was enough for him to leave Berlin, but that would mean shedding Lyudmila, and he did not know how to break with her. And although he had given himself a week to do it in and had told the landlady that he had finally decided to leave on Saturday, Ganin felt that neither this week nor the next would change anything. Meanwhile nostalgia in reverse, the longing for yet another strange land, grew especially strong in spring. His window looked out onto the railway tracks, so that the chance of getting away never ceased to entice him. Every five minutes a subdued rumble would start to move through the house, followed by a huge cloud of smoke billowing outside the window and blotting out the white Berlin daylight. Then it would slowly dissolve again, revealing the fan of the railway tracks that narrowed in the distance between the black, sliced-off backs of houses, all under a sky as pale as almond milk.

Ganin would have felt more at ease had he been living on the other side of the corridor, in Podtyagin's room, or in Klara's; their windows looked out onto a rather dull street, and although it was crossed by a railway bridge it at least lacked the view into the pale, seductive distance. That bridge was a continuation of the tracks that could be seen from Ganin's window, and he could never rid himself of the feeling that every train was passing, unseen, right through the house itself. It would come in from the far side, its phantom reverberation would shake the wall, jolt its way across the old carpet, graze a glass on the washstand, and finally disappear out of the window with a chilling clang—immediately followed by a cloud of smoke billowing up outside the window, and as this subsided a train of the *Stadtbahn* would emerge as though excreted by the house: olive-drab carriages with a row of dark domes and nipples along their roofs and a stubby little locomotive coupled at the wrong end, moving briskly backward as it pulled the carriages into the white distance between blank walls whose sooty blackness was either coming off in patches or was mottled with frescoes and outdated advertisements. It was as if an iron draft kept always blowing through the house.

"Ah, to leave!" muttered Ganin, stretching listlessly, and at once stopped short—what would he do about Lyudmila? It was absurd how flabby he had become. Once (in the days when he had walked on his hands or jumped over five chairs) he had been able not merely to control his will but to play games with it. There had been a time when he used to exercise it by making himself, for instance, get out of bed in the middle of the night in order to go down and throw a cigarette butt into a postbox. Yet now he could not bring himself to tell a woman that he no longer loved her. The day before yesterday she had stayed five hours in his room; yesterday, Sunday, he had spent the whole day with her on the lakes outside Berlin, unable to refuse her this ridiculous little excursion. Everything about Lyudmila he now found repulsive: her yellow locks, fashionably bobbed, the two streaks of unshaven black hairs down the nap of her neck, her dark, languid eyelids, and above all her lips, glossy with purple-red lipstick.

He was bored and repelled when as she dressed, after a bout of mechanical lovemaking, she would narrow her eyes, which at once gave them an unpleasantly shaggy look, and say, "I'm so sensitive, you know, that I shall be able to tell at once when you don't love me as much as you used to." Ganin, without replying, turned away toward the window, where there rose a white wall of smoke. Then she would give a little nasal snigger and call him in a husky whisper: "Come here." At that moment he felt like wringing his hands to make the joint crack in delicious pain, and say to her, "Get out, woman, and goodbye." Instead of that he smiled and bent down to her. She would run her nails, so sharp that they might have been artificial, over his chest, and pout, and flutter her coal-black eyelashes in her performance of a slighted girl or a capricious marquise. There seemed to him something sleazy, stale and old in the smell of her perfume, although she herself was only twenty-five. As he brushed her hair, a little forehead with his lips she forgot everything—forgot the falsity which she trailed around everywhere like her scent, the falsity of her baby talk, of her exquisite senses, of her passion for some imaginary orchids, as well as for Poe and Baudelaire, whom she had never read; she forgot all her factitious charms, her modishly yellow hair, sultry face powder and piggy-pink silk stockings—and, tilting back her head, she would press against Ganin her whole feeble and pathetic, unwanted flesh.

Bored and ashamed, Ganin felt a nonsensical tenderness—a melancholy trace of warmth left where love had once fleetingly passed by—which caused him to kiss without passion the painted rubber of her proffered lips, although this tenderness did not succeed in silencing her calm, sarcastic voice advising him: try right now to thrust her away!

