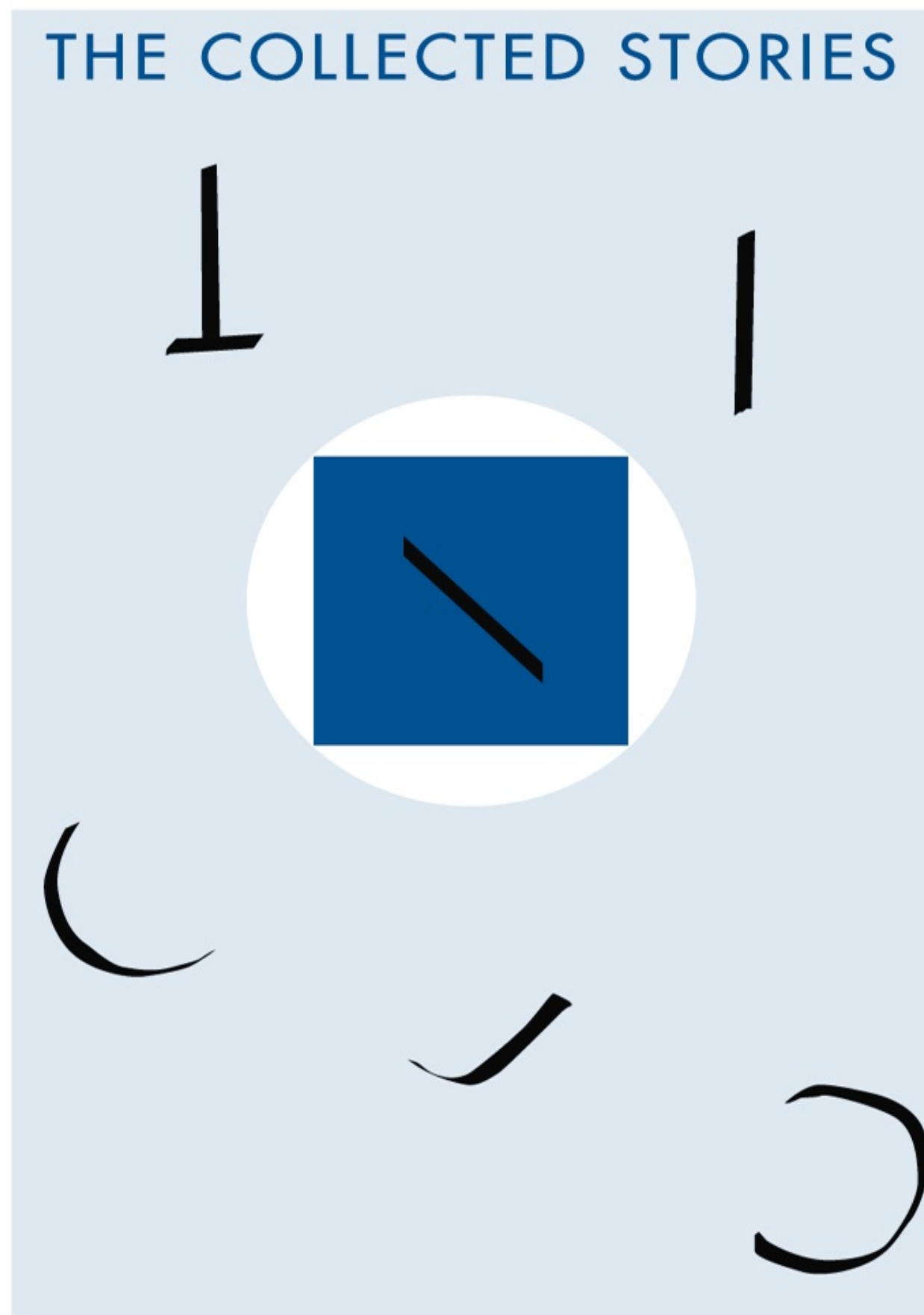


CALLIGRAPHY LESSON

THE COLLECTED STORIES



MIKHAIL SHISHKIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY MARIAN SCHWARTZ,
LEO SHTUTIN, SYLVIA MAIZELL, AND MARIYA BASHKATOVA

