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The Green Lamp

- The fiction writer and literary historian Lidia Libedinskaia (Tolstaia) started her memoir in 1959 at the age of thirty-eight, several months after the death of her husband, the “proletarian” writer and civil war veteran Yuri Libedinsky. She finished it in the spring of 1964, when the “Khrushchev Thaw,” which had made its conception and publication possible, was drawing to a close.

MY MOTHER wore a checkered cap and hung out with the futurists, and later with the LEF crowd.¹

My father would get misty-eyed reciting Bunin:²

The cheerful summer sun comes seeping through the shutters,
Through dusty curtains, heavy glass, a dry bouquet,
To pour golden crystals over the candle cutters,
The harpsichords, the ancient carpets and the dull parquet.

I do not know what these lines reminded him of. Perhaps his blue Tolstoyan blood still retained some memory of old manor houses, overgrown ponds, and hundred-year-old lindens, although he himself could not possibly remember any of that because my grandfather left Tambov Province for Baku, where he opened a notary office, right after the birth of his eldest son (who happened to have been my father).

That piece of property was less poetic than Bunin’s cold rooms, but it turned out to be much more profitable, allowing my grandfather to live in a very large, comfortable apartment. After the fall of the autocracy, he tossed several thick bundles of crisp white bills into the green waves of the Caspian Sea. The bills carried the image of Tsar Peter, who had granted the Tolstoys their title.

My father had kept some cards that had gold trim, a picture of a small crown, and an intricate inscription written in a fancy spidery hand: “Count Boris Dmitrievich Tolstoy.” Underneath, my father had added in purple ink: “An Employee of the RSFSR State Planning Commission.”

To my mother’s and grandmother’s horror, he used to leave these cards at his friends’ and acquaintances’ apartments when he did not find them at home. According to him, just as only a scoundrel would have been ashamed of his proletar-

From Lidia Libedinskaia, *Zelenaiia lampka* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966), 9–92 (abridged).

¹ LEF (Levyi front iskusstv)—Left Front of Art, 1923–28; group of avant-garde writers and theorists led by V. V. Mayakovsky, N. N. Aseev, and A. M. Rodchenko.

² I. A. Bunin (1870–1953)—Russian writer, some of whose early work is concerned with the decline of the gentry; emigrated to France in 1920; 1933 Nobel Prize winner.

ian origin before the revolution, so it did not become a decent person to deny his gentry background after the revolution.

Perhaps the most free-thinking member of our family was Grandma, my mother's mother. In her youth she worshipped Chernyshevsky,³ slept on bare wooden boards to imitate Rakhmetov,⁴ and, in the year 88 of the previous century, composed the following poem:

If I could become a man,
I would go to college
And learn a little decadence
Along with useful knowledge.

She never made it as a decadent and was quite indifferent to so-called decadent poetry. All her life she loved Nekrasov, and whenever my parents went out she would recite "Red-nosed Frost" and "Russian Women."

Our whole family lived in one room. We could not afford a maid, so Grandma took charge of the housework. Tall and statuesque, in a loose clean blouse with a black velvet bow and a very long skirt that touched the floor, she was constantly thinking about something she was reading, and, her pince-nez glistening, she would bemoan the defeat of the Decembrist uprising or, rolling her *r*'s in the French manner and occasionally employing a French word, she would relate the plot of *Faust* to me. There would hardly be any time left to cook dinner and no time at all to clean up. We would have to combine our efforts to finish the dishes and sweep the floor before my parents got home from work.

Another example of Grandma's influence was the game that the girls from our building loved to play; it consisted of spending whole days sitting on the roof amid bags full of toys and sacks filled with sand and pebbles. This signified a trip to Siberia to join our exiled husbands. The Decembrists! In our house that word was always uttered with particular reverence. My mother used to write historical novels about Bestuzhev-Marlinsky and Ryleev.⁵

Still, Bunin's dreamy lines had made a tremendous impression on me. My very first poem, which I wrote at the age of ten, began in the following manner:

A hazy melancholy wrapped my heart
In the soft silk of ancient recollections.

I cannot for the life of me explain what the terrible burden of those recollections was all about because my childhood was unusually peaceful and happy.

Probably the only real burden was having to go to the theater every Sunday. I was very shy and could not imagine how anyone could perform on stage. I suffered for the actors; I felt desperately sorry for them. I was overcome with guilt

³ N. G. Chernyshevsky (1828–1889)—radical writer whose novel *What Is to Be Done?* (written in prison in 1863) became the gospel of Russian socialists.

⁴ Rakhmetov—an ascetic revolutionary in Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?*

⁵ A. A. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky (1797–1837)—writer, member of the Decembrist movement; reduced to ranks and killed in action in the Caucasus; K. F. Ryleev (1795–1826)—poet, member of the Decembrist movement; executed along with four other leaders of the December 14 uprising.

for having to participate in their torture. My parents could not understand why I kept asking them what time it was. I used to count every minute, waiting anxiously for the end of the show.

