

Italian Lessons

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Translated from the Russian by Lisa Hayden

<A>Chapter 1

All that remained of Malya was the bakleva.

Nobody knew what that was. But it was delicious.

Run one hundred walnuts (expensive, of course, but it's a holiday, what can you do?) through the meat grinder. The iron grinder—so heavy—leaves a telltale indentation on the stool, and the handle turns with a ravenous crunch that kicks back all the way to the shoulder. It has to be taken apart at least three times when you grind meat. Sinews wind around its torturing knives. But the walnuts go through well. Quickly.

Rich, sweet rolls at nine kopecks each—two and a half of them.

Dark-complexioned, almost square, their pudgy sides stuck together. Brownd, varnished backs. If they cost ten kopecks, they have raisins. The unused half goes in the mouth, but not all at once: there's dallying and pinching off, a little at a time. Some people love them with butter, but that's obviously too much. Death to the arteries. The cat comes into the kitchen, teeming with her own strange food addictions: green peas, chamomile tea, and once she suffered terribly in the morning after stealthily drinking a shot of port wine. When she gets a whiff of raisin, she yowls as demandingly as an opposition member on Bolotnaya Square. You have to share, but fine, those rich rolls are even more delicious without the raisins. They don't make them like that anymore, which is too bad. And the cat died long ago.

The rolls need to be crumbled by hand, so it's important they're day-old, a little dried out. It's even more important to remember not to wolf them down in the morning with tea. That's why they have to go in the bread box, out of harm's way. Gluttony, lust, greed, wrath, sadness, melancholy, vanity, pride. Prelate Ignatius Bryanchaninov. Clanking his sword and shield of holiness. Forgive me, O Lord, for I am a worm, I am a beast and no man, a reproach of men. Nice to meet you. My pleasure. Protestants, by the way, replace melancholy with sloth, which explains a lot. A whole lot. For the Christian who is forbidden melancholy is no brother to the Christian who is forbidden idleness. And a legion of them have been cut in two, tormented, and beaten in that name.

Amen.

Of course the rolls were based on conditions. A later invention. Someone else's scrawls on top of a strict canonical text. Marginalia. Initially there was just honey, walnuts, and anise seeds. Nutmeg. The rolls drifted in thanks to exiles and of course they weren't even rolls but bread. Eternal poverty. The fear of hunger sprouted right through the DNA. Supermarkets in the Mediterranean region are filled with dried breads of all shapes and sizes to this day. Prudent peasants. We'll eat up everything, brush even the tiniest little crumb into a calloused palm. But it was even worse for them because they were refugees without the slightest hope for alms. What kind of rolls could they have? They poured all the scraps they could find or scrounge into the filling. They were happy for the upcoming holiday. They prepared. Got excited.

Was it Mama who thought up adding rolls? Maybe Mama's mama? Did she talk about that? Do you remember?

She looks away. Doesn't say anything. Again.

Fine. Then let's move on to the rose petal preserves.

At one time, it was basically impossible to get. All you could do was acquire yourself some southern relations, wreck your nerves and make your blood boil with all the hassle of their tall tales, heart-rending rifts, exultant shrieks, and the sudden arrivals of a whole mountain village mob of them (on Monday, without warning, at 6:30 in the morning). And our Zhuzhunochka got married, you remember Zhuzhuna, don't you? I don't remember her and I want nothing to do with her! But then—from the clothes they brought, from the bursting suitcases—they extract, gently muttering, the sought-after little jar. Ground rose petals with sugar. Smooth, pungent bitterness. The taste and aroma of a woman. But, ohmygod, was it really impossible to just send a package?!

You only need a tablespoon of rose preserves, no more because . . .

Damn. The phone.

Yes, hello. No, you have it completely wrong. In your case, three million units is more appropriate, not a million and a half. Don't have it? Then you'll have to do it twice, million and a half each. You know where. I sympathize.

Yes, goodbye.

So, the roses. I have to confess right off that I have no southern blood or relations whatsoever. I'm so Russian it's even unpleasant. Pure alcohol, completely unusable for anything. Even for disinfection. For drinking or treating a wound, it needs to be diluted with life-giving water. Otherwise you'll burn everything all to hell. In its 96-percent guise, alcohol's only appropriate for sterilization. It's unpleasant to acknowledge yourself as sterile. It's unpleasant to acknowledge yourself at all. Though a drop of other blood would have given my life a totally different meaning. But no.

Allow me to introduce myself: Ivan Sergeevich Ogarev.

No, I'm not related to that guy and I'm no pal of the other one.

Ivan Sergeevich is just an empty remembrance, too.

I'm a doctor.

Nothing but a doctor.