Calligraphy Lesson is the first English-language collection of short stories by Mikhail Shishkin, the most acclaimed contemporary author in Russia. Spanning his entire writing career, from his first published story, “Calligraphy Lesson,” which heralded an entirely new voice in post-Soviet Russian literature and won him Russia’s prestigious Debut Prize in 1993, to creative essays reflecting on the transcendent importance of language, to the newest story, “Nabokov’s Inkblot,” written in 2013 for dramatic adaptation by a theater in Zurich. A master prose writer and unique stylist, Shishkin is heir to the greatest Russian writers, such as Tolstoy, Bunin, and Pasternak, and is the living embodiment of the combination of style and content that has made Russian literature so unique and universally popular for over two centuries. Shishkin’s breathtakingly beautiful writing style comes across perfectly in these stories, where he experiments with the forms and ideas that are worked into his grand novels while exploring entirely new literary territory in the space between fiction and creative nonfiction as he reflects on the most important and universal themes in life: love, happiness, art, death, resurrection...

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CALLIGRAPHY
LESSON

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DEEP VELLUM PUBLISHING
DALLAS, TEXAS



Deep Vellum Publishing
2919 Commerce St. #159, Dallas, Texas 75226
deepvellum.org · [@deepvellum](https://twitter.com/deepvellum)

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“The Bell Tower of San Marco” © 2015 by Sylvia Maizell

Some stories were published previously:
“The Half-Belt Overcoat” in *Read Russia: An Anthology of New Voices* (May 2012)
“Calligraphy Lesson” in *Words Without Borders* (July 2007)
“Nabokov’s Inkblot” in *New England Review* (Volume 34, Nos. 3–4, 2014)
“Of Saucepans and Star-Showers” in *Spolia* (March 2013)
“In a Boat Scratched on a Wall” originally appeared in slightly different form as “Mikhail Shishkin: A revolution for Russia’s words” in the *Independent* (March 22, 2013)

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ISBN: 978-1-941920-02-2 (ebook)
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2015935163

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*Издание осуществлено при участии Программы поддержки переводов
русской литературы TRANSCRIPT Фонда Михаила Прохорова.*



The publication of this book was made possible with the support of the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation’s Transcript program to support the translation of Russian literature.

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Cover design & typesetting by Anna Zylicz · annazylicz.com

Text set in Bembo, a typeface modeled on typefaces cut by Francesco Griffo for Aldo Manuzio’s printing of *De Aetna* in 1495 in Venice.

Deep Vellum titles are published under the fiscal sponsorship of The Writer’s Garret, a nationally recognized nonprofit literary arts organization.

Distributed by Consortium Book Sales & Distribution.

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The Half-Belt Overcoat

There's a famous police photograph of Robert Walser, taken at the place of his death: winter, a white incline, tracks in deep snow, a man fallen supine, arms outstretched. His old man's hat flung to the side. That's how he was found by children on their Christmas walk.

He described his own death in a story published half a century before his final Christmas. The protagonist of this brief little tale is a lost soul, inconspicuous, needed by no one—and yet, to make things worse, also a genius and master of the world. He wearies of being unneeded and escapes from his troubles like this: he buries the world in a snowstorm and lays himself down in a drift.

Foreknowledge of one's own death is not, however, the privilege of the writer. It's just that it's easy to catch him red-handed—in the literal sense: the hand records whatever is revealed to him at a particular juncture. Such breakthroughs happen in every person's life. Holes in matter. Points of transmission. In such moments the composer comes by his melody, the poet his lines, the lover his love, the prophet his God.

In that instant you encounter what everyday existence holds asunder: the visible and the invisible, the worldly and the sacred.

You begin to breathe in time with a space in which all things occur simultaneously—those that have been and those yet to be.

Reality has been playing hide-and-seek with you, hiding behind the past and the future like a child who's squeezed himself in under the fur coats hanging in the hallway, and now jumps out at you, sweaty, happy, bursting with laughter: here I am! How'd you manage that—went right past and didn't see me! Now you're it!

To see your own death in such a moment is nothing, for there arises in all its glorious patency the knowledge that I was never born, but have always been. Suddenly comes the realization that there's no need to cling on to life, because I *am* life. And it is not I who can sense the smell of mulch exuding from the forest's mouth, it is the universe sniffing its own scent with my nostrils.

If you can measure your life by anything at all, it's probably by the number of such encounters allotted to you.

I remember very well how I experienced that for the first time. My twelfth year. The smell of peat bogs burning around Moscow. The hazy country mornings of seventy-two. A charred aftertaste to everything, even the hot strawberries from the garden-bed. Mum went on holiday to a rest home on the upper Volga, and took me with