However, my mother and father considered going to the theater a necessary element of a proper education and continued to press on relentlessly, even though I would often arrive at the theater with my eyes red from crying.

There was one more “heavy recollection” that did not manage to cloud the happiness of my childhood. In pursuit of the same goal of raising a “well-rounded human being,” as my father used to put it, they decided to teach me ballet.

I have to admit that I am completely tone deaf and cannot sing even the simplest melody. Nevertheless, I was taken to the ballet studio at the Bolshoi, where some sensible people suggested that my mother sign me up for an art class at the local Pioneer Club. Why art, I have no idea because I am as bad at drawing as I am at singing. My parents refused to give up, however, and sent me to a private ballet school where they used the “Isadora Duncan method.” I do not remember what the method consisted of, but I do remember endlessly jumping up and down, clumsy in our bare feet on the fluffy carpet, to the accompaniment of an out-of-tune piano. The classes were held in a spacious apartment (a “NEPman” apartment, as we used to say in those days). I was totally incapable of moving to the rhythm of the music, which drove our quietly irritable teacher with her sorrowful eyes to despair.

That just about completes the list of recollections that wrapped my nine-year-old heart in “soft silk.”

I should probably have been told in no uncertain terms that such attempts at versification had to stop once and for all, but that would have gone against the humane spirit that reigned in our family.

Grandma said that the poem had a Nadsonian ring to it;⁶ Mother was too busy to notice my literary efforts (she was working as a reporter for *Ogonek*); and Father delivered a long lecture on the history of Russian poetry, at the conclusion of which he told me that my work was imitative, which was pardonable at such an early stage of one’s creative development. He was probably right: at that time my creative development was indeed at an early stage.

WE lived in an old, yellow house the color of autumn leaves. It stood at the intersection of two quiet streets in the very center of Moscow. A short distance away, Tverskaia and Malaia Dmitrovka Streets buzzed with the noise of rattling streetcars, honking automobiles, banging doors, and bustling pedestrians. But here, in Vorochnikovsky Alley, everything was quiet. The pink and yellow gentry townhouses dozed behind their wooden fences and the dusty greenery of overgrown gardens; the Pimenovsky Monastery rose silently behind its white walls. The former monastery, that is: now it was used as a place for weekly Saturday auctions at which pawned goods were sold. Sold cheaply enough, so that every once in a while a gorgeous velvet chair, a copper desk lamp, an inlaid table, or a

⁶ S. Ia. Nadson (1862–1887)—Russian poet.

pair of silver spoons would show up in our one-room apartment. Arrivals from some strange, unknown world, these things were certainly not vital necessities, but Grandma always claimed that she could not “let them get away.” Actually, our family was rather indifferent to material objects. The new purchase would be proudly shown to all our friends and neighbors and would have its origins investigated, to be completely forgotten within three days. The inlaid table would be used as a stand for the kerosene lamp; the velvet chair would become a bed for a neutered cat by the name of Planchik; and the silver spoons would become tarnished as they peacefully lived out their lives among their stainless-steel brethren.

I liked to hear the story of how, in the cold, frosty December of 1917, when leaving Petersburg for the warm and fertile Caucasus, Grandma had taken only two things from her well-furnished four-room apartment: a brass mortar and pestle and a huge, life-sized portrait of my admiral grandfather in a heavy bronze frame. The mortar is now in Tbilisi, at my aunt’s place, and the portrait of my admiral grandfather was thrown off the train by revolutionary sailors.

A former monastery, former townhouses . . . I used to hear the word *former* at every turn. We got our bread at the former Filippov store, bought meat at the former Eliseev, purchased galoshes at the former Muir & Merrilies and received medical treatment at the former Catherine Hospital. There were “former people,” as well. Professor Ivanov, who lived in our house, was known as the former palace doctor; the driver Toropov, as a former landless peasant; and Grandma, simply as a “former person.”

Former things, former people . . . When were these former times, and what had they been like?

I often asked Grandma these questions, and it turned out that it had all ended very recently—some ten or twelve years before. And yet it was so unlike everything that surrounded me! It seemed to me that it was as far back as the Tatar Yoke,⁷ about which Grandma had told me so many colorful stories—she had a wonderful memory and a fertile imagination.

I HAD a dream. A fairly ordinary dream: to have a bear. Not a live bear, brown or polar, of the kind I had often seen at the zoo, but a red, flannel bear like the one my friend Lidka Toropova had recently received as a present. The problem was that such bears could be found in only one Moscow store—the closed warehouse for the employees of the GPU. Lidka’s father worked at the GPU as a driver, but none of my relatives had anything to do with that institution.

I told Grandma about my dream, and she set about making it a reality.

