

There Once Lived a Woman
Who Tried to Kill
Her Neighbor's Baby



SCARY FAIRY TALES

LUDMILLA
PETRUSHEVSKAYA

*Selected and Translated with an Introduction by
Keith Gessen and Anna Summers*



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There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby

LUDMILLA PETRUSHEVSKAYA was born in 1938 in Moscow, where she still lives. She is the author of more than fifteen collections of prose, including the short novel *The Time: Night* shortlisted for the Russian Booker Prize in 1992, and *Svoi Krug*, a modern classic about the 1980s Soviet intelligentsia. The progenitor of the women's fiction movement in modern Russian letters, she is also a playwright whose work has been staged by leading theater companies all over the world. In 2002 she received Russia's most prestigious prize, The Triumph, for lifetime achievement.

KEITH GESSEN is the author of *All the Sad Young Literary Men* and an editor and founder of the literary magazine *n+1*. He has written about Russian literature for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*. His translation of *Voices from Chernobyl* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction in 2005.

ANNA SUMMERS holds a doctorate in Slavic literature from Harvard. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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PUBLISHER’S NOTE These selections are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Introduction

IN ONE OF THE SHORT MEMOIRS SHE'S WRITTEN OVER THE years, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya described a trip she took to Lithuania in 1973. Though part of the USSR, Lithuania was a troublesome republic—wealthier and more European than the rest of the empire, it was not a place a troublesome Soviet writer could go on official business. But Petrushevskaya wanted to make a pilgrimage to Thomas Mann's summer home (on the Baltic coast) and also meet with a literary editor, who might not know—Vilnius was far from Moscow—that her writing was banned in Russia. She invented a reason to visit a Russian city near the border, then hitchhiked the rest of the way. The year before Petrushevskaya's first husband had died at the age of thirty-two after a long illness; for the last several years of his life he was paralyzed.

The trip as she describes it is trying, difficult, exhilarating—but most of all it is a break. Wandering the early morning streets of Vilnius, she meets a woman named Yadviga, who takes her in. The two women exchange stories. Yadviga is also a widow: She moved to the capital because her house had been burned down while she was out one morning, while her daughter, a grandson, and her husband remained inside. In return, Petrushevskaya tells the widow about her husband. At the end of his life, he was so thin he looked like Jesus Christ on the cross. They cry together. Then it's time to go. "I take the tram out of town until I reach the highway," Petrushevskaya's memoir concludes. "There's not enough money for a train. Freedom. A deafening freedom after six years of hospitals and steady fighting. Ten more days of freedom before I return to my everyday life, hold in my arms my child, my savior, my treasure. Yadviga remains alone, the dry branch of a burned tree." A month later, the Lithuanian editor sends her the handsome sum of thirty-two rubles and the Lithuanian women's magazine where two of Petrushevskaya's stories had appeared in translation.

In official Soviet literature, Petrushevskaya would remain out of favor for years to come. Her stories about the lives of Russian women were too dark, too direct, and too forbidding. Even her fairy tales seemed to have an edge of despair to them. ("Who's Afraid of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya?" was the title of a 1984 essay in an emigre literary journal which asked in part why an author who was so far from explicitly political themes should be banned.) The same editor who first published Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union in *Novy Mir* in the early 1960s met with Petrushevskaya in 1968 and told her that, in her case, there was no hope. She did, however, write plays, and these fared better—only one of her most radical plays, *Love*, comparable in style and spirit to Harold Pinter's early work, premiered at the Taganka Theater in 1974—but often these productions too were shut down. Petrushevskaya scraped by with television and radio scripts, occasional journalism, editing, and translations.

Finally, the Soviet Union began to fall apart. A group of writers who had never been allowed to print before began to be published in earnest, with large circulations. "The New Robinson Crusoes" is one of Petrushevskaya's most famous stories (included in this collection), was published in *Novy Mir* alongside Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The appearance in 1987 of her first collection, *Immortal Love*, which gathered her grim, realist tales of Soviet life, many of them in the form of acidic female monologues, was a major cultural event. Petrushevskaya was then forty-nine. From that point on, she was officially a major figure in Russian letters, unrivaled in the scope and diversity of her talent. She

has won numerous awards and her stories have entered university curricula in Russia and in the West. Her seventieth birthday in 2008 was a government-sponsored celebration on a national scale. With the death of Solzhenitsyn, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Petrushevskaya is Russia's best known living writer.