With a sigh he smiled gently down at her upturned face and could think of nothing to say when she clutched him by the shoulder and begged him in a fluttery voice quite unlike her usual nasal whisper, her whole being seeming to fly into words, "Tell me—*please*—do you love me?" But as soon as she noticed his reaction—a familiar shadow, an involuntary frown—she remembered that she should be fascinating him with poetry, scent and sensibility, and she once began putting on her act that wavered between the poor little girl and the subtle courtesan. And again Ganin was seized with boredom, and he paced back and forth from the window to the door and back again, almost in tears from trying to yawn with his mouth shut while she put on her hat and watched him surreptitiously in the mirror.

Klara, a full-busted and very cosy young lady dressed in black silk, knew that her girl friend visited Ganin and she felt distressed and embarrassed whenever Lyudmila told her about her love affair. Klara considered that emotions of that kind ought to be more restrained, without violet irises and crying violins. But it was even more intolerable when her friend, narrowing her eyes and expelling cigarette smoke through her nostrils, would describe the still warm and horribly exact details, after which Klara would dream monstrous and shameful dreams. Lately she had taken to avoiding Lyudmila for fear that her friend would end by spoiling for her that enormous, always festive sensation that is daintily called "reverie." She loved Ganin's sharp, slightly arrogant features, his gray eyes with bright arrowlike streaks radiating from the unusually large pupils, his thick and very dark eyebrows which when he frowned or listened attentively formed a solid black line, but which unfurled like delicate wings whenever a rare smile momentarily bared his handsome, glistening teeth. Klara was so taken by these pronounced features that in his presence she lost her composure and did not say things she would have liked to say, constantly patted the wavy chestnut hair

which half covered her ear, or rearranged the black silk folds on her bust, causing her lower lip to protrude and reveal her double chin. Anyway, once a day at lunch was the most she saw of Ganin, except for a single time when she had supper with him and Lyudmila in the squalid pub where he used to have his evening meal of würstchen and sauerkraut or cold pork. At lunch in the dreary *pension* dining room she used to sit opposite Ganin, as the landlady placed her lodgers at table in roughly the same order as the position of their rooms; thus Klara sat between Podtyagin and Gornotsvetov, and Ganin between Alfyorov and Kolin. The prim and sad little black figure of Frau Dorn seemed very out of place and forlorn at the head of the table between the facing profiles of the two affected, powdered ballet dancers who spoke to her with little darting, birdlike quirks of demeanor. Hampered by her slight deafness, she herself spoke little and confined herself to seeing that the vast Erika brought and cleared away the dishes at the proper time. Like a dry leaf her tiny wrinkled hand would now and then flit up to the dangling bell knob and then, yellow and faded, would flutter back again.

When Ganin entered the dining room at about half past two on Monday afternoon, all the others were already in their places. Catching sight of him, Alfyorov smiled in greeting and rose in his place, but Ganin did not offer his hand and sat down beside him with a silent nod, having already mentally cursed his obtrusive neighbor. Podtyagin, a neatly dressed, unassuming old man, who fed rather than ate, was noisily slurping his soup while with his left hand preventing his collar-lodged napkin from falling into the plate, glanced over the lenses of his pince-nez and then with a vague sigh returned to his slops. In a moment of frankness Ganin had told him about his oppressive love affair with Lyudmila and now he regretted having done so. Kolin, on his left, passed him a plate of soup with tremulous care, giving him such an ingratiating look and such a smile with his strange veiled eyes that Ganin felt uncomfortable. Meanwhile, to his right, Alfyorov's unctuous little tenor voice resumed its prattling, objecting to something said by Podtyagin, who was sitting opposite him.

"You're wrong to find fault, Anton Sergejevich. This is a most cultured country. No comparison with backward old Russia."

With a kindly glint of his pince-nez, Podtyagin turned to Ganin. "Congratulate me. Today the French have sent me my entrance visa. I feel like putting on the great ribbon of an order and calling on President Doumergue."