“Tania,” she asked my mother when she got home from work, “is it true that you cannot manage to get a bear for your only child?”

My mother tried to protest, but Grandma was not to be deterred.

“Get your newspaper to give you an assignment to write a story about that store. I doubt you need a special ration card to buy a bear—surely they’ll sell it to you for cash.”

⁷ Tatar yoke—term used to refer to the period of Mongol rule over Russia.

I do not know what kind of assignment my mother managed to get at her paper, but several days later she and I were cheerfully walking toward a large store just off Lubianka Square.

Indeed, one did not need ration cards to buy bears.

When we got home the bear received some calico pants and a blue Tolstoyan shirt embroidered with white and red flowers. My dream had come true. Everybody knows, however, that the fulfillment of a final dream signifies the end of life. My life, on the other hand, was only beginning, and desires followed one after another. My next dream was to get the bear some shoes. A long time ago, I had noticed that the Rubbertrust store on Tverskaia, which for some reason sold baby things, had some brown leather shoes of the kind children wear when they are learning to walk. I could not think of a better pair of shoes for my bear. But those particular ones cost one ruble, which was a lot of money. For one ruble you could buy two tickets to the only show at the Children's Theater, *A Negro Boy and a Monkey*, two "Napoleons" at the bakery, or two "Teddy Bear" and ten "Transparent" candies at the corner kiosk. All for one ruble. That is how expensive those shoes were!

Still, Grandma told me that as soon as she received her pension (twenty rubles), she would buy the shoes. Grandma always got her pension on the 15th of each month at ten in the morning, so by eleven A.M. on July 15, 1928, the bear was already sporting his new shoes.

Once again, one satisfied desire led to another. It was important for the bear to see the world and be seen himself. So Lidka and I grabbed him by his hard, sawdust-filled front paws and took him for a walk around the neighborhood.

On Tverskaia we stopped next to a bakery. It was one of the last NEPman bakeries, and the owner was trying to show his loyalty to the Soviet order by staging a kind of news show in his shop window. In those days the most dramatic event was the disappearance of Amundsen, who had flown to the North Pole on a hydroplane to rescue the Italian Nobile expedition and had vanished without trace, along with his whole crew.⁸ The world was agitated over his disappearance, and in the shop window of the bakery, sugar icebergs floated next to sugar ice floes. A chocolate tent was sprinkled with powdered sugar, and small sugar people with pink candy faces stretched out their tiny sugar hands in a desperate plea for help. In front of them, right by the glass, stood a shaggy dog with its chocolate mouth wide open and its bright-red marzipan tongue hanging out.

After that we showed our bear the lions that guarded the entrance to the Museum of the Revolution: after all, he was a bear and they were lions, so perhaps he would find it easier to communicate with them. Then we decided to extend our itinerary and, in violation of a strict parental prohibition, we crossed Tverskaia, which was full of clanging streetcars. We walked under the museum arch, past the iron cannons and neat piles of cannonballs, and into the shady linden garden of

⁸ Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian Polar explorer (b. 1872), never returned from that expedition; Umberto Nobile (1885–1978) was rescued on June 23, 1928, six days after Amundsen's disappearance.

the former English Club. Grandma used to take me there to talk about the Napoleonic invasion, Natasha Rostova, and Pierre Bezukhov.⁹

We walked along the wide linden alleys, sat on benches in the transparent shade of trembling leaves, and looked at the tall museum windows. Behind the windows, in the same rooms in which Moscow had welcomed Bagration,¹⁰ an endless line of visitors was filing through. We could hear a ringing voice pronouncing the words that seemed to fill the air in those years: “dictatorship of the proletariat . . .”; “revolutionary underground . . .”; “class struggle . . .”; “storming of the Winter Palace . . .”

I WAS not accepted by the Young Pioneers. There were three of us: Irka Maleeva, Vovka Iakovlev, and I. I do not remember why they were not accepted, but in my case it was social origin.

At the meeting John Kuriatov said that his mother had known our family back in Baku.

“They used to receive the bourgeois poet Khlebnikov.¹¹ Tolstaia (that was me!) had the émigré Viacheslav Ivanov as her godfather.¹² And her grandmother speaks French!”

“Tolstaia, is that true?” asked our Pioneer leader, Fatia Gurari, a dark-skinned, curly-haired boy. He looked confused.

What could I say? Khlebnikov had been a frequent guest at my parents’ place in Baku in 1920–21. He and my mother had worked in the Caucasus Telegraph Agency together. The memory of those encounters, as well as some yellow sheets covered with Khlebnikov’s tiny, intricate handwriting, were being proudly and carefully preserved by my family. Viacheslav Ivanov was indeed my godfather, having named me after his favorite actress, Lidia Borisovna Iavorskaia. The small bouquet of violets he had given my mother on that occasion was kept in a special album. Grandma spoke fluent French and had even translated Verlaine.¹³ All this was true, although I had not realized that it was bad.