She is still also a very controversial one: Many Russian readers cannot forgive the unremitting bleakness (even if it was always mixed with profound sympathy and hope) of her early work; others cannot accept that a writer who has existed so far outside the ordinary conventions of literary life—who once produced a nearly epic-length poem called *Karamzin* satirizing Karamzin's 1804 story "Poor Liza"; and who has recently been performing a one-woman cabaret while wearing an enormous hat—has achieved classic stature. The one expression that unquestionably fits her, a Russian critic wrote recently in *Novy Mir*, is an English one: "larger than life."

This collection represents a selection from one vital side of Petrushevskaya's oeuvre: Her mystical and fantastical tales. They are organized into four sections according to the cycles in which Petrushevskaya has arranged them in her Russian books. "Songs of the Eastern Slavs"—dark, surreal vignettes told in the manner of urban folk tales; "Allegories," including two apocalyptic stories, some of Petrushevskaya's best known, about the collapse of a social-political order; "Requiems," an older and gentler cycle that explores human relationships under duress and after death; and, finally, "Fair Tales"—or "real fairy tales," as Petrushevskaya calls them. From over a hundred stories we chose pieces with a common fantastic or mystical element, leaving for future translations Petrushevskaya's early realistic stories; her central masterpiece, the novel *Time Night*; and her novellas and dramatic writings. The stories in this volume were composed over the last thirty-plus years, but many of them are from the past decade. Most of them have never appeared in English.

The cycles are written in very different keys, making them difficult to classify, but a subtitle Petrushevskaya used for one of her longer fantastic tales, "The Possibilities of Menippea," points to a common source. The ancient Greek Menippus once visited Hades, and since then the satirical genre named after him has often been said to include visits to the literal or social underworld. These visits are called *nekylia*, a night journey, after Homer's term in the *Odyssey*. Classic *nekylia* describe travels to the underworld and dialogues with the dead (in the original *nekylia*, Odysseus drinks human blood so as to talk with the dead); modern *nekylia*, like *Alice in Wonderland* and "The Turn of the Screw," involve extraordinary situations like near-death experiences and borderline states. Time functions differently in these tales: travels to the underworld and other parallel realities occur outside past, present, and future and may only last a few earthly seconds, like Alice's dream.

In this collection, nearly every story is a form of *nekylia*. Characters depart from physical reality under exceptional circumstances: during a heart attack, childbirth, a major psychological shock, a suicide attempt, a car accident. Under tremendous duress, they become propelled into a parallel universe, where they undergo experiences that can only be described allegorically, in the form of a parable or fairy tale. In one of her collections, Petrushevskaya invented a name for this secondary reality: "Orchards of Unusual Possibilities." Most of the action in the stories collected here takes place in the Orchards of Unusual Possibilities. Characters find themselves in a strange place without any memory of the accident that brought them there. A middle-aged Russian man wakes up in a mental hospital in New York. Another character finds himself walking alone through the winter woods at night, searching for a child he's never seen. A girl discovers that she is standing on the side of a dark road, wearing strange clothes, without any knowledge of herself. What happens to the

characters on their journey in a strange land may be read as a dream, a nightmare caused by shock, or else as a momentous mystical transgression—Petrushevskaya makes a point of leaving room for both interpretations. In “The Fountain House,” the father of a killed girl falls asleep in the hospital, and his dream meets his daughter in a strange house where he eats a raw human heart. We are allowed to turn the screw either way and interpret the story either as a genuine mystical experience, a sacrificial descent to the underworld where the father exchanges his heart for his daughter’s life, or else simply as an account of the father’s heart attack and his hallucinations under anesthesia.

Mystery and ambiguity are at the heart of Petrushevskaya’s fairy tales: we are always inside the dream. Petrushevskaya saves her best clues to the very end, and often we, like the character, have to travel the entire journey without any knowledge of its endpoint and without any memory of the original accident. The final revelation is always somewhat ambiguous, the screw never turns all the way, and the suspense over which reality is more real is never fully broken. When Petrushevskaya finally points the way out of the Orchard of Unusual Possibilities, the question of physical reality has already lost its vital urgency for the reader and the character. The half-memories of abandoned responsibilities, of everyday existence, lose their grip. All that matters now is the enchanting journey itself, and this new unearthly world, and the people you meet there, some of them once loved but long gone and forgotten.

