

The Aviator

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Translated from the Russian by Lisa Hayden

To my daughter

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“Why is it you keep writing?”

“I’m describing things, sensations. People. I write every day now, hoping to save them from oblivion.”

“God’s world is too great to count on success with that.”

“You know, if each person were to describe his own sliver of that world, even if it’s small... Although why, really, is it small? You can always find someone whose field of view is broad enough.”

“Such as?”

“Such as an aviator”

Conversation on an airplane

Part One

I used to tell her: wear a hat when it's cold, otherwise you'll get frostbite on your ears. Have a look, I would say, at how many pedestrians these days don't have ears. She would agree, yes, yes, she'd say, I should, but she didn't wear one. She would laugh at the joke and go around without a hat anyway. That little picture surfaced in my memory just now, though I haven't the faintest idea who it concerns.

Or perhaps a scandalous scene came to mind, an outrageous and grueling one. It is unclear it played out. The shame is that the interaction began well (one might even say good-naturedly) and then one word led to another and everyone quarreled. The main thing is that we were the ones who were surprised later: what was that for, why?

Someone noticed that funeral banquets are often like that: people talk for an hour and a half or so about what a good person the deceased was. And then someone in attendance remembers that it turns out the deceased was not only good. And here, as if on command, lots of people begin speaking out and adding on, so, little by little, they come to the conclusion that the deceased was basically a first-rate heel.

Or there could be a real phantasmagoria: someone's hit on the head with a piece of sausage and then that person rolls along an inclined plane, rolls and can't stop, and his head spins from the rolling.

My head. Spins. I'm lying on a bed.

Where am I?

Footsteps.

An unfamiliar person in a white lab coat entered. He stood, placing a hand to his lips, and looked at me (someone else's head is in the crack in the door). For my part, I looked at him, but as if I were not showing it. Out from behind eyelids not tightly closed. He noticed their trembling.

“You're awake?”

I opened my eyes. The unfamiliar person approached my bed and extended a hand:

“Geiger. Your doctor.”

I pulled my right hand out from under the blanket and felt Geiger's cautious handshake. This is how people touch when they're afraid of breaking something. He glanced back for an instant and the door slammed shut. Geiger bent toward me without letting go of my hand:

“And you're Innokenty Petrovich Platonov, isn't that so?”

I could not confirm that. If he says that, it means he has grounds to do so. Innokenty Petrovich... I silently concealed my hand under the blanket.

“You don't remember anything?” Geiger asked.

I shook my head. Innokenty Petrovich Platonov. Sounds respectable. Perhaps a bit literary.

“Do you remember my coming over to your bed just now? How I introduced myself?”

Why is he like this with me? Or am I truly in sorry shape? I pause and rasp:

“I remember.”

“And before that?”

I felt tears choking me. They had broken out into the open and I began sobbing. Geiger took a napkin from the bedside table and wiped my face.

“Come now, Innokenty Petrovich. There are so few events on this earth that are worth remembering and you’re upset.”

“Will my memory be restored?”

“I very much hope so. Your case is one where it’s impossible to assert anything for certain.” He placed a thermometer under my arm. “You know, try recalling as much as you can, your effort is important here. We need you to remember everything yourself.”

I see hairs in Geiger’s nose. There are scratches on his chin from shaving.

He’s looking at me calmly. High forehead, straight nose, pince-nez—it was as if someone had drawn him. There are faces so very typical they seem invented.

“Was I in an accident?”

“One might say that.”

In an open vent window, air from the hospital room is mixing with winter air from outside. The air is growing murky, trembling and fusing; a vertical slat on the frame is merging with a tree trunk; and this early dusk—I have already seen it somewhere. And I have seen snowflakes floating in, too. Melting before reaching the windowsill... Where?

“I don’t remember anything. Only some little things: snowflakes in a hospital window, the coolness of glass if one touches it with a forehead. I don’t remember events.”

“I could, of course, remind you about something that occurred, but one can’t retell a life in all its fullness. I know only the most surface aspects of your life: where you lived, who you interacted with. Beyond that, the history of your thoughts and feelings is unknown to me, do you see?” He pulled the thermometer out from under my arm. “Thirty-eight point five. Rather high.”

Monday

Yesterday, there was still no such thing as time. But today is Monday. Here is what happened.

Geiger brought a pencil and a thick notebook. And left. He returned with a writing stand.

“Write down everything that happened during the day. And write down everything you recall from the past, too. This journal is for me. I’ll see how quickly we’re making progress with what we do.”