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People put cherries in bakleva, too. Well, actually, it's cherry preserves and that's a special kind, too: without pits and without syrup, practically dry, dark, smooth cherries snugly filling a liter jar. All exactly alike. People removed the pits with a hairpin. Remember those? Wire bent into the English letter U, a little wavy, with tiny blobs on the sharp ends, so as not to injure delicate skin. Elbows up, a birdlike tilt of the head, quick motions of unseeing fingers arranging a knot of hair at the nape. A braid. A part. Curls along a tender low forehead and in the back, on the neck. A quick, incomprehensible question through laughing hairpins clenched in the teeth. Only the woman you're in love with is more beautiful than a woman fixing her hair. It's too bad they all have short hair now, the little fools.

Malya's hair was long. Malya herself *was*.

Pitting cherries for a long time is painstaking work, it's better to do it with someone else, even with two people, but it's messy and you're in it up to your ears either way, the juice won't come out for anything; go on, don't hang around among the women constantly, you're a boy after all; what do you mean it won't come out, when it washes out beautifully, my dear? Well, you know, take half a teaspoon of citric acid . . .

I'm trudging along and I keep glancing back, purposely dragging my feet, raking my sandals over sand, dry pine needles, and sticky unseen ghosts of future white mushrooms—it's someone else's dacha near Moscow, the fragile wooden beams of childhood past.

I'm a boy. They kick me out. They deny me.

I already understand this is a tragedy but don't yet suspect it will always be like this.

They place the gutted cherries in a basin—it's large, copper, with a wooden handle—and boil them using a method new to Agafya Mikhailovna: no water added. Remember in *Anna Karenina*? No, of course not, why would you remember . . . Feminine society on the terrace, sewing baby undershirts, knitting swaddling clothes. A pregnant Kitty. The "Anke" cake Sophia Tolstoy made. Lemons, butter, hatred: right from the cellar, so they're thoroughly chilled. Did poor Nikolai Bogdanovich Anke, the sweetest doctor, professor at Moscow University's department of pharmacology, general medicine, and toxicology, and privy councilor b. in Moscow into a merchant family, December 6, 1803, and d. in that same city, December 17, 1872, know his cake recipe would acquire such horrible immortality? Lyubov Alexandrovna, maiden name (ah, that music of illegitimate passion!) Islavina, married name Bers (ah, that stale prose of matrimony!). Dearest, eternally pregnant spouse of Andrei Yevstafyevich Bers, also a doctor.

Colleagues. A venomous fraternity.

Your point of view won't stand up to any criticism, old fellow. Your practice is a pain in my ass. Your success is the result of the deplorable stupidity of the public, which trusts the most valuable thing it has—personal health—to ignorant charlatans. You're an abysmal diagnostician. But when your turn comes to die and you take your dose of earthly suffering in sips (before and after and instead of food), we'll all gather at your deathbed, each and every last one of us, put our

bald heads together and flap our tattered wings, then we'll provide treatment, selflessly, devoutly, not hoping for anything, and praying anyway, and taking no payment—no, no, we take no recompense from our own—we kneel for our own, free of charge, because there are too few of us already, so very few genuine, chosen priests of the true god. So few doctors.

Thirty minutes. Thirty-five.

You resuscitate, colleague, I no longer can.

Ribs broken in the name of a life that's slipping away. Stilled heart. Black circles. Icy sweat along the back. Medical treatment of desperation. No vital signs whatsoever. The brain was dead before we even started.

Resuscitate anyway!

Too late. He died.

Roasted on a spit for an incorrect diagnosis, killed by a furious, ignorant crowd, poisoned by a gulp of *Vibrio cholerae*, infected by a patient, burnt to a crisp, blocked with cholesterol plaque, gashed, worn to tatters by overwhelming responsibility.

He served until he wore out, like a copper cauldron.

Away with the haloes, colleagues! Yet another doctor has passed away.

What the hell got into me yet again? Forgive me.

And so, Nikolai Bogdanovich Anke. Anke's cake. A recipe dictated to Lyubov Alexandrovna Bers, mother-in-law of Tolstoy (Lev Nikolayevich, needless to say—the other two Tolstoys don't count). She wrote it down, her black tongue extending from zeal. What's wrong with your tongue, Lyubochka? Charcoal. Birch charcoal. She'd use silver tweezers to take it from a special jewel case, and swallow, gagging: a crunch on the teeth, anthracite crumbs, nature's oxygen cycle, suffering black eyes, thinness. We'll all be diamonds again one day. In

another million years or more. But why the charcoal, anyway, what's this strange infatuation? Eight children. A doting old husband. Morning sickness. Never-ending morning sickness. Charcoal is only a weaker version of the non-norm: others near their time gobble up raw plaster, brittle pencil lead, and even clay. My mother confessed once that she ate soap when she was expecting me: glycerin, almost transparent, and green as bottle glass. One single cake, almost round, the edges smoothed like a pebble. Someone's gift. Imported. The era of widespread deficits. She skimped on it so it lasted her whole term. Scraped it, pressing gently with her front teeth. Gnawed it away like a mouse. She was getting something started within herself, building, generating. It's interesting: where did that soap go, what turned into me? Channels for the blood? Skeleton? A soul that's soapy, disloyal, and salty to the taste?