As Solzhenitsyn revealed to the world the insides of the massive prison camps, so Petrushevskaya described for the first time the cramped Soviet apartment on the night of a white wedding, the danger not just of sexual failure but of the mother-in-law barging in drunk. But in all her work—and in the stories in this collection in particular—Petrushevskaya has insisted on a way out. The women in the stories are mad with grief. They walk around with little matchboxes, claiming that a baby is inside (“The Cabbage-patch Mother”); they decide to destroy everything in their apartments and leave in order to thwart an imagined gremlin (“There’s Someone in the House”); they appeal to alcohol, to homeless prophets for help (“The Miracle”), to their dead mothers (“The Shadow Life”), to the sea god Poseidon. They bury their husbands in the forest, on the street before the draft board, or in the past. They consider burying themselves alongside them—and then they don’t. The greatness of Petrushevskaya lies first in her ability to convey the true, crippling power of despair, and then to find a reason to return, as she herself once returned from Lithuania.

She has described the absolute breakdown, in the postwar era, of traditional human values; she has also tried to discover what human relationships can survive. We know of no writer in any language who is working at such a pitch of emotion, with such honesty in even the smallest and shortest stories, with such a profound knowledge of people’s dreams and disappointments and consolations.

—KEITH GESSEN AND ANNA SUMMERS

Songs of the Eastern Slavs

The Arm

DURING THE WAR, A COLONEL RECEIVED A LETTER FROM HIS wife. She misses him very much, it said, and won't he come visit because she's worried she'll die without having seen him. The colonel applied for leave right away, and as it happened that just a few days earlier he'd been awarded a medal, he was granted three days. He got a plane home, but just an hour before his arrival his wife died. He wept, buried his wife, and got on a train back to his base—and then suddenly discovered he had lost his Party card. He dug through all his things, returned to the train station—all this with great difficulty—but couldn't find it. Finally he just went home. There he fell asleep and dreamed that he saw his wife, who said that his Party card was in her coffin—it had fallen out when the colonel bent over to kiss her during the funeral. In his dream his wife also told the colonel not to lift the veil from her face.

The colonel did as he was told: he dug up the coffin, opened it, and found his Party card inside. But then he couldn't resist: he lifted the covering from his wife's face. She lay there as if still alive, but there was a little worm on her left cheek. The colonel wiped away the worm with his hand, covered up his wife's face, and reburied the coffin.

Now he had very little time, and he went directly to the airfield. The plane he needed wasn't there, but then a pilot in a charred jacket pulled him aside and said he was flying to the same place as the colonel and could drop him off. The colonel was surprised that the pilot knew where he was going, but then he saw it was the same pilot who had flown him home.

“Are you all right?” asked the colonel.

“I had a little crash on the way back,” said the pilot, “but it's all right. I'll drop you off, it's on the way.”

They flew at night. The colonel sat on a metal bench running the length of the plane. In truth he was surprised the plane could fly at all. It was in terrible shape: clumps of material hung everywhere, some kind of charred stump kept rolling into the colonel's feet, and there was a strong odor of burned flesh. They soon landed, and the colonel asked the pilot if he was sure this was the right place. The pilot said he was absolutely sure.

“Why is your plane in such poor shape?” the colonel demanded, and the pilot explained that his navigator usually cleaned up, but he'd just been killed. And right away he started lugging the charred stump off the plane, saying, “There he is, my navigator.”

The plane stood in a field, and all through this field wandered wounded men. There was forest in every direction, a campfire burned in the distance, and among the burned-out cars and artillery, people were lying and sitting, others were standing, and others were milling about.

“Damn it!” the colonel yelled. “Where have you brought me? This isn't my base!”

“This is your base now,” said the pilot. “I've brought you back to where I picked you up.”

The colonel understood that his division had been surrounded and destroyed, everyone killed or wounded, and he cursed everything on earth, including the pilot, who was still messing with him.

charred stump, which he insisted on calling his navigator, and pleading with it to get up and go.

“Let’s start evacuating everyone,” ordered the colonel. “We’ll begin with the military files, then the coats of arms and the heavily wounded.”

“This plane won’t fly anymore,” the pilot noted.

The colonel drew his pistol and promised to shoot the pilot then and there for disobeying an order. But the pilot ignored him and went on trying to stand the stump on the ground, first one way, then another, saying over and over, “Come on, let’s go.”