“All my events so far are connected with you. Does that mean I should write about you?”

“Abgemacht.¹ Describe and assess me from all angles: my modest persona will begin pulling other threads of your consciousness behind it. And we will gradually broaden your social circle.”

Geiger adjusted the stand over my stomach. It rose slightly, dolefully, with each of my breaths, as if it were breathing, too. Geiger straightened the stand. He opened the notebook and placed the pencil in my fingers; this was, really, a bit much. I may be sick (with what, one might ask?) but I can move my arms and legs. What, in actuality, could I write? Nothing, after all, is happening or being recalled.

The notebook is huge; it would be enough for a novel. I twirl the pencil in my hand. What is my illness, anyway? Doctor, will I live?

“What is today’s date, doctor?”

He is silent. I am silent, too. Did I really ask something indecorous?

“Let’s do this,” Geiger finally utters, “let’s have you just indicate the days of the week. We’ll come to an understanding with time easier that way.”

Geiger is mysteriousness itself. I answer:

“Abgemacht.”

¹ Agreed (German).

He laughs.

So I went ahead and wrote everything down—about yesterday and about today.

Tuesday

Today I made the acquaintance of Valentina, the nurse. She's shapely. Not talkative.

I feigned sleep when she entered; this is already becoming a habit. Then I opened one eye and asked:

“What is your name?”

“Valentina. The doctor said you need rest.”

She answered no further questions. She swabbed the floor with a mop, her back to me. A triumph of rhythm. When she bent to rinse the rag in the pail, her underclothes showed through her white coat. What kind of rest could I have...

I'm joking. I have no strength whatsoever. Geiger took my temperature this morning: 38.7, which worries him.

What worries me is that I cannot seem to distinguish recollections from dreams.

Ambiguous impressions from last night. I am lying at home with a temperature—it's influenza. My grandmother's hand is cool; the thermometer is cool. Swirls of snow outside are covering the road to my school, where I did not go today. This means they will come to the letter “P” in the roll call (a finger, all chalky, will slide through the record book) and call Platonov.

But Platonov is not here, reports the class monitor, he stayed home due to influenza, I dare say they are reading *Robinson Crusoe* to him. It's possible a wall clock is audible at the house. His grandmother, continues the monitor, is pressing a pince-nez to her nose so her eyes

look large and bugged from the lenses. That is an expressive little picture, agrees the teacher, let us call this the apotheosis of reading (animation in the classroom).

In short, the essence of what happened, says the monitor, boils down to the following. A frivolous young man sets off on an ocean journey and is shipwrecked. He is washed up on an uninhabited island where he remains, without means for existence and—the most important thing—without people. There are no people at all. If he had conducted himself sensibly from the very beginning... I don't know how to express this, so as not to slip into an instructional tone. It is a sort of parable about a prodigal son.

There is an equation (yesterday's arithmetic) on the classroom chalkboard; the floorboards retain moisture from the morning cleaning. The teacher vividly imagines Robinson's helpless floundering as he strives to reach the shore. Aivazovsky's painting *The Ninth Wave* helps him see the true scope of the catastrophe. Not one interjection breaks the shaken teacher's silence. Coach wheels are barely audible outside the double windows.

I myself read from *Robinson Crusoe* rather often, but you don't read a whole lot during an illness. Your eyes smart, the lines float. I follow my grandmother's lips. She raises a finger to her lips before turning a page. Sometimes she gulps cooled tea and then a barely noticeable spray flies on *Robinson Crusoe*. Sometimes there are crumbs from rusks eaten between chapters. After returning to health, I carefully page through what was read and brush out dried, flattened particles of bread.

"I remember many various places and people," I nervously announced to Geiger, "I remember some sort of statements. Even if my life depended on it, though, I do not remember exactly who said which words. And where."

Geiger is calm. He hopes this will pass. He does not consider this consequential.

And maybe this truly is not consequential? Perhaps the only thing that matters is that words were uttered and preserved, so questions of “where” and “by whom” are further down the list? I will have to ask Geiger about this, he seems to know everything.

Wednesday

This can happen, too: a picture is completely intact although the words were not preserved. A person, for example, is sitting in the dusk. He is not switching on the light even though there is already half-darkness in the room: is he economizing or something? A sorrowful immobility. Elbow resting on a table, forehead in repose on palm of hand, little finger sticking out. It is visible even in the darkness that his clothes are in folds, all brownish, to the point of colorlessness, and his face and hand are the only white spot. The person appears to be musing, although in reality he is not thinking about anything, only resting. Maybe he is even saying something but the words are inaudible. In any case, his words are not important to me: who is there for him to talk with, himself? He does not know, after all, that I am observing him and if he happens to be say anything, it is not to me. His lips move; he looks out the window. Drops on the glass reflect the luminescence of the street and sparkle with glimmers from carriages. The vent window squeaks.