He had an unusually pleasant voice, soft, without change in pitch, mellow and mat in tone. His fat, smooth face with its gray little goatee under the lower lip and its receding chin seemed to be covered with an even, reddish tan, and wrinkles of kindness fanned out around his serene, intelligent eyes. In profile he looked like a large, grizzled guinea pig.

"I'm so glad," said Ganin. "When are you leaving?"

But Alfyorov did not allow the old man to reply. Giving a habitual twitch to his scraggy neck with its sparse golden hairs and large mobile Adam's apple, he went on. "I advise you to stay here. What's wrong with this place? Things are straightforward here. France is more like a zigzag, and as for our Russia—that's a googly. I like it a lot here—there's work and the streets are nice for a walk. I can prove to you mathematically that if one's got to reside somewhere—"

"But," Podtyagin quietly interrupted him, "what about the mountains of paper, the coffinlike cardboard boxes, the interminable files, files and more files! The shelves are

groaning under the weight of them. And the police official practically expired under the strain of finding my name in the records. You just can't imagine (at the word 'imagine' Podtyagin shook his head slowly and mournfully) what a person has to go through simply to be allowed to leave this country. As for the number of forms I've had to fill in! Today I had already begun to hope: ah, they will stamp my passport with their exit visa! Nothing of the sort. They sent me to have my picture taken, but the photos won't be ready until this evening."

"All very proper," Alfyorov nodded. "That's how things should be in a well-run country. None of your Russian inefficiency here. Have you noticed, for instance, what's written on the front doors? 'For the gentry only.' That's significant. Generally speaking, the difference between our country and this one can be expressed like this: imagine a curve, and on it—"

Ganin stopped listening and said to Klara, sitting opposite him, "Yesterday Lyudmila Borisovna asked me to tell you to ring her up as soon as you came home from work. It was about going to the cinema, I think."

Klara confusedly thought: "How can he talk about her so casually. After all, he knows that she knows."

For propriety's sake she inquired, "Oh, did you see her yesterday?"

Ganin raised his eyebrows in surprise and went on eating.

"I don't quite understand your geometry," Podtyagin was saying, carefully sweeping up the breadcrumbs into the palm of his hand with his knife. Like most aging poets he had a certain penchant for plain human logic.

"But don't you see? It's so clear," cried Alfyorov excitedly. "Just imagine—"

"I don't understand it," Podtyagin repeated firmly, and, tilting his head back slightly, he poured the collection of crumbs into his mouth. Alfyorov spread out his hands in a gesture of helplessness and knocked over Ganin's glass.

"Oh, sorry!"

"It was empty," said Ganin.

"You're not a mathematician, Anton Sergeyevich," Alfyorov went on fussily, "but I've been swinging on that trapeze all my life. I once used to say to my wife that if I'm a 'summer flower' you're surely a spring cinquefoil—"

Gornotsvetov and Kolin dissolved in mannered mirth. Frau Dorn gave a start and looked at them both in fright.

"In short, a flower and a figure," said Ganin drily. Only Klara smiled. Ganin started pouring himself some water, his action watched by all the others.

"Yes, you're right, a most fragile flower," drawled Alfyorov, turning his bright, vacant look onto his neighbor. "It's an absolute miracle how she survived those seven years of horror. And I'm sure that when she arrives she'll be gay and blooming. You're a poet, Anton Sergeyevich; you ought to write something about it—about how womanhood, lovely Russian womanhood, is stronger than any revolution and can survive it all—adversity, terror—"

Kolin whispered to Ganin, "There he goes again—it was the same yesterday—all he could talk about was his wife."

"Vulgar little man," thought Ganin as he watched Alfyorov's twitching beard. "I bet his wife's frisky. It's a positive sin not to be unfaithful to a man like him."

"Lamb today," Lydia Nikolaevna suddenly announced stiffly, with a cross look at the listless way her lodgers were eating their meat course. Alfyorov bowed for some reason, the

went on. "You're making a big mistake by not taking that as a theme." (Podtyagin was gentle but firmly shaking his head.) "When you meet my wife perhaps you'll understand what I mean. She's very fond of poetry, by the way. You two ought to agree. And I'll tell you another thing—"

Glancing sidelong at Alfyorov, Kolin was stealthily beating time to him. Watching his friend's finger, Gornotsvetov shook with silent laughter.