The colonel fired his pistol, but he must have missed because the pilot kept mumbling, “Come on, come on,” to his navigator, and in the meantime the roar of vehicles could be heard, and suddenly the field was filled with a mechanized column of German infantry.

The colonel took cover in the grass as the trucks kept coming and coming, but there was neither shooting nor shouting of orders, nor did the motors stop running. Ten minutes later the column was gone, and the colonel raised his head—the pilot was still fussing with his charred stump, and over by the fire people were still lying down, sitting, walking around. The colonel stood and approached the fire. He didn’t recognize anyone—this wasn’t his division at all. There was infantry here, and artillery and God knows what else, all in torn uniforms, with open wounds on their arms, legs, stomachs. Only their faces were clean. They talked quietly among themselves. Next to the fire, her back to the colonel, sat a woman in civilian dress with a kerchief on her head.

“Who’s the senior officer here?” demanded the colonel. “I need an immediate report on the situation.”

No one moved, and no one paid any attention to the colonel when he started shooting, although when the pilot finally managed to roll his charred stump over to them, everyone helped him throw his navigator on the flames and thereby put out the fire. It became completely dark.

The colonel was shivering from the cold and began cursing again: now it would be impossible to get warm, he said—you can’t light a fire with a log like that.

And without turning around, the woman by the fire said: “Oh why did you look at my face, why did you lift my veil? Now your arm is going to wither.”

It was the voice of the colonel’s wife.

The colonel lost consciousness, and when next he woke up he was in a hospital. He was told that they’d found him in the cemetery, next to his wife’s grave, and that the arm on which he’d been lying was seriously injured, and now might have to be removed.

Revenge

THERE ONCE LIVED A WOMAN WHO HATED HER NEIGHBOR—A single mother with a small child. As the child grew and learned to crawl, the woman would sometimes leave a pot of boiling water in the corridor, or a container full of bleach, or she'd just spread out a whole box of needles right there in the hall. The poor mother didn't suspect anything—her little girl hadn't learned to walk yet, and she didn't let her out in the corridor during the winter when the floor was cold. But the time was fast approaching when her daughter would be able to leave the room on her own. The mother would say to her neighbor, "Raya, sweetie, you dropped your needles again," at which point Raya would blame her poor memory. "I'm always forgetting things," she'd say.

They'd once been friends. Two unmarried women living in a communal apartment, they had a lot in common. They even shared friends who came by, and on their birthdays they gave each other gifts. They told each other everything. But then Zina became pregnant, and Raya found herself consumed with hatred. She couldn't bear to be in the same apartment as the pregnant woman and began to come home late at night. She couldn't sleep because she kept hearing a man's voice coming from Zina's room; she imagined she heard them talking and moving about, when in fact Zina was living there alone by herself.

Zina, on the other hand, grew more and more attached to Raya. She even told her once how wonderful it was to have a neighbor like her, practically an older sister, who would never abandon her in a time of need.

And Raya did in fact help her friend sew clothes in anticipation of the newborn, and she drove Zina to the hospital when the time came. But she didn't come to pick her up after the birth, so that Zina had to stay in the hospital an extra day and ended up taking the baby home wrapped in a ragged hospital blanket that she promised to return right away. Raya explained that she hadn't been feeling well. In the weeks that followed she didn't once go to the store for Zina, or help her bathe the baby, but just sat in her room with warm compresses over her shoulders. She wouldn't even look at the baby, though Zina often took the girl to the bath or the kitchen or just out for a little walk, and kept the door to her room open all the time, as if to say: Come look.

Before the baby came, Zina learned how to use the sewing machine and began to work from home. She had no family to help her, and as for her once-kind neighbor, well, deep down Zina knew she couldn't count on anyone but herself—it had been her idea to have a child, and now she had to bear the burden. When the girl was very little, Zina could take finished clothes to the shop while the baby slept, but when the baby got a little bigger and slept less, Zina's problems began: she had to take the girl with her. Raya continued to complain about her bad joints, and even took time off from work, but Zina wouldn't dare ask her to babysit.



Meanwhile, Raya was planning the girl's murder. More and more often, as Zina carried the child through the apartment, she would notice a canister on the kitchen floor filled with what was supposed to look like water, or a steaming kettle left precariously balanced on a stool—but still she didn't suspect anything. She continued to play with her daughter just as happily as before, chirping to her, "Say *Mommy*. Say *Mommy*." It's true, though, that when leaving for the store or to drop off her work, Zina began locking the door to her room.