“Yes,” I said softly but firmly, “it is true.”

“Well, her (that is Grandma’s!) speaking French is no problem,” said Fatia thoughtfully. “All knowledge can be used in the service of the revolutionary class. Now this Khlebnikov thing is more serious. From what I know, he was a friend of Mayakovsky’s.¹⁴ And Mayakovsky committed suicide, which is against Communist morality. Maybe he was under Khlebnikov’s influence.”

“But Khlebnikov died a long time ago,” I said timidly. “From an illness. He did not shoot himself . . .”

⁹ Natasha Rostova, Pierre Bezukhov—characters from Leo Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace* (1863–69).

¹⁰ Prince P. I. Bagration (1765–1812)—Russian general, hero of the 1812 war with Napoleon, killed at the battle of Borodino.

¹¹ Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922)—avant-garde poet, one of the founders of Russian futurism.

¹² Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949)—symbolist poet and philosopher; emigrated from Russia in 1924.

¹³ Paul Verlaine (1844–1896)—French poet.

¹⁴ V. V. Mayakovsky (1893–1930)—Russian poet.

Fatia coughed.

“All this needs to be clarified,” he said sadly. “I’ve never heard anything at all about this Viacheslav Ivanov. In any case, you were baptized without your consent, and chances are, Tolstaia, you would have disassociated yourself from your parent’s incorrect action. Isn’t that right, Tolstaia?”

I was silent. There was no way in the world I was ever going to disassociate myself from my family, especially Grandma. Fatia realized he had said something wrong, and hastened to add: “Well, never mind, Tolstaia, we’ll have it all cleared up, and everything will be all right!”

It usually took me three minutes to walk home from school. On that day it took about an hour. The cold autumn sun was shining down from the sky. The first patches of ice glistened between the cobblestones, and gusts of wind kept swirling up dirt, scraps of paper, and the last yellow leaves.

I had to decide what to do next. But when you have just celebrated your eleventh birthday the month before, such decisions are not easy to make. I did not have anyone I could talk to.

I sat down on a stone hitching post at the corner of Pimenovsky and Vorotnikovsky, took a new notebook and pencil out of my satchel, and, holding the pencil tightly in my freezing fingers, resolutely wrote on the cover: “Diary.” I then turned the page and wrote down on the snow-white paper:

“October 26, 1932

I was not accepted by the Young Pioneers. I am terribly ashamed. What I ought to do:

1. Not say anything to Father, Mother, or Grandma.
2. Or Liuska or Galka. Nurakhmet is OK.
3. Never go to school again. Ever.”

I still have that page. “Nurakhmet is OK” meant that I could tell the oldest son of our janitor, a little Tatar boy by the name of Nurakhmet, about what had happened. Why he deserved such confidence I do not know; we had not been friends before then. He always used to do what I told him, though. Nurakhmet was a year and a half younger than I was and did not like to read.

I returned the notebook to my satchel and went to the janitor’s room. It was dark as usual: thick smoke rose from the stove; diapers hung drying on the line; shiny black roaches brought specially from Kazan for good luck scurried up and down the walls; and a mountain of down pillows in bright pink pillowcases with large green roses rested solemnly on the bed. I really coveted those pillowcases and could not understand why we had to sleep on boring white pillows, thereby depriving ourselves of such pink happiness.

“Nurakhmet,” I said in a peremptory tone, “starting tomorrow I will not be going to school anymore. But I will leave home every morning as if I were. Do you understand?” Nurakhmet nodded. “Tomorrow at a quarter past eight I want you to be waiting for me by the “Goldfish” kindergarten. Do you know where we are going?”

“No,” said Nurakhmet sadly.

“You’ll find out tomorrow, OK?”

“OK.”

I had no idea where we were going to go.

The next morning was a gray one, with low clouds that seemed pregnant with the last rain or the first snow. The wind had subsided, and the world had become a little warmer and cozier. At a quarter past eight, I ran out the front door as usual, hid the hated galoshes under the porch, crossed the street, and opened the kindergarten gate. Nurakhmet was standing and waiting meekly under a naked pear tree.

“Let’s go, young man!”

“Where? To the movies?” His eyes glistened with greed.

“It’s not that simple.” I was indignant at his mercenary attitude. “We’ve got to get some money first.”

“How are we going to get it?”

“We’ll look for it.”

“Look for it?” Nurakhmet’s face fell. “Where?”

“Don’t you understand? In stores, on sidewalks . . . You see, people lose money: sometimes five kopeks, sometimes ten. And we’ll pick it up. Maybe we’ll even find a wallet with a hundred rubles in it. Then we’ll return it to the person who lost it, and he’ll give us a reward . . .”

“What kind of reward?”

“I don’t know—maybe even a bicycle.”

“But whose will it be—yours or mine?”

“Both . . .”