"But the chief thing," Alfyorov burred on, "is that Russia is finished, done for. She's been rubbed out, just as if someone had wiped a funny face off a blackboard by smearing a wet sponge across it."

"But—" Ganin smiled.

"Does what I say upset you, Lev Glebovich?"

"Yes, it does, but I won't stop you from saying it, Aleksey Ivanovich."

"Does that mean, then, that you believe—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Podtyagin interrupted in his even, slightly lisping voice. "No politics, please. Why must we talk politics?"

"All the same, Monsieur Alfyorov is wrong," Klara put in unexpectedly, and gave her hair a brisk pat.

"Is your wife arriving on Saturday?" asked Kolin in an innocent voice down the length of the table, and Gornotsvetov tittered into his table napkin.

"Yes, Saturday," Alfyorov replied, pushing away his plate with the uneaten remains of his mutton. His eyes lost their combative gleam and immediately faded to a reflective look.

"Do you know, Lydia Nikolaevna," he said, "yesterday Lev Glebovich and I were stuck in the lift together."

"Stewed pears," replied Frau Dorn.

The dancers burst out laughing. Jogging the elbows of the people at table, Erika began to clear away the plates. Ganin carefully rolled up his napkin, squeezed it into its ring and stood up. He never ate dessert.

"What boredom," he thought as he made his way back to his room. "What can I do now? Go for a walk, I suppose."

The day, like the previous days, dragged sluggishly by in a kind of insipid idleness, devoid even of that dreamy expectancy which can make idleness so enchanting. Lack of work irked him now, but there was no work to do. Turning up the collar of his old mackintosh, bought for a pound from an English lieutenant in Constantinople (the first stage of exile), and thrusting his fists hard into its pockets, he strolled slowly along the pale April streets, where the black domes of umbrellas bobbed and swam. He stared long at a splendid model of the *Mauretania* in a steamship company's window and at the colored strings joining the ports of two continents on a large map. At the back was a photograph of a tropical grove—chocolate brown palms against a beige sky.

He spent about an hour drinking coffee, sitting at a picture window and watching the passers-by. Back in his room he tried to read, but he found the contents of the book so alien and inappropriate that he abandoned it in the middle of a subordinate clause. He was in the kind of mood that he called "dispersion of the will." He sat motionless at his table unable to decide what to do: to shift the position of his body, to get up and wash his hands, or to open the window, outside which the bleak day was fading into twilight. It was a dreadful

agonizing state rather like that dull sense of unease when we wake up but at first cannot open our eyelids, as though they were stuck together for good. Ganin felt that the murky twilight which was gradually seeping into the room was also slowly penetrating his body, transforming his blood into fog, and that he was powerless to stop the spell that was being cast on him by the twilight.

He was powerless because he had no precise desire, and this tortured him because he was vainly seeking something to desire. He could not even make himself stretch out his hand to switch on the light. The simple transition from intention to action seemed an unimaginable miracle. Nothing relieved his depression, his thoughts slithered aimlessly, his heartbeat was faint, his underclothes stuck unpleasantly to his body. At one moment he felt he should once write a letter to Lyudmila explaining firmly that it was time to break off this dreary affair, then at the next he remembered that he was going to the cinema with her that evening and that somehow it was much harder to make himself ring her up and cancel today's date than it was to write a letter, which prevented him from doing either.

How many times had he sworn to himself that he would break with her tomorrow and he had had no trouble in concocting the appropriate things to say, only to fail utterly to visualize that final moment when he would press her hand and leave the room. It was that action—turning round, walking out—which seemed so unthinkable. He belonged to the sort of people who can get whatever they want, achieve, surpass; but he was quite incapable of renunciation or flight—which are, after all, one and the same thing. He was held back by a sense of honor and a sense of pity which blunted the will of a man who at other times was capable of any kind of creative enterprise, any exertion, and who would set about a task eagerly and willingly, cheerfully intent on overcoming everything and winning all.