This infuriated Raya. One time when Zina left, the girl woke up and fell out of her crib—at least that's what it sounded like to Raya, who heard something crash to the floor in Zina's room, and then the girl started crying. Raya knew the girl didn't yet walk well on her own, and she must have been badly hurt because she was emitting terrible cries on the other side of the door. Raya couldn't bear them anymore, and finally she put on rubber gloves, poured bleach into a bucket, and began mopping the floors with it, making sure to splash as much as possible under the girl's door. The cries turned into heart-wrenching screams. Raya finished mopping, then washed everything—the bucket, the mops, the gloves—got dressed, and went to a doctor's appointment. After the doctor's, she went to a movie, walked around to some stores, and came home late.

It was dark and quiet behind the door to Zina's room. Raya watched a little bit of television and then went to bed. But she couldn't sleep. Zina was gone all night and the whole of the next day. Raya couldn't stand it anymore. She took an ax, broke down the door, and found the room covered with a thin film of dust, with dried spots of blood next to the crib, and a widening trail of blood to the door. There was no trace of the bleach. Raya washed her neighbor's floor, cleaned the room, and sat down to wait, feeling great anticipation.

Finally, after a week, Zina came back home. She said she'd buried her girl and found work on a night shift. That was all she said. Her dark and sunken eyes and her sallow, haggard skin spoke for themselves.

Raya made no attempt to console her neighbor, and life in the apartment came to a standstill. Raya watched television alone while Zina went to work nights and then slept during the day. She seemed to have gone mad from grief and hung photos of her little daughter everywhere. The inflammation of Raya's joints grew worse. She couldn't raise her arms or even walk, and the shots the doctors gave her no longer helped. In the end, Raya couldn't even make herself dinner or put water on to boil. When Zina was home she'd feed Raya herself, but she was home less and less, explaining that it was too painful for her to be there, where her daughter had died. Raya could no longer sleep because of the pain in her shoulders. When she learned that Zina was working at a hospital, she asked her for a strong painkiller, morphine if possible. Zina said she couldn't do it. "I don't smuggle drugs," she said.

"Then I need to take more of these pills," Raya said. "Give me thirty."

"No. I'm not helping you die."

"But I can't do it myself," Raya pleaded.

"You won't get off so easily," Zina said.

So with a superhuman effort, the sick woman lifted the bottle of pills with her mouth, removed the cap, and spilled its entire contents down her throat. Zina sat by the bed. Raya took her time dying. When the sun came up, Zina finally said: "Now you listen to me. I lied to you. My little girl is alive and well. She lives at a preschool, and I work there as a cleaning lady. The stuff you spilled under the

door wasn't bleach—it was baking soda. I switched the cans. The blood on the floor was from Le
~~bumping her nose when she fell out of bed. So it's not your fault. Nothing is your fault.~~

“But neither is anything my fault. We're even.”

And here, on the face of the dying woman, she saw a smile slowly dawn.

Incident at Sokolniki

EARLY IN THE WAR IN MOSCOW THERE LIVED A WOMAN named Lida. Her husband was pilot, and she didn't love him very much, but they got along well enough. When the war began he was assigned to a base near Moscow, and Lida would visit him there. One time she arrived and was told that his plane had been shot down not far from the airfield, and that the funeral was the next day.

Lida attended the funeral, where she saw three closed coffins, and then returned to her room to find a draft notice for a brigade digging antitank ditches outside the city, and off she went to dig. It was autumn before she finally returned, and she began to notice that she was being followed by a strange young man, very malnourished and pale. Lida would see him on the street and in the store where she bought potatoes with her ration card. One night her doorbell rang and there he was. "Lida, don't you recognize me?" said the man. "I'm your husband." He hadn't been buried at all, it turned out. They had buried some dirt instead of him, whereas his fall from the plane had been broken by the trees in the forest at Sokolniki, and after he'd disentangled himself, he decided not to go back to fighting.

Lida didn't ask how he'd survived these past two and a half months alone in the woods—he told her he found some civilian clothes in an abandoned building—and they began living together again. Lida was nervous the neighbors might notice, but almost everyone had already been evacuated out of Moscow, and so no one did.

Then one day her husband told her that winter was coming soon and they should go right away and bury the flight suit he'd left in the forest.