If only you knew how detritus can grow.

The preserves for bakleva are the same as in *Anna Karenina*: no water, also prepared using Anke's recipe.

You don't like Tolstoy?

You're deranged.

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My mother made an entirely different kind of preserves: it was cherries, too, but they were sour, from around Moscow. Cherries from the Vladimir area, six rubles a bucket. Red, sickly sweet slurry with occasional cherries sealed in one-liter and half-liter jars. That's for winter, don't take it! I only got the froth. Pink and spongy, like soft, rapidly cooling pumice. Remember? Oh, they're going to lap that right up with tea! My father suggested waiting for dinner, not being

greedy, what kind of piglet are you, anyway? Go wash your hands, you lazybones. You'll never amount to anything. He'd come home from work, sit for a long time in the bedroom with his pants down around his ankles, staring at the wall, living through some of his unforeseen, unfathomable, adult failures. Then he'd go to the kitchen and eat faceted, brown buckwheat groats, nibbling at a round of soft, pink, "doctor's" sausage, instead of bread. They didn't give me sausage like that. I mean they gave it to me, of course, but you're not supposed to eat sausage like bread. Or instead of bread, either. Just with bread. Only a few toys, shabby books, pants I'd outgrown even before another payday reached the beloved cashier's window at my father's factory.

The ascetic, verified tools of a Soviet childhood.

Did you do your homework?

Not yet.

Well, what kind of slowpoke are you, huh? I just don't know who you take after. Did you buy bread?

I stood stock-still, with scraped knees, a balled-up bag in my fist, worn-out brown sandals from Children's World, and an expectation that change would be handed out. I was too small and pitiful to protest.

What are you waiting for? Mon-n-ney? Any fool can do it with money. You go buy it without money. Crybaby.

Why was he doing that? Was he building character in me? Reaping my fate?

It's awful to even say how much I hated him.

But that's nothing. Nothing's changed since.

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Then we mix the nuts with the crumbled sweet rolls. Add two cups of sugar and half a cup of oil. Of course you need olive oil, but who'd heard of that then? So sunflower oil. It was sold in glass bottles. It cost a ruble, five kopecks. No, maybe where you lived it was ninety-nine kopecks. It was a ruble, five, for us at the corner food store. Cool plaster arches, the saleswomen's monumental marble busts. Too majestic to create a scene. Matrons. To the counter first, then to the cashier for a receipt, then back to the counter. Shuttling all around. Half a loaf each of white and dark. Two hundred grams of the lower-fat butter. Count your change twice before leaving the cashier. Money got very tight as soon as I started school, and my parents' wages and advances just didn't tally, it was like some natal chart created by a charlatan novice astrologer. Even kopeck-level Soviet prices didn't save my mother from endless humiliating calculations. I could manage my heavily armed pockets very well, too: ten-kopeck coins, twos, and, very, very rarely, the bulky fifty. Blessed are those unable to calculate, for they live in earthly prosperity and never even think about the kingdom of heaven. So you just go through the eye of a needle. They feed us pretty well here anyway.

At first, the coins accumulated for a long time in a brown Indian Coffee can with a big-breasted, unhappy houri on its tin side. It was expensive. Someone had treated us at some point. We drank it on big holidays, delicately adding condensed milk to the cup. When the holidays were over, the tin remained—like a symbol, like a reminder—and became a temporary haven for small change. How could you throw away a treasure like that? My mother even washed out plastic bags in soapy water and dried them for a long, long time, greasy and covered in heavy drops. In respectable homes people saved up ten-kopeck pieces, casting them with a jingle into a

Soviet Champagne bottle, observing their level of prosperity and self-respect rise through the thick glassy greenness.

The most patient collected up to the neck: one hundred rubles.

We couldn't even dream of that.

The coffee can never even filled up halfway. My mother was always diving in, shaking her head guiltily. Fine. Don't buy butter, honey. We'll get by. Just kefir. My father never condescended to household management. Basically, he never condescended to their poverty, which was as inexplicable and odd as a curse. After all, he was apparently somebody important at his factory, an engineer, then (not for long, but still) even chief engineer. He had to be earning decently.