Up until now, I have seen only two people in my room: Geiger and Valentina. A doctor and a nurse; who else, in actuality, is necessary? I gathered my strength, stood, and walked over to the window: the yard is empty, the snow is knee-deep. One time I went outside my room into the corridor, holding on to the wall but Valentina appeared immediately: you're on bed rest regime, go back to your room. A regime...

By the way: they both look like they're from the old regime. When Geiger is not wearing a white coat, without fail he wears a three-piece suit. He reminds me of Chekhov... I kept thinking: who does he remind me of? Chekhov! He wears a pince-nez, too. Of those alive today, I think I have only seen one on Stanislavsky, but he is a person of the theater... Then again, I would say there is some sort of theatricality in the pair that is treating me. Valentina is every bit the war-time sister of mercy. 1914. I don't know how they'll regard this impression of mine: Geiger will read this, we agreed to that. After all, it was he who asked me to write everything down, openly: what I notice, recall, and think, so, that's how I'm writing, by all means.

My pencil lead broke today so I told Valentina. She took something akin to a pencil out of her pocket and held it out to me.

"That's funny," I say, "metal lead, I've never seen anything like it."

Valentina blushed and quickly took that thing back. She brought me another pencil later. Why did she blush? She doesn't blush when she brings me to the toilet or pulls down my drawers for injections, but come on!, this is a pencil. There are masses of minor riddles in my life right now that I am powerless to unravel... But she blushes charmingly, to the tips of her ears. Her ears are delicate, elegant. I admired them yesterday when her white kerchief fell off. More precisely, one of them. With her back to me, Valentina leaned over the lamp and the light shone pink through her ear; I wanted to touch it. But dared not. And had not the strength anyway.

I have the strange sensation that I have been lying in this bed for an entire eternity. There's pain in my muscles when I move an arm or a leg, and my legs feel like jelly if I stand without someone's aid. Then again, my temperature has lowered a bit: 38.3.

I ask Geiger:

"So what happened to me, anyway?"

“That,” he answers, “is something you need to recall, otherwise my consciousness will replace yours. Do you really want that?”

I myself do not know if I want that. Maybe I will turn out to have a consciousness that could stand replacing.

Friday

Regarding the question of consciousness: I lost mine yesterday. Geiger and Valentina had quite a fright. I saw their perturbed faces when I came to: it seems they would have been sorry to lose me. It's nice when people need you for some reason, even if the reason is nothing personal but only, as they say, pure love of one's fellow man. Geiger did not return my papers to me all day yesterday. He was apparently afraid I had strained myself with my writings the day before. I lay there, watching flakes of snow fall outside the window. I fell asleep watching. The flakes were still falling when I woke up.

Valentina was sitting on a chair beside my bed. She wiped my forehead with a damp sponge. Kiss, I wanted to say, kiss me on the forehead. I did not say that. Because it would have worked out that she had been wiping my forehead before she kissed it. In any case, it's clear who is kissed on the forehead... I took her by the hand, though, and she didn't take it away. She just placed our joined hands on my stomach so as not to hold mine hanging. Her palm covered my hand like a little house, the way they teach holding one's hand to play the fortepiano. If I know things like this, most likely I was taught that at one time, too. After turning my hand over, I drew my index finger along the ceiling of that little house and sensed it jolt, collapse, and sprawl over my palm. And I sensed its warmth.

“Lie next to me, Valentina,” I asked of her. “I have no indecent thoughts and I am completely harmless, you are aware of that. I simply need for someone to be next to me. Right next to me, otherwise I will never warm up. I cannot explain it, but that is how it is.”

With effort, I moved on the wide bed and Valentina lay down alongside me, on top of the blanket. I myself do not know why, but I was certain she would fulfill my request. She inclined her head toward my head. I inhaled her scent: an infusion that joined ironed, starched, and snow-white with the aroma of perfume and a youthful body. She was sharing that with me and I could not breathe in enough of it. Geiger came into view as the doorway opened but Valentina remained lying there. Something tensed in her (I felt it) but she did not stand. She probably blushed; she could not help but blush.

“Very good,” said Geiger without entering. “Get some rest.”

A wonderful reaction in its own way.