He no more knew what kind of external stimulus would give him the strength to break off his three-month-old liaison with Lyudmila than he knew what was needed to get him up from his chair. Only for a very short time had he been genuinely in love—in that state of mind in which Lyudmila had seemed wreathed in a seductive mist, a state of questing, exalted, almost unearthly emotion, as when music plays at the very moment when one is doing something quite ordinary, such as walking from a table to pay at the bar, and gives an inward dancelike quality to one's simple movement, transforming it into a significant and immortal gesture.

That music had stopped at the moment one night when on the jolting floor of a dark taxi he had possessed Lyudmila, and at once it had all become utterly banal—the woman straightening her hat that had slipped down onto the back of her neck, the lights flickering past the window, the driver's back towering like a black mountain behind the glass partition.

Now he was obliged to pay for that night with laborious deceit, to continue that night forever, and feebly, spinelessly yield to its creeping shadow that now filled every corner of the room, turning the furniture into clouds. He fell into a vague doze, his forehead propped on the palm of his hand and his legs stretched out stiffly under the table.

Later in the cinema it was crowded and hot. For a long time, colored advertisements for grand pianos, dresses, perfumes flocked silently across the screen. At last the orchestra struck up and the drama began.

Lyudmila was unusually cheerful. She had invited Klara to come too because she sensed very well that Klara was attracted to Ganin and she wanted to give pleasure to Klara, and to herself, by flaunting her affair and her ability to conceal it. Klara for her part agreed to come

because she knew that Ganin was planning to depart on Saturday; also she was surprised that Lyudmila seemed not to know this—or else she purposely said nothing about it and was going to leave with him.

Sitting between them, Ganin was irritated because Lyudmila, like most women of her type, talked throughout the film about other things, bending across Ganin's knees toward her friend, every time dousing him in the chilling, unpleasantly familiar smell of her perfume. This was made worse by the fact that the film was thrilling and excellently done.

"Listen, Lyudmila Borisovna," said Ganin, unable to restrain himself any longer, "do stop whispering. The German behind me is starting to get annoyed."

She gave him a quick glance in the darkness, leaned back and looked at the bright screen.

"I don't understand a thing. It's pure rubbish."

"No wonder you can't understand it," said Ganin, "when you spend all the time whispering."

On the screen moved luminous, bluish-gray shapes. A prima donna, who had once in her life committed an involuntary murder, suddenly remembered it while playing the role of a murderess in opera. Rolling her improbably large eyes, she collapsed supine onto the stage. The auditorium swam slowly into view, the public applauded, the boxes and stalls rose in an ecstasy of approval. Suddenly Ganin sensed that he was watching something vaguely and horribly familiar. He recalled with alarm the roughly carpentered rows of seats, the chairs and parapets of the boxes painted a sinister violet, the lazy workmen walking easily and nonchalantly like blue-clad angels from plank to plank high up above, or aiming the blinding muzzles of klieg lights at a whole army of Russians herded together onto the huge set and acting in total ignorance of what the film was about. He remembered young men in threadbare but marvelously tailored clothes, women's faces smeared with mauve and yellow make-up, and those innocent exiles, old men and plain girls who were banished far to the rear simply to fill in the background. On the screen that cold barn was now transformed into a comfortable auditorium, sacking became velvet, and a mob of paupers a theatre audience. Straining his eyes, with a deep shudder of shame he recognized himself among all those people clapping to order, and remembered how they had all had to look ahead at an imaginary stage where instead of a prima donna a fat, red-haired, coatless man was standing on a platform between floodlights and yelling himself to insanity through a megaphone.

Ganin's doppelgänger also stood and clapped, over there, alongside the very striking-looking man with the black beard and the ribbon across his chest. Because of that beard and his starched shirt he had always landed in the front row; in the intervals he munched a sandwich and then, after the take, would put on a wretched old coat over his evening dress and return home to a distant part of Berlin, where he worked as a compositor in a printing plant.