And so we lived poorly, despite overall abundance. No, that's not right: we lived poorly and badly. My mother was silent. My father was annoyed. I was growing. There were no pies in our house, either, just balls of fried dough with fruit paste, taken out of a big vat at the cafeteria. Four kopecks apiece. Rubbery dough. A little gob of brownish filling. Greasy paper you could read through, as if through incredible, invisible mica. A means for turning even the most trivial text into a genuine treasure.

And so: nuts, two cups of sugar, crumbled sweet rolls, half a cup of vegetable oil, one egg. Mix thoroughly. Add cherries and rose preserves. Mix again, first with a spoon, then with hands that don't believe their luck. Crumbly, sweet rubble. It comes together a little in your fingers. It's practically impossible to hold back and not lick your fingers. I think I already said that at one time people added dried orange peel instead of cherries, and anise and nutmeg instead of rose preserves. A garrulous clear-eyed woman would laugh, break off a little piece, stealthily stuff it into the mouths of grubby, eternally hungry children, a jumble of her own and someone

else's. And the sun pushing through a patchwork of crowded rooftops didn't differentiate, either, when caressing the warm tops of everyone's heads.

What's left here? The dough. It's the simplest thing, not even worth writing down. Egg, a little flour, smooth green oil in the palm of a cupped hand. White wine from a heavy bottle warmed all day. A pinch of baking soda in fingers that are still sweet and clumsy. Roll it out into a thin layer, make it into a roulade, place it close to the heart of the oven, where the heat's the evenest, the pain's the strongest, and the ripeness is darkest. Keep there until golden-brown.

Know that it will never let go. Never pass. Never go stale, just dry out slowly, week after week, year after year, without losing either a molecule of sweetness or a grain of grief. And then the clear-eyed woman and the dark-complexioned children will appear again, and a sun that has no equals anywhere on earth will muss your hair with its big hand.

It will never pass, Malya.

You know that. You always knew. This will be forever.

Do all of you think I know how to cook? No, I don't know how.

Nothing but this bakleva.

Even when he was little, they called him Ivan, his full name, no nicknames. Never anything else. Ivan-you-pawn, go fetch a swan, get off the lawn, and now be gone! Disgusting. They were raising a true person. More specifically, it was Ivan's father raising him, stuffing him like a Christmas goose with all the things he thought were rational and edible. Ivan's mother kept silent more than she spoke. She was nobody: slight and whitish. And the apartment around her quietly became overgrown with a slight, whitish dust. His mother would run a finger through it, drawing a bright, fluid, almost living, brown stripe along a polished surface. Then she'd drop her hand as if she'd tired, perhaps leaving an unfinished letter of the alphabet or a secret unknown sign on the sideboard.

All for nothing.

Everything truly was for nothing: cleaning up, moving a muscle, or living.

An apartment (three rooms, sturdy and light, like his father) where half the windows stared at a railroad branch line. And so—sometimes during the day, sometimes at night, but somehow always unexpectedly—the trains cried out and neared, desperately, as if they'd been wounded. His mother shuddered as if she were waking up for a short time and then, puzzled, went quiet again, both inside and outside. The largest of the rooms belonged completely to Ivan's father. His office. That was funny. A cautious quiet—fragile and insecure, like a Christmas tree ornament—settled in at the apartment when his father was working (on what? why?). His mother walked around on tiptoe, slinking slightly, shushing her son, the trains, and even the tea kettle that incautiously came to a boil on the stove. Some tea, Seryozhenka? The office door kept silent. Sighing, his mother would carry the tray away to the kitchen and set it on the table, trying not to jingle anything. Cup, saucer, bone china, it was unclear how it had drifted into their house. It was only for his father. Everyone else drank out of pottery. Sugar bowl. A

ramekin with those same cherry preserves; it looked like a slowly clotting wound. Plain “Jubilee” cookies fanned out like cards on a saucer. His mother called them little cookies. Want a little cookie, honey? She’d catch Ogarev by the arm, all small and clumsy, and press him to herself. Shh! Please don’t make noise. Papa’s working.

Who the hell knows what he was doing in there. An ordinary factory engineer.

Suffering? Imagining? Inventing?

Objects just as mysterious and inanimate as his father lived in the office, too. There were kettlebells in one corner and a completely empty desk in another. A photograph hung over the desk: it was black-and-white, wavy, and pinned right to the wallpaper with ordinary thumbtacks. One had little rust spots. The photograph showed the steppe. Just the steppe: bare, cheerless, and lined in the middle by a road just as bare and cheerless, drawing the gaze beyond an unseen horizon. An exercise in perspective. He must have looked at it for hours. Thinking. Remembering. What kind of steppe was this? Why did he keep it right in front of himself? Pa, what is that? His father pushed him aside without stopping, not noticing, as if he were a pesky tree limb. He kept walking. A daybed huddled in the office, too; it was aging and unattractive, bashfully attempting to pull a fuzzy black-and-white checked blanket over itself. Maybe his father just slept here? Hit the sack, as they said in the army.