Nurakhmet shook his head:

“No, mine, but I’ll let you ride it.”

“All right, you can have it,” I consented generously.

We were in a large orchard; the dry, slightly frostbitten yellow leaves exuded a fermented, spicy aroma and crunched loudly underfoot. At the other end there was a hole in the fence. We climbed through and found ourselves in a courtyard that led out onto Tverskaia.

Our journey began with a visit to the store “Communard.” We got lucky right away. We found a three-kopek coin, a black button from a man’s pair of trousers, and a piece of hard candy. Nurakhmet took it all. I suggested that we take turns licking the candy, but he said that it would be better to find another one.

In the waiting room of the eye hospital we went through a trash basket and found an empty matchbox with a bright label. Nurakhmet already had that label in his collection, but I didn’t, so he let me have it. “But the button is mine!” he added quickly.

Luck is capricious, and soon it had abandoned us completely. Cigarette butts, candy wrappings, and empty cigarette boxes were all we could find. We walked around the Strastnoi Monastery, which housed the antireligious museum, and hung out by the ticket window. Unfortunately, very few people were around, and we did not discover anything valuable on the floor. Next we went to the Eliseev

Department Store, but it was for foreigners, and simple mortals, especially minors, were not allowed inside.

By the time we made it to the Central Telegraph building, it was almost eleven and Nurakhmet was complaining that he was hungry. I had twenty kopeks in school-lunch money, but those were the days of ration cards, and we could not buy anything with them. Nurakhmet continued to whine. What could we do?

Keeping our eyes on the floor, we walked all around the huge room hoping to find something of value. But in the twentieth century people were less absentminded than in the good old days of Dickens. Besides, right in front of us, a cleaning lady had poured muddy water from a rusty bucket onto the floor and was quickly wiping it with a rag. The room was warm and quiet; it was still early in the day and very few people were there. We had no reason to hurry. I suggested that we read the signs on all the windows. But that is when his dislike of reading entered the picture. No sooner had we read "Telegrams" and "General Delivery" than he started saying he was hungry and wanted to go to the movies . . . When I did not respond, he demanded that I take him home immediately. That was a lot easier. The school day was almost over, and I had to get back, too.

We were heading for the door, when suddenly a huge figure loomed over us.

"Where are you going, my youthful friend?" I heard a soft but thick voice ask.

A large, warm hand took me under the chin. I raised my eyes and saw Artem Vesely.¹⁵

"Pray, to whom was your excellency pleased to mail a telegram?" he went on.

"Or perhaps you were here to claim your *poste restante* correspondence?"

I just stood there frowning, watching Nurakhmet out of the corner of my eye. I was afraid he would burst into tears at any moment.

"What news have you received?" Artem Ivanovich continued joking.

"We haven't received anything," I muttered. "We were looking for money . . ."

"Found much?" asked Artem earnestly.

"Three kopeks, a button, a piece of candy, and a label," said Nurakhmet quickly, and then added: "The candy and the button are mine; the label is hers . . ."

"What about the three kopeks?" asked Artem sternly.

"It belongs to both of us, but it's in my pocket!"

"I see you don't forget your pocket, Sonny. But whatever made Vecherka's daughter set out in search of money?"

"Oh, Mother doesn't know anything," I said in alarm. "Nobody knows anything. I was not accepted into the Pioneers, so I am not going to school anymore, but I leave in the morning as if I were . . ."

"Now I understand," Artem Ivanovich interrupted my muttering. It is called playing hookey!"

"But I am never ever going back there."

"We'll decide about that later. But right now I am going to send my telegram,

¹⁵ Artem Vesely (real name Nikolai Ivanovich Kochkurov, 1899–1939)—"proletarian" writer, civil war veteran, friend of the Tolstoy family; perished during the Great Terror.

and then we will all go home on the bus, is that clear? And do not even think about running away, your excellency . . .”

Nurakhmet jumped up and down in delight: on the bus!

Bus No. 1, with its black stripes and long yellow nose, did not make us wait. We sat down on the cool, bouncy seats covered with oilcloth, and Artem Ivanovich asked me seriously:

“So you were rejected because of your social origin?” And added just as seriously: “Everyone must share the fate of his social class . . .”

The bus growled as it climbed up Tverskaia. We had already passed Sovetskaia Square and the white columns of the Moscow Soviet building.

“Now listen to me, child,” said Artem Ivanovich. “I don’t know what should be done about the Pioneers. Now, as far as looking for money is concerned, it is an interesting but, I would say, rather uncertain occupation. Betting on absent-minded people is not a sensible thing to do. I can see that you are a child with initiative. You know what I’d like to suggest? Would you like to help me?”

My heart began beating with pride, and my already flushed cheeks must have turned beet red. I nodded silently.

“Do you know what a *chastushka* is?”¹⁶

“My nanny Sulatskaia sings them.”