I had not really intended to describe this since it relates not only to me, but since Geiger already saw everything... Let him have the right understanding of the essence of what happened (though of course he understands anyway). I want for this to repeat, if only for a few minutes each day.

Sunday

After waking, I mentally recited “Our Father.” It turns out that I can reproduce the prayer without hesitation. When I could not go to church on Sundays, I would at least recite “Our Father” to myself. I would move my lips in the damp wind. I lived on an island where attending services was not taken for granted. And it was not that the island was uninhabited—there were

churches—but somehow everything turned out that it was not simple to attend. I can no longer remember the details.

Church is a great joy, especially during childhood. I'm small, meaning I'm holding on to my mother's skirt. The skirt under her fur jacket is long and the hem rustles along the floor. My mother places a candle by an icon and the skirt rises a tiny bit, my hand in a mitten along with it. She carefully picks me up and carries me toward the icon. I feel her palms on the small of my back, my felt boots and mittens move freely in the air, and it is as if I'm soaring toward the icon. Under me are dozens of candles—holiday candles, wavering—and I look at them, unable to avert my gaze from that brightness. They crackle, wax flowing from them, freezing on the spot in intricate stalactites. Coming to greet me, arms spread, is the Mother of God and I clumsily kiss her on the hand because I am not in control of my flight and, after kissing, I touch her with my forehead as one should. I feel the coolness of Her hand for an instant. And I soar around the church like that, I drift through aromatic smoke, over a priest swinging a censer. Over the choir, through its canticles (the slowed flapping of the precentor and his grimaces on the high notes). Over the candle lady and the people filling the church (flowing around the pillars), along windows, outside which there is a snow-covered country. Russia? Bitter cold swirls visibly near a door not tightly shut; there is rime on the handle. The crack widens abruptly and Geiger is in the rectangle that has formed.

“We are in Russia, doctor, are we not?” I ask.

“In a certain sense, yes.”

He is preparing my arm for an intravenous drip.

“Then why are you Geiger?”

He looked at me, surprised:

“Because I’m a Russian German. Deutschrusse. Were you worried that we’re in Germany?”

No, I was not worried. Now I can simply consider that I know our location for certain. Essentially, that was not very clear until today.

“And where is nurse Valentina?”

“She has the day off.”

After putting in the drip, Geiger takes my temperature. It’s 38.1.

“And so,” I wonder, “there are no other nurses?”

“You’re insatiable.”

I do not need another nurse. I just do not understand what kind of establishment this is where there is one doctor, one nurse, and one patient. Then again, anything is possible in Russia. In Russia... that must be a common phrase if it has even been preserved in my destroyed memory. It has its own rhythm. I don’t know what is behind it, but I do remember the *phrase*.

I already have a few of these phrases that have surfaced out of nowhere. They probably have their own histories, but I’m uttering them as if for the first time. I feel like Adam. Or a child: children often utter phrases without yet knowing their meaning. Anything is possible in Russia, uh-huh. There is condemnation in that, perhaps even a verdict. It feels as if it is some sort of disagreeable boundlessness, that everything will head in an all-too-obvious direction. How much does that phrase concern me?

After thinking, I announce the phrase to Geiger, as a German, and ask him to evaluate it. I follow the movement of his lips and brows—people sampling wine look like this. He inhales noisily as if in answer, but he exhales just as noisily after pausing. As a German, he decided to keep silent, in order, let us suppose, not to traumatize me. Instead, he asks me to stick out my

tongue, which, in my view, is justified in its own way. My tongue still operates independently to a significant degree: it pronounces what it is accustomed to pronouncing, as happens with talking birds. Geiger has apparently understood everything about my tongue so asks me to stick it out. He shakes his head when I do. My tongue does not gladden him.

Geiger turns as he approaches the door:

“Oh, also... If you'd like for nurse Valentina to lie next to you, even, let us suppose, under the same blanket as you, just say so, don't be shy. That's fine.”

“You know yourself she'll be completely safe.”

“I know. Although,” he snaps his fingers, “anything is possible in Russia, is it not?”

At the moment, not everything... I sense that like nobody else.

Friday

I had no strength for all those days. Nor do I have any today. Something strange is spinning in my head: “Aviator Platonov.” Another *phrase*?

I ask Geiger:

“Doctor, was I an aviator?”

“As far as I know, no...”

Where was I called an aviator? Perhaps in Kuokkala? Precisely! In Kuokkala. I shout to

Geiger:

“That moniker is linked to Kuokkala, where I... Where we... Have you been to Kuokkala, doctor?”

“It has a different name now.”