And at the present moment Ganin felt not only shame but also a sense of the fleetingness and evanescence of human life. There on the screen his haggard image, his sharp uplifted face and clapping hands merged into the gray kaleidoscope of other figures; a moment later, swinging like a ship, the auditorium vanished and now the scene showed an aging, world-famous actress giving a very skillful representation of a dead young woman. "We know not what we do," Ganin thought with repulsion, unable to watch the film any longer.

Lyudmila was whispering to Klara again—something about a dressmaker and some stuff for

a dress. The drama came to an end and Ganin felt mortally depressed. A few moments later as they were pushing their way toward the exit Lyudmila pressed close to him and whispered, "I'll ring you at two tomorrow, sweetie."

Ganin and Klara saw her home and then set off together back to their *pension*. Ganin was silent and Klara tried painfully to find a topic. "Are you going to leave us on Saturday?" she asked.

"I don't know, I really don't," Ganin replied gloomily.

As he walked he thought how his shade would wander from city to city, from screen to screen, how he would never know what sort of people would see it or how long it would roam round the world. And when he went to bed and listened to the trains passing through that cheerless house in which lived seven Russian lost shades, the whole of life seemed like a piece of film-making where heedless extras knew nothing of the picture in which they were taking part.

Ganin could not sleep. A nervous tingling ran through his legs and the pillow tormented his head. Then in the middle of the night his neighbor Alfyorov started to hum a tune. Through the thin wall he could hear him shuffling across the floor, first near then moving away, while Ganin lay there in anger. Whenever a train rattled past, Alfyorov's voice blended with the noise, only to surface again—tum-ti-tum, tum-ti, tum-ti-tum.

Ganin could bear it no longer. He pulled on his trousers, went out into the passage and thumped on the door of room 1 with his fist. In his wanderings Alfyorov happened at that moment to be right beside the door, and he flung it open so unexpectedly that Ganin gave a start of surprise.

"Please come in, Lev Glebovich."

He was wearing shirt and underpants, his blond beard was slightly ruffled—presumably from puffing away at his songs—and his pale blue eyes were alive with happiness.

"You're singing," said Ganin, frowning, "and it's keeping me awake."

"Come in for heaven's sake, don't hang about there in the doorway," fussed Aleksei Ivanovich, putting his arm round Ganin's waist in a well-meant but clumsy gesture. "I'm sorry if I annoyed you."

Ganin went reluctantly into the room. It contained very little, yet was very untidy. Instead of standing at the desk (that oaken monster with the inkwell shaped like a large toad) one of the two kitchen chairs seemed to have wandered off in the direction of the washbasin but had stopped halfway there, having obviously stumbled over the turned-up edge of the green carpet. The other chair, which stood beside the bed and served as a bedside table, had disappeared under a black jacket whose collapse seemed as heavy and shapeless as if it had fallen from the top of Mount Ararat. Thin sheets of paper were scattered all over the wooden wilderness of the desk and over the bed. Ganin noticed from a casual glance that on these sheets were pencil drawings of wheels, squares, done without the least technical accuracy—simply scribbles to pass the time. Alfyorov himself, in his woollen underpants—which make any man, be he built like Adonis or elegant as Beau Brummel, look extraordinarily unattractive—had started pacing up and down again amidst the ruins of his room, occasionally flipping his fingernail against the green glass shade of the table lamp or the back of a chair.

"I'm terribly glad you've dropped in at last," he said. "I couldn't sleep either. Just think-

my wife's coming on Saturday. And tomorrow's Tuesday already. Poor girl, I can just imagine what agony she's been through in that accursed Russia of ours!"

Ganin, who had been glumly trying to decipher a chess problem drawn on one of the pieces of paper lying around on the bed, suddenly looked up. "What did you say?"

"She's coming," Alfyorov replied with a bold flick of his nail.

"No, not that. What did you call Russia?"

"Accursed. It's true, isn't it?"

"I don't know—the epithet struck me as curious."

"Now, Lev Glebovich"—Alfyorov suddenly stopped in the middle of the room—"it's time you stopped playing at being a Bolshevik. You may think it very amusing, but what you do is very wrong, believe me. It's time we all admitted frankly that Russia is done for, that our 'saintly' Russian peasantry has turned out to be nothing but gray scum—as might have been expected, by the way—and that our country is finished for good."