“Excellent! Write down a hundred *chastushki* for me. Is it a deal?”

He stretched out his large meaty palm, and, with great dignity, I put my round callused hand on top of it.

The bus was approaching the eye hospital. We had to get off.

Artem Ivanovich helped us out of the bus (not long before, his own little boy had been run over by a streetcar, and his kind heart was forever aching for all children).

“And now run along home! And make sure you tell your parents all about it! I’m going to check up on you! Now off you go!” He clapped his hands loudly, the way people do to scare chickens in villages.

We held hands as we ran. The timid autumn sun was peeking through the pale breaks in the clouds; gray shadows lay over the roofs, sidewalks, cobblestones . . .

That night we held a family council. My father absolutely refused to go to the school and talk to the teachers.

“I spent ten years in a gymnasium, and that was enough. Let them (he probably meant the teachers) educate her however they want . . .”

My mother did not refuse, but she was too busy, as usual. So it had to be Grandma.

The next morning, at exactly a quarter past eight, we set off for school. This time I had to wear my galoshes.

Occasional snowflakes fell from the overcast sky and melted before they reached the ground.

“I’ll tell them,” said Grandma belligerently, “that I speak not only French but also Latin and Greek!”

¹⁶ *Chastushka*—a humorous four-lined folk ditty.

I knew my case had been won.

I do not know what Grandma told our assistant principal Aleksandr Semenovich Tolstov, but by the eve of Revolution Day I had a scarlet satin scarf tied solemnly around my neck, and Grandma had been elected to the parents' committee.

I wrote down considerably more than a hundred *chastushki* for Artem Vesely. All my friends from school and all the kids from the courtyard got involved. When the book came out, Artem Ivanovich thanked everyone who had helped him collect the *chastushki* in the acknowledgments. Among others, he mentioned . . . no, not my name (Tolstaia), but my mother's . . . Such was life!

My father was not easily surprised. But one morning at breakfast, when Grandma handed him his cup of coffee, I heard him mutter softly but with unconcealed amazement: "My God, what is this? Where did you find it?"

On his normally expressionless, dark, Buddha-like face, with its high cheekbones, was an expression of extreme puzzlement. Grandma, who, like most mothers-in-law, was not overly fond of her daughter's husband, looked at my father condescendingly through her pince-nez.

"Are you so divorced from reality, Boris, that you did not know that this country had embarked on the path of industrialization?"

My father worked in Gosplan¹⁷ and, of course, knew better than the rest of us what path the country had embarked on. However, he chose not to argue with Grandma (peace in the family was more important), but instead, having silently finished his coffee, he picked up his briefcase, kissed me on the forehead, and left for work.

My father's amazement had been provoked by the cups that Grandma had picked up at a manufactured goods warehouse the night before. Tall and wide, with small uneven bottoms, they teetered back and forth like little rocking horses, spilling their contents and burning one's hands. To make up for this, they were decorated with pictures of tractors, cranes, cogwheels, and wrenches. Those cups, the children of the First Five-Year Plan, filled me with patriotic fervor.

The country had embarked on the path of industrialization, and one could see signs of it everywhere: in small, trivial things and in works of art. Perhaps the greatest consequence, however, was the changed landscape of Moscow. Everything in the city seemed to have been set into motion: buildings, streets, squares, parks, even monuments. Ancient little churches, monasteries, and old buildings were being blown up, to be replaced by construction sites surrounded by gray wooden fences. The round heads of the belfries that had supported the Moscow sky for centuries began giving way to the camel-like necks of tall cranes that appeared to be munching on the low, peaceful, furry clouds as they floated by.

The streets resembled trenches: new gas and water pipes and endless cables were being laid. The newly turned earth gave birth to a new kind of people. In canvas overalls and wide-brimmed hats, with jackhammers and spades over their

¹⁷ The State Planning Committee.

shoulders, talking loudly and clanking in their heavy boots, they walked around the city with a proprietary look: these were the subway builders.¹⁸

During a remodeling, move, or spring cleaning the most active participants tend to be the children. Their efforts are not always constructive, and the grown-ups occasionally have to restrain their enthusiasm. As a rule, however, they do not get their feelings hurt but continue to scurry in and out of rooms and up and down the halls and stairways, interfering with everything and trying desperately to be useful and to take part in the life of the adults.

The great Soviet house was being remodeled and thoroughly cleaned: the new political system was settling in for perpetual residency. And we children eagerly inhaled the free air mixed with construction dust. Our greatest desire was to march shoulder to shoulder with the grown-ups.

Every day after school we would run to construction sites to dig trenches, carry boards and logs, and help unload truckfuls of sand, bricks, or cement. We helped cut down hundred-year-old lindens on the Garden Ring Road and plant rickety poplar saplings in new parks. We collected books for kolkhoz libraries.