“How is that?”

“Well, now it’s called Repino... The primary thing is to write down your recollection.”

I’ll write it down, but tomorrow. I’m tired.

Saturday

My cousin Seva and I are on the Gulf of Finland. Seva is my mother’s brother’s son: that explanation of the kinship sounded terribly complicated to me when I was a child. Even now, I don’t say it smoothly. Of course “cousin” is a little easier to say but it’s best of all to say Seva. Seva’s parents have a house in Kuokkala.

He and I are flying a kite. In the evenings, we run along the beach at the very edge of the water. Sometimes our bare feet graze the water and the spray sparkles in the setting sun. We imagine that we’re aviators. We’re flying together, I in the front seat, Seva in the back. It’s deserted and lonely there in the cold sky but our friendship warms us. If we perish, at least we are together; that draws us close. We attempt to exchange remarks there, up high, but the wind carries our words away.

“Aviator Platonov,” Seva shouts to me from the back. “Aviator Platonov, the locality of Kuokkala lies ahead!”

I do not understand why Seva is addressing his colleague so ceremoniously. Maybe in order that Platonov not forget he is an aviator. Seva’s high voice (it always remained that way) carries along the entire locality we are flying over. Sometimes it merges with the screeches of seagulls and they become almost indistinguishable from one another. To tell the truth, this shouting of his irritates me very much. Glancing at Seva’s happy face, I cannot find the strength within to ask him to be quiet. Essentially, it is thanks to his strange birdlike timbre that I remembered him.

They give us hot milk with honey before bed. I don't really like hot milk but it evokes no protest after the flight over the gulf, after the sea breeze in my face. Seva and I—despite the fact that the milk has barely begun cooling—drink it in big, loud mouthfuls. A Finnish milkmaid brings the milk and it truly is very delicious, especially when it's not hot. The Finnish woman gets tangled up in her Russian words as she praises her cow. I imagine that the cow resembles the milkmaid herself: huge and unhurried, with wide-set eyes and a taut udder.

Seva and I share a room in a turret. It has a panoramic view (forest behind, sea ahead), something that is not unimportant for experienced aviators. The weather can be evaluated at any time: fog over the sea means a likelihood of rain, whitecaps on the waves and the rocking of pine tree tops mean a gale-force wind. The pines and the waves change their appearance in the dusk of a white night. It's not quite that a threat appears in them, no, they simply lose their daytime kindness. It is akin to experiencing anxiety when watching a smiling person who has become pensive.

“Are you already asleep?” Seva whispers.

“No,” I say, “but I plan to be.”

“I saw a giant outside,” says Seva, pointing at the window opposite the sea.

“It's a pine tree. Go to sleep.”

A few minutes later, I can hear Seva's loud breathing. I look at the window Seva had pointed to. And I see a giant.

Monday

Monday is a rough day... That's one more *phrase* from my poor head. I wonder: are there many more of them in there? There are no longer people or events, but words remained, there they are.

Words are probably the last to disappear, especially the written word. It is possible Geiger himself does not completely understand what a profound idea this writing is. Maybe it's words that will turn out, at some point, to be the thread that will manage to drag out everything that happened? Not just with me but everything there ever was at all. A rough day... I, however, am feeling a lightness, even a sort of joy. I think it's because I am expecting to see Valentina. I attempted to stand up but felt dizzy and then the lightness disappeared. The joy did not disappear, though.

Valentina pinched my cheek when she entered, which was very nice. Surprising aromas, completely unfamiliar to me, emanate from her, too. Perfume, soap? Valentina's natural properties? It is awkward to ask and unnecessary, too. Everything should have its secrets, especially a woman... That's a *phrase*, too. I can sense it's a *phrase*!

Here's another one I liked very much: "Metal conducts heat quickly." It might not be the most prevalent phrase, but for me it's one of the first I heard. We're sitting who'd know where with who'd know who, stirring tea with little spoons. I'm about five years old, I think, no more, and there's an embroidered pillow on the chair under me (I can't reach the table) and I'm stirring tea like an adult. The glass itself is in a metal holder. The spoon is hot. I drop it into the glass with a jingle and blow on my fingers. "Metal conducts heat quickly," says a pleasant voice. Beautifully, scientifically. I repeated that in similar circumstances until I was around twelve.

No, that is not the earliest. "Go intrepidly," that is the earliest. We are entering someone's house at Christmas. A taxidermied bear stands on its back paws by the staircase, holding a tray in its front paws.

"What is the tray for?" I ask.

"For visiting cards," answers my father.