Ganin laughed. "Quite, quite, Aleksey Ivanovich."

Alfyorov wiped his gleaming face from top to bottom with his palm and suddenly smiled wide, dreamy smile. "Why aren't you married, old chap, eh?"

"Never had the chance," Ganin replied. "Is it fun?"

"Delightful. My wife is adorable. A brunette, you know, with such lively eyes. Still very young. We were married in Poltava in 1919, and in 1920 I had to emigrate. I've some photographs in the desk drawer—I'll show them to you." Crooking his fingers underneath it, he pulled open the wide drawer.

"What were you in those days, Aleksey Ivanovich?" Ganin inquired without curiosity.

Alfyorov shook his head. "I don't remember. How can one remember what one was in a past life—an oyster maybe, or a bird, let's say, or perhaps a teacher of mathematics? In any case our old life in Russia seems like something that happened before time began, something metaphysical or whatever you call it—that's not quite the word—yes, I know, metempsychosis."

Ganin looked at the photograph in the open drawer without much interest. It was the face of a tousled young woman with a merry, very toothy mouth. Alfyorov leaned over his shoulder. "No, that's not my wife, that's my sister. She died of typhus, in Kiev. She was a nice, jolly girl, very good at playing tag."

He produced another photograph.

"And that's Mary, my wife. Poor snapshot, but quite a good likeness all the same. And here's another, taken in our garden. Mary's the one sitting, in the white dress. I haven't seen her for four years. But I don't suppose she's changed much. I really don't know how I survive till Saturday. Wait! Where are you going, Lev Glebovich? Do stay!"

Ganin, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets, was walking toward the door.

"What's the matter, Lev Glebovich? Did I say something that offended you?"

The door slammed shut. Alfyorov was left standing alone in the middle of his room.

"Really! How rude," he mumbled. "What's bitten him?"

That night, as every night, a little old man in a black cape plodded along the curb down the long deserted avenue, poking the point of a gnarled stick into the asphalt as he looked for cigarette-ends—gold, cork or plain paper—and flaking cigar butts. Occasionally, braying like a stag, a motorcar would dash by or something would happen which no one walking in a city ever notices: a star, faster than thought and with less sound than a tear, would fall. Gaudier gayer than the stars were the letters of fire which poured out one after another above a black roof, paraded in single file and vanished all at once in the darkness.

“Can—it—be—possible,” said the letters in a discreet neon whisper, then the night would sweep them away at a single velvet stroke. Again they would start to creep across the sky. “Can—it—”

And darkness descended again. But the words insistently lit up once more and finally, instead of disappearing at once, they stayed alight for a whole five minutes, as had been arranged between the advertising agency and the manufacturer.

But then who can tell what it really is that flickers up there in the dark above the houses—the luminous name of a product or the glow of human thought; a sign, a summons; a question hurled into the sky and suddenly getting a jewel-bright, enraptured answer?

And in those streets, now as wide as shiny black seas, at that late hour when the last beer hall has closed, and a native of Russia, abandoning sleep, hatless and coatless under an old mackintosh, walks in a clairvoyant trance; at that late hour down those wide streets passing worlds utterly alien to each other: no longer a reveler, a woman, or simply a passer-by, but each one a wholly isolated world, each a totality of marvels and evil. Five hackney droshki stood on the avenue alongside the huge drumlike shape of a street *pissoir*: five sleepy, warm gray worlds in coachman’s livery; and five other worlds on aching hooves, asleep and dreaming of nothing but oats streaming out of a sack with a soft crackly sound.

It is at moments like this that everything grows fabulous, unfathomably profound, where life seems terrifying and death even worse. And then, as one swiftly strides through the nighttime city, looking at the lights through one’s tears and searching in them for a glorious, dazzling recollection of past happiness—a woman’s face, resurgent after many years of humdrum oblivion—all of a sudden, in one’s mad progress, one is politely stopped by a foreign passenger and asked how to get to such and such a street; asked in an ordinary voice, but in a voice which one will never hear again.

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