The Dnieper Hydroelectric Dam and Magnitogorsk,¹⁹ industrialization and collectivization, five-year plans, and more five-year plans—these were the words of our adolescence, the words we repeated in a million different ways, wrote on posters and in wall newspapers, rhymed in poems and songs. *The Tale of a Great Plan* was one of our favorite books. And if someone among the adults complained of the lack of necessities or the long lines in the stores, we would respond with all the fervor and faith of an eleven-year-old:

“As soon as we complete the five-year plan, everything will be different!”

But then, more and more often, a sinister word began appearing in adult (and hence our own) conversations, a word whose terrible meaning we were destined to come to know many years later: *fascism*. On Staropimenovsky Street, an old monastery was blown up, and in its place a new high-rise was built. We heard that its future residents were to be German revolutionaries who had been forced to leave Germany because of the fascist takeover of power. There was a new movie called *The Worn-Out Shoes* that we went to see over and over again: the sad fate of the curly-haired German boy affected us as if it were our own. Even now, thirty years later, I can picture the last scene in the film with perfect clarity: the murdered boy in his checkered shirt is lying on the pavement; beside him lies his children’s bugle, silenced forever because its little master has been silenced.

“The Reichstag fire,” “the huge fascist provocation,” Georgi Dimitrov, the Leipzig Trial . . .²⁰

¹⁸ That is, the workers constructing the Moscow metro.

¹⁹ Magnitogorsk—large urban center at the southern tip of the Urals located near massive iron ore deposits; built up by the regime during the First Five-Year Plan, it became an important symbol of the industrialization drive.

²⁰ Georgi Dimitrov (1882–1949)—Bulgarian Communist accused by the Nazis of starting the Reichstag Fire (February 27, 1933) but acquitted at the Leipzig Trial (September 21–December 23, 1933); received a hero’s welcome in the Soviet Union, where he became a member of the Supreme Soviet and the nominal head of the Communist International; prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949.

For my own children, all these words represent the past. They are street names, monuments, and movies; a white mausoleum in the center of sun-drenched Sofia; just another question on a history exam. But for me they stand for the living and fiery epic of my childhood, for our dream of a World Union of Socialist Republics, for the pioneer rallies at which children's hot little hands used to soar upward in a common demand for freedom for the Bulgarian Communists.

THE open Komsomol meeting of the eighth through the tenth grades was about to begin. "Agenda: The expulsion of J. Kuriatov in connection with his anti-Komsomol behavior."

J. Kuriatov was the very same John Kuriatov (named after John Reed),²¹ who had voted against my induction into the young pioneers several years earlier. All that had become ancient history, however. Since then he had sent me a love letter with the following less than felicitous paraphrase of the Pushkin poem:

I love you with such tenderness, such passion,
That I hope someone else will love you, too.²²

Obviously this became known to the whole class the very next day, and John had become the butt of all sorts of jokes, which no doubt had helped cure him of his hopeless passion. But this, too, was ancient history. John and I were now in the habit of taking walks on the much quieter Moscow streets, going to the movies together, and even talking about affairs of the heart. For a long time (about six months), John had been in love (once again, hopelessly) with my friend, Masha . . .

I knew that John was being expelled from the Komsomol because he had refused to renounce his father, an old Bolshevik and an employee of a large ministry, who had been arrested the month before. After his father's arrest John had been avoiding his friends, and even I had not seen much of him. To Masha's credit, she had been giving John much encouragement in those difficult days. But even that had not distracted him from his grief. He had been disappearing after classes, only to reappear on time the next morning and get another "A." Masha and I had decided that even though we were "nonunion youth," that is, we were not Komsomol members, we would go to the meeting: perhaps John would derive some satisfaction from our being there.

But when we ran into him in the hall, he asked with uncharacteristic rudeness: "What the hell are you doing here? Just satisfying your curiosity?"

"You don't understand, we—"

"Get lost. I don't need anyone's pity."

"Masha, you go on home: he's embarrassed in front of you. I'll call you if you're needed," I said. "I'll go ahead and go to the meeting. Who knows . . ."

²¹ John Reed (1887–1920)—U.S. Communist; author of *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), an eyewitness account of the October Revolution sympathetic to the Bolsheviks.

²² In fact, the final lines of A. S. Pushkin's "I Loved You Once" are these:

I loved you with such tenderness, such passion,
As, God grant, you are someday loved again.

The children were quiet and morose; no one was laughing or joking. The representative of the Komsomol district committee walked in, and the meeting got under way. Let my children and grandchildren never experience anything like that. Let it never happen again on this Planet Earth.

John was standing. He was sweating profusely, and his face was beet red; only his dark blue myopic eyes remained firm behind his glasses.

“So, Kuriatov, do you persist in refusing to recognize your father’s mistakes?”

“I am in no position to recognize mistakes that I did not commit,” answered John woodenly, as if reciting by rote.

“But they have been recognized by the Soviet people.”