Lida borrowed a small shovel from the superintendent, and off they went to the forest. They had to take a tram to the Sokolniki station, then follow a brook deep into the woods. No one stopped them, and finally toward evening they reached a wide clearing, and at the edge of it a large pit. It was growing dark. Lida's husband told her that he was too weak to help but that it was important they cover up the pit, since he remembered now that he'd thrown his suit down there.

Lida looked into the pit and saw that, yes, something resembling a flight suit lay at the bottom. She began throwing dirt on top of it, while her husband kept hurrying her along, saying it was getting dark. She shoveled dirt into the pit for three hours, and then, looking up, saw that her husband was gone.

Lida was frightened. She searched for him, running around, then almost fell into the pit and saw that, at the bottom, the flight suit was moving. It was completely dark now, yet somehow Lida made her way out of the forest, emerging at her tram stop as the sun was coming up. She rode home, and once she finally got there she fell asleep.

And in her dream her husband came to her and said, "Thank you, Lida, for burying me."

A Mother's Farewell

THERE ONCE LIVED A YOUNG MAN NAMED OLEG WHO WAS left an orphan when his mother died. All he had left was his older sister, for though his father was still alive, that man turned out not to be his real father. Oleg's real father, as he learned when he was going through his mother's papers after her funeral so he could know her better, was some man his mother had met when she was young and married. In the papers he found a letter from this man saying he already had a family and had no right to abandon his two children for the sake of some future child he wasn't even sure was his. The letter had a date on it. Shortly before Oleg was born, in other words, his mother tried to leave her husband and marry this other man, meaning that things really were as Oleg's sister had once hinted, cruelly and vengefully, in the middle of an argument.

Oleg kept going through the papers and soon found a black folder filled with photographs of his mother in various stages of undress, including completely nude. They were staged photos, as if his mother was performing, and even when nude she wore a long scarf. All of this came as a great blow to Oleg. He'd heard from relatives that as a young woman his mother had been known for her beauty, but the photographs showed a woman already in her mid-thirties, in good shape but not very pretty, merely well-preserved.

After this Oleg, who was sixteen, dropped out of school, dropped out of everything, and for two years, until the day he went off to the army, did nothing, listened to no one, ate what was in the refrigerator, left whenever his father and sister came home, and returned when they were asleep. In the end he collapsed mentally and physically, and his father used his influence to set up an appointment with a medical commission that would declare the boy a schizophrenic and put him on government subsidies and, most important, keep him out of the army. But just before Oleg was to appear before the commission, his father died in his sleep, and everything fell apart. Oleg's sister quickly traded her share of the apartment for an apartment of her own, and left Oleg in his room by himself.

Soon he was drafted.



In the army, Oleg was involved in an incident. He had been placed as a lookout on a mountain peak that an escaped prisoner was supposed to be crossing. This man had been on the loose for a month and had already managed to kill five people, including a young woman, and was now about to travel over the only part of the mountain that led away from the prison zone and into the European part of Russia. He wasn't supposed to pass this way for some time, but the ambush was set up in advance, three days in advance, because who knew what kind of transport the prisoner might get his hands on, and maybe he'd get there faster? The ambush consisted of Oleg, a sergeant, and three other soldiers. They sat on a large rock, their machine guns beside them, and took turns at the watch.

It was during Oleg's watch that a man appeared on the trail. He looked like the man whose photograph they'd been shown. Oleg shot him, but it turned out to be the wrong man. He had also been a prisoner once but had served his time and was now going back—although, it's true, he didn't have a permit to move around from place to place. As for the wanted man, he was soon caught on a nearby trail.

Oleg was treated well by the army. They declared him temporarily insane, placed him in a hospital, then discharged him altogether as unfit to serve—and this turned out to be a good deal, since the wife of the man he'd shot kept trying to find the soldier who'd killed her husband when all he'd done was attempt to leave the area without a permit, the poor wretch.



Oleg returned home. He was almost completely bald now, his teeth had fallen out one after the other, he had nothing to eat, nothing to do, and no education to help him find a job. But then out of nowhere his sister appeared, took everything under her control, got Oleg into a vocational program, cleaned up his room, and provided him with groceries and money, even though she wasn't his real sister and had never betrayed any affection for him before.

One night as she was getting ready to go she said offhandedly to Oleg: "You shouldn't believe what I said that time about our mother, you know. Our father was a very suspicious man, that was all. He was a very difficult person and could have driven anyone insane."

Then she left.

As soon as she was gone Oleg took out the suitcase with his mother's papers. This time all he found was an envelope with photos of her funeral. The folder where the nude photos had been now contained a single sheet of crumpled old black paper, which dissolved into dust as soon as he tried to touch it.

Oleg began rifling through the papers. Everywhere he looked were letters from his mother to his father, the father he'd grown up with, speaking of love, of faithfulness, of Oleg's resemblance to his father. Oleg cried all night, and the next morning he got up to wait for his sister to tell her how he'd lost his mind when he was sixteen, and imagined some terrible things, and even killed a man because of it—for the man he'd shot didn't look at all like the photograph of the real criminal.

But his sister never came. She must have forgotten about him, and that was all right because he had soon forgot about her, too—he was busy with his new life. He finished the vocational program, went to college, got married, had children.

And what was funny was that both he and his wife had dark eyes and dark hair, but their two sons were blue-eyed and blond, just like their grandmother, Oleg's dead mother.

One time his wife suggested they visit his mother's grave. It took a long time to find it: the cemetery was old and the gravestones crowded together, and also, on his mother's grave, right in the middle, there stood another, smaller head-stone.

"That must be my father," said Oleg, who had not attended his father's funeral.

“No, look,” said his wife, “it’s your sister.”

Oleg was horrified—how could he have neglected his sister like this?—and he bent down to read the inscription. It really was his sister.

“Except the dates are wrong,” he said. “My sister came to visit me much later than that, after I came home from the army. Remember I told you how she got me back on my feet? She literally saved my life. I was young, and small things were always sending me over the edge.”

“That can’t be,” his wife said. “They never get the dates wrong. When did you come back from the army?”

And they began to argue, standing there at the foot of his mother’s unkempt grave. The wild grass which had grown considerably over the summer months, reached to their knees until, at long last, they bent down and started clearing it.

Allegories

Hygiene

ONE TIME THE DOORBELL RANG AT THE APARTMENT OF the R. family, and the little girl ran to answer it. A young man stood before her. In the hallway light he appeared to be ill, with extremely delicate, pink, shiny skin. He said he'd come to warn the family of an immediate danger: There was an epidemic in the town, an illness that killed in three days. People turned red, they swelled up, and then mostly, they died. The chief symptom was the appearance of blisters, or bumps. There was some hope of surviving if you observed strict personal hygiene, stayed inside the apartment, and made sure there were no mice around—since mice, as always, were the main carriers of the disease.

The girl's grandparents listened to the young man, as did her father and the girl herself. Her mother was in the bath.

"I survived the disease," the young man said simply, and removed his hat to reveal a bald scalp covered with the thinnest layer of pink skin, like the foam atop boiling milk. "I survived," he went on, "and because of this I'm now immune. I'm going door to door to deliver bread and other supplies to people who need them. Do you need anything? If you give me the money, I'll go to the store—and bring a bag, too, if you have one. Or a shopping cart. There are long lines now in front of the stores, but I'm immune to the disease."

"Thank you," said the grandfather, "but we're fine."

"If your family gets sick, please leave your doors open. I've picked out four buildings—that's all I can handle. If any of you should survive, as I did, you can help me rescue others, and lower corpses out."

"What do you mean, lower corpses out?" asked the grandfather.

"I've worked out a system for evacuating the bodies. We'll throw them out into the street. But we need large plastic bags; I don't know where to get those. The factories make double-layered plastic sheets, which we could use, although I don't have the money. You could cut those sheets with a hand knife, and the material will seal back together automatically to form a bag. All you really need is a hand knife and double-layered plastic."

"Thank you, but we're fine," repeated the grandfather.

So the young man went along the hall to the other apartments like a beggar, asking for money. As the R. family closed the door behind him, he was already ringing their neighbors' bell. The door opened a little, on its chain, leaving just a crack, so the young man was forced to lift his hat and tell his story to the crack. The R. family heard the neighbor reply abruptly, but apparently the young man didn't leave, for there were no footsteps. Another door opened slightly: someone else wanted to hear his story. Finally a laughing voice said: "If you have some money already, run and get me ten bottles of vodka. I'll pay you back."

They heard footsteps, and then it was quiet.

"When he comes back," said the grandmother, "he should bring us some bread and condensed milk and some eggs. And soon we'll need more cabbage and potatoes."

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