Nobody knew. Asking was useless.

Ogarev was strictly forbidden from entering the office. His father’s prohibitions crossed the world in the most varied, sometimes unthinkable ways, like the red laser lines in a fantastic security system. If you so much as move, you graze that invisible, sharp tripwire and it immediately starts wailing from all sides, shouting, and striking with an open palm, bluntly and frightfully. Spanking children was acceptable: it was still acceptable as punishment, for the

edification of descendants, to please the forefathers. Girls were granted a certain leniency, the first of many gender-based privileges. They weren't particularly thrashed, either because they truly were pitied or because that right was left to the future husband, for later, as dessert. Ogarev was a boy. His father could have even killed him just a few hundred years ago. He had the full right. Eradicating a flaw. Sowing virtue.

Who wouldn't have been horrified at the thought of having to relive one's childhood and would have thus preferred death?

Blessed Augustine.

Meaning that one might say Ogarev was lucky.

After letting loose a slap, his father would bend—sturdy cheekbones shaded with dark stubble, straight nose, brows as fluffy as a girl's. Sable. As handsome as if he were on a poster. He'd ask: you understand what that's for? It was simpler to nod, agree, and jump through yet another burning hoop with his eyes squeezed shut. Otherwise a moral would follow the slap. His father would place him between his knees, you can't move, can't make a peep—look at me, I said, don't turn away—and concisely, for about forty minutes, start in about responsibility, duty, the rights and obligations of each member, you'll kick the bucket like some homeless person, and when I was your age. Ogarev kept quiet, knitting his brows and waiting for everything to finally be over. He took it. They both took it of course. His father didn't believe in positive reinforcement. Praising a child would only ruin him. Did you understand what I said? Then go. You'll thank me when you grow up. Ogarev would extricate himself from the iron captivity of the knees, subdued but not tamed. Grow up! Yes. He definitely wanted that. But not at all so he could say thank you.

His mother never punished him but—like his father—never praised him, either. She was quiet, incorporeal, and affectionate. She shone with his father's reflected light, like the moon. Seryozhenka, are you tired? Seryozhenka, are you working late again today? Seryozhenka, will you have some supper? Ogarev jealously wormed his way in, butting the top of his head against his mother's palm, like a half-starved cat—and me, what about me!—and she'd stroke his head absent-mindedly, without thinking, not noticing. She pushed aside the tattered *Doctor Aibolit* and building blocks he extended toward her.

Hold on, honey. Let's not bother Papa.

She worked at the post office. She sat there every other day, as if she were hiding, behind a wooden partition so that even when visitors leaned in they saw only the thin line of the parting in her light, curly, long, and iridescent hair. Young hair, like a theater and cinema actress's. What an amazing color! Do you dye it yourself, Anna Ivanovna? Or at the salon?

His mother would lift her long face, as pale as if it were stearin. Colorless eyes, limp mouth, soft bulldog-like jowls—everything sagged, relentlessly aspiring downward. Even at the age when all moms are fairytale princesses, Ogarev knew his mother was ugly. A callous word. Very callous. His mother bent over her receipts, slouching again, and the inappropriate question about hair color hung in the air: she hadn't made even the slightest attempt at self-beautification and every plain woman knows, after all, that sometimes even the most pitiful efforts are enough to at least mollify people, if not God. At least people.

But . . . no, neither lipstick, nor powder, nor compassion for herself.

Nothing feminine.

It was when Malya appeared that Ogarev saw eye shadow up close for the first time. Smooth little case, like ebony. Quiet click. Mirror. Delicate little brushes. Round little pans in

different colors. Like watercolors, for painting. “Neva,” do you remember the “Neva” set? The coveted “Leningrad.” Only they’re better. If you touch carefully with a finger, a thin pearlescent dust stays on the fingertip. As if you’d stroked a living butterfly. Mourning cloak. Peacock butterfly. Cabbage butterfly. Red Admiral. What red admiral? Ah! The black and brown one, with the red? No, we didn’t call it “admiral,” it was a king. Malya tore herself away from the mirror for a second and tossed up her hands joyfully. Oh, it’s my palette! And I’d been looking for that. Where’d you find it? He pointed silently at a dressing table that looked more like an overturned circus wagon. Little jars, little vials, little tubes, ribbons. Torn lace. A plush reddish cat, almost strangled by innumerable necklaces. A kingdom of things that were called “little,” to show affection. A happy chaotic mess. One of the jewelry boxes loudly sang the lambada, choking with embarrassment when the lid was opened. Malya laughed as she stuck a hand into the very heart of the tacky little tune to grope for an escaped earring, aha, so that’s where you are! She put it hurriedly in her warm earlobe, shaking her head. Pretty, isn’t it? No, toss it back. Wherever you want. I mislaid the second one somewhere anyway.

So that’s what it’s called: a palette.

His mother had nothing like that. She didn’t laugh, didn’t use makeup, didn’t even smell like anything. Didn’t wear rings or earrings or any other jewelry. Nothing. Then again, his father never gave her any gifts. Malya, though, gasped in elation—oh boy!—and couldn’t peel herself away from shop windows for hours. Cheap little plastic clip earrings. Black pearls in white gold. Handmade, homespun little wooden things. Everything she touched became beautiful. Alive. But his mother up and cut her hair at thirty. Short, even shorter than a boy cut. Her face, which was lifeless anyway, seemed to slam shut like those of the unsightly wayside saints who once guarded all Europe’s crossroads. Only several days later did his father notice. He took a close

look, winced, and shrugged. Didn't say anything. He, as it happened, was handsome: broad-shouldered and strapping, with his brown hair combed back like some socialist realist hero, one of its wings falling on the broad, bright forehead of a proportioned, honest face. He looked like a genuine hero. And a genuine shithead.

In the morning, he'd lift the round kettlebells in his office before breakfast, bare to the waist, working his muscles, and grunting "heh."

A sleek young boar.

Ogarev's mother shuddered each time a kettlebell thudded to the floor and Ogarev would daydream that this big metal blob weighing one pood would break through the floor and fall downstairs to the neighbors' apartment, smashing furniture, light fixtures, and hard-to-find crystal, so the neighbors would call the police and his father would be jailed, not for too long, about ten years, which would be plenty to grow up and just catch his breath. But there were no downstairs neighbors, only noiseless rats that scurried among joists overgrown with dust and cobwebs. Their apartment was on the first floor. Nobody would ever arrest his father, a communist, a steamship, and a pacesetter. He wasn't going anywhere.

Utter hopelessness. The pits.

His father would come into the kitchen with a towel around his neck, sweaty shaggy clumps under his arms, and sweatpants drooping on his powerful fleshy ass. Even the hair on his chest lay like a sturdy, proud eagle made from felt. He would toss his son a quick, contemptuous glance, with no indulgence, no compassion—they competed like adults. Always. What're you staring at, you wimp? Blowing off your exercises again? His bustling mother would take eggs off the stove, scraping a fork on the iron skillet to portion them out on plates. Worn-out slippers without backs, a flannelette robe with pockets into which she casually stuck everything, as if

they were rubbish bins: little papers picked up off the floor, apple cores, sad communal trash.

She was about five years older than his father, but it seemed like twenty.

How they'd contrived to get married was pretty much incomprehensible. Where, when, how? Of course Malya would have found out immediately. But it never even occurred to Ogarev to ask. Ma, tell me how you and Papa met. A typical kid question, cozy, for an evening, a blanket tucked in all around, I made it home, I'm not it! But his mother only came in for a second every evening, leaning over without sitting down, hastily pecking his forehead. She was hurrying to the next room, to his father.

Her steps, a light switch clicking, and then the live yellow stripe under the closed door would disappear.

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Sparrows bellow in the mornings outside the windows.

Back in the fifties, it wasn't even outskirts here: just a couple of worthless villages entwined by a deserted dirt road as if by an umbilical cord, a wood, a bend in the Moscow River, floodplains, and quiet little dachas. But Moscow appeared suddenly, piling on from all sides, like firm dough protruding from a pot: they didn't even resettle the little villages, but scattered them, as if they'd blown them off the map, and in their place there arose first a factory—a sound one with four buildings—and then around it, as if around a medieval citadel, (obeying, by the way, the exact same measured laws common to all mankind), there crept, in expanding concentric circles, first clamorous barracks, then the Khrushchev-era's strong, five-storey brick buildings. Shortly thereafter, it was as if an infrastructure arose on its own, attracted by living people, and then the entire, exact same ancient human way of life continued hiding behind that crunchy foreign word. Only instead of shop stalls, refreshment stands, and traders of potions, there arose

stores, kindergartens, and medical clinics, all brand-new, white as sugar, and smelling deliciously of cool, damp plaster, both inside and out.

Journeyman set off—waddling, self-respecting and important—along fresh sidewalks but kept turning off so they could trample convenient paths across young lawns, leading right to a bus stop or state-run liquor store. Primacy of reason over aesthetics. Klavka! You going to the community center tonight? You bet!

The district was built all at once and settled all at once, too, primarily by out-of-town temporary workers who soon paired off, obeying Party and body: firstly, they acquired fitting descendants for themselves, then some hard-won and earned (in the literal sense) square meters of living space. The men worked side by side with their peers in factory workshops, the women and their peers pushed in lines; they held weddings, made scenes and divorced, and made themselves at home in the capital, breaking themselves in with every hour and every step, as they polished themselves. They were already giving birth to native Muscovites. Yes. We done made it.

By 1969, when it was Ogarev's turn to come into the world, the district had already become completely sedate, matured, and acquired itself a thin fatty layer of its own intelligentsia. After gobbling up and digesting that slice of land, Moscow crept further away, toward Leningrad, muttering indistinctly. It turned out to be only five Metro stops to the center. Convenient. Close. Whether if you want to go shopping at GUM or go to the Kremlin. On top of that, it was a five-minute walk to the nearest kindergarten and the school's right over there, around the corner.

They didn't even walk Ogarev to school or kindergarten (not that anybody walked anybody anywhere) so this was the best time of day, completely free, especially in the spring.

First time wearing shorts that year; a chill biting at still-pale winter knees, tall socks, satchel, the sticky little peelings from poplar buds. The soles of his shoes smacked at the sidewalk: it was a fresh, joyful, and very spring-like sound. Childhood's best memories. Complete solitude.

Ogarev didn't notice right away when everything began growing dilapidated and covered in a web of cracks that initially went unseen, but then entire layers suddenly started falling off. Huge, colorful ones. The first to disappear were his mother's happy, young friends who used to gather for tea. In reality, they were in the kitchen, stealthily treating themselves to vodka, relishing just a little until their cheeks reddened, and then they'd sing in lovely, doleful voices about how a young Cossack was strolling along the Don River, strolling along the Don River. Instead of a Cossack, though, Ogarev imagined a costly ox, a young costly ox, with a surprised Georgian accent, vakh! Wow! Georgians at a nearby little street market sold completely unimaginable cherries, red and black, as if they were polished, for eight rubles a kilo. Small and spellbound, Ogarev would stand by the counter for a long time: how could someone eat beauty like that? In the winter, the Georgians shivered and huddled over glass boxes that looked like aquariums. Mandarin oranges replaced the cherries and moved into the aquariums, their warm, reddish sides shining indistinctly and softly through the sweaty glass. A candle beamed just as warmly in each box, breathing out a small, festive, and completely human warmth. The sad Georgians buried their noses in sheepskin coat collars pulled up, spy-like, and only their huge, watery eyes complained about the alien, insufferable cold weather, but they'd leap up right away at the sight of every young woman, scattering their generous, guttural rapid patter and clicking their tongues in admiration. Young costly ox!

His mother's friends simply stopped coming over and that was that. Now only the wall radio—sober and boring, a long-term resident—occasionally sang at home, dwelling in the

kitchen, too, as if mocking. Then his father stood on a stool (the ceilings were very tall, even for him) and shut it down forever. And suddenly everything became quiet. For a very, very long time.

Then summer trips to the dacha stopped. They'd previously rented half a house in a village, and Ogarev and his mother would go in a rented truck with their things, both of them happy, free, and idle. Or did it only seem that way? Ogarev would sit in the truck's gigantic cab, his mouth agape, following each turn of a steering wheel covered in electrical tape. It was the steering wheel that stuck in his memory forever. He remembered everything else—the taut stream of water from the pump, the fissured wooden box of a privy, lush burdocks, sour cherries that ripened in one night as if by magic—ever more rarely, and with difficulty, as if they were completely fantastic children's tall tales. His father would come to the dacha once a month. For the weekend. Shirtless, he'd dig around in a kitchen garden that didn't belong to him, effortlessly jabbing the modest Moscow-area soil with the blade of a spade. The damp layer he turned over was evenly penetrated by worms and roots that were identically pale, weak, and lifeless. It remembered death. Ogarev would snoop from a raspberry bush, which was also pale, sparse, and from the Moscow area; the berries hung over his head, each one painstakingly composed of slightly sour, semi-transparent beads. Catch it with your lips, press, swallow. Make it your own.

His father kept digging and digging, tireless and unbending, and only his back, broad and young, shone with glistening sweat, like a horse's back. His mother would go out on the front steps and watch for a long, long time, too, so Ogarev physically felt his and his mother's gazes focusing between his father's shoulder blades and threatening to burn a tiny, unbearable hole, but nothing happened; his father didn't even turn around until his mother finally called out to him quietly, Seryozhenka, I put some food together. And then his father would jab the spade into a

garden bed nobody needed and a faceted, precious, and quivering dragonfly would land quickly on a spade handle, polished as if it were amber, seeming to mark the end of the workday with a full stop.

Inside the house, a dish of steaming dark-yellow potatoes that looked as though they'd been molded from butter already stood on the table, and his father would sniff the bread heel, then stretch a bunch of green onions toward a heavy crystal salt cellar that looked like a vodka shot glass that was framed in silver for some unknown reason. They brought the salt cellar with them, too. Then they stopped.

Going to the dacha.

Hosting guests.

Celebrating the New Year.

The previous life faded quietly and slowly, like a tan, trailing off to nothing and finally disappearing when Ogarev was inducted into the Little Octobrists. The festive line ceremony, the disordered square formation of white shirts, a whole handful of pointy little stars with Lenin at the center. Little Lenin. With curly hair. Ogarev, his ears blazing, stood in the row with everyone and—for the first and last time in his life—experienced the feeling of participating in his government: it felt very warm, simple, and rough, like a pig pile. He never managed to be one with his motherland again. That's too bad, of course. But what can you do? Respect can only be mutual.

Ogarev's father suddenly left him in peace and stopped training him like a puppy, even with a sort of relief, as if he'd shifted all that responsibility to the school: I did everything I could, let them figure it out now. For a while yet, as if by habit, he tormented his son with

taunting, targeted, adult carping. He was settling some mysterious, dreadful scores. For Ogarev, it would have been better to be thrashed, like before.

And then he stopped noticing him at all. Completely. Both him and his mother.

Ogarev's mother grew even drabber, quieter, and more withdrawn, like an overturned beetle on someone's palm. The apartment, once large and bright, grew drabber along with her. When his mother came home from work, she would sink powerlessly in front of the fuzzy black-and-white television, watching without seeing anything, as if she were trying to fill her head with someone else's indistinct jabbering. Ogarev didn't like TV. It was boring.

He would mope around from room to room, small, skinny, and sullen. Of course he could have gone outside to run around with the other kids, but something had gone wrong there, too, as if his father really had jinxed him and his mother. It was a strange and scary word: jinxed. He'd overheard it. His mother was complaining quietly to a neighbor woman: as he picked at the door frame, Ogarev had heard her swallowing her tears, loudly and clumsily, as if they were tea gone cold. She was muttering something incomprehensible and lamenting, even as if she were whimpering, and then suddenly the neighbor's thick, rich voice loudly pronounced his mother's sentence: well, it's obvious, you've been jinxed. You needs to go to church to pray.

Ogarev never did find out what "jinxed" was. His mother just made a face when she heard his question, waved it off, and left, left for the kitchen, mechanically holding the wall as if she were blind. Pity is a brief feeling for a child. Almost instantaneous. You're expending so much strength on growing up yourself. If his mother had hurt herself, Ogarev would have cried along with her, instead of her, and spanked the clumsy chair or sharp corner: the shark hurts, the wolf hurts, but Mummy doesn't hurt, that was a quiet, reliable incantation, like plantain stuck on a scratch or a miraculous kiss that stops nonfatal, venous blood. But what could he do with

genuine adult despair at the age of eight? Just forget it instantly, just force it aside without understanding anything. His mother hadn't even made it to the kitchen by the time Ogarev was already in his favorite corner, between the wall and the sofa: the floor was below, the windowsill's sheltering shadow was above. He fumbled behind the back of the sofa—in a narrow dangerous crevice, almost in the crack— and pulled out a book.

He stroked it with his palm, as always. Tightly closed his eyes for a moment before opening it.

Large black letters on a glossy white cover.

Titian.

God only knows how that thick art book in the slippery dustcover had drifted into their home. It had probably been awarded to his father at the factory for some improved cardan shaft or something. It would have been better to give a live twenty-five-ruble bill with Lenin's scalp in sculpted purplish shadows. Ogarev didn't think so. He liked Titian. Titian was a celebration: stolen and secret. Danaë, the gypsy Madonna, portrait of a young woman. The lovely Salome, who had raised a plate with an enormous dead head. Soft, tasty nudity. Sad, dark eyes, tiny mouths, tender necks, folds melting in a darkness that promised an incomprehensible but distinct sweetness. Dimples on cheeks and elbows. A parched throat. Italy, Florence, the Renaissance, Santa Maria del Fiore, Santa Croce, Santissima Annunziata: wonderful words that meant nothing. There was no meaning in them, nothing at all but light.

His father came home at the wrong time, and just seized and darkened that light, in the literal and figurative senses. He leaned, ripped the book out of Ogarev's hands, and paged through it with a crackle. He looked at Ogarev as if he'd stumbled and landed his hand in someone's still-warm barf.