John was silent.

“Do you renounce your father and the wrecking activity he directed against the Soviet people?”

“I know nothing about his activity, but I will never renounce my father no matter what! Even Lenin knew him and valued him!” The boy’s resonant voice suddenly cracked.

“We want a straight answer, Kuriatov. Do you renounce your father, or do you not?”

“No, I do not,” said John in a barely audible whisper that sounded like a sigh of relief.

“Turn in your Komsomol card.”

“No, I won’t. I will never part with it! I haven’t done anything wrong . . .”

“What kind of discipline is this?”

John was not listening. Suddenly, he turned around and headed resolutely for the door. Pausing for a second, he said gloomily: “Let someone from Stalin’s office call, and then I’ll give it to you.”

“Cut out the nonsense, Kuriatov,” said the district committee representative. “As if Comrade Stalin had nothing better to do than deal with young whelps like you.”

“We are not whelps, we are human beings,” said John quietly. “And human beings are the party’s main resource. The cadres decide everything,²³ Comrade Representative. Remember who said that? And anyway, I don’t have my card with me . . .”

Realizing they could do nothing with the stubborn boy, the chair held a vote to have J. Kuriatov expelled from the Komsomol and then declared the meeting closed.

We walked out silently, and I caught up with John in the hall.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I said. “The weather is great.”

“Why not?” said John with a defiant and guilty smile, as if to say: I don’t want your pity.

AND then summer came, the dry, hot summer of 1937. The sun bore down mercilessly. Some sheets of paper that had been left outside withered, turned yellow, and crumbled.

²³ A Stalin quote and a major slogan of the day.

Red Spanish oranges, neatly wrapped in bright pieces of paper, were being sold on the street. Spanish revolutionary songs were being played on the radio. Somewhere far away, the valiant Spanish Revolution was struggling and bleeding, but refusing to surrender.

We dreamed of going there, to the mountains of Spain.

But it was only a dream, and we thought we had been born too late.

The Maksim trilogy was playing in all the movie theaters.²⁴ The silly song about the blue globe that “keeps turning, trying to fall down” had acquired a new meaning on the streets of Moscow. We could not take part in the exploits of Maksim and his friends, and, once again, we thought we had been born too late.

My mother sent me to a Pioneer camp in Koktebel, in the Crimea. For the first time I saw the blue expanse of the sea, the gray cliffs, and Voloshin’s²⁵ white house standing all alone on the hill. For the first time I breathed in the Koktebel air flavored with thyme, mint, and wormwood, collected bright-colored rocks, and sat at night on the wet sand listening to the murmur of the waves and gazing at the reflection of the moon stretching to the horizon.

Mountain hikes, bugle reveille at dawn, kayaking in the sea, heart-to-heart conversations with friends, long hours in Voloshin’s studio. Time spent over the poetry of Blok and Bely, Balmont and Voloshin, Severianin and Akhmatova, Mandelstam and Gumilev . . . The tattered volumes of Dickens and Thackeray, Goncharov and Tolstoy, Stendhal and Mérimée. Awkward attempts to write my own poems. This is how I remember the summer of the now infamous year 1937.

I left Koktebel in the middle of August. My friend Maika’s mother had died, and Maika had to return to Moscow. We did not want to part, so I asked to be sent back with her.

Life at home was sad. My mother told me that my father had been arrested in Alma-Ata, where he had been working for the last two years. As a result my mother began having difficulties at work, and finally she was forced to leave the editorial office of *The History of Factories*. We had no money, so my mother took a course in proofreading that enabled her to receive a small but regular salary. Grandma continued to run the household. Now she had to save on everything in order to make ends meet, but she did not despair. In her free time Grandma used to read Lavissee and Rambaud,²⁶ talk a great deal and at great length about the reasons for the defeat of the French Revolution, and tell me all about Robespierre and Marat.

My friends had not yet returned from their summer vacations. Maika and I, suntanned, healthy, and still smelling of salt water and sunny breezes, wandered all around the city, not knowing what to do with ourselves. She would cry softly, grieving over her mother’s death, while I tried to console her. I told her about my father.

²⁴ *The Maksim Trilogy* (1935–38)—popular adventure film about the revolution.

²⁵ M. A. Voloshin (1877–1932)—Russian poet and painter.

²⁶ The eight-volume *History of the Nineteenth Century*, by Ernest Lavissee and Alfred Rambaud, was issued in 1937 and 1938 in two different Russian translations and enjoyed great popularity in the Soviet Union.

Finally, the first of September arrived. What a happy, carefree day! No grades or homework yet, just the joy of seeing my friends and teachers and our good old school building. Everyone had grown and changed so much! Some boys had down on their upper lips, and some even had cuts from clumsy and premature attempts at shaving. The girls had new haircuts and fancy dresses. What a noisy, colorful, fun-loving crowd! How could we not forget our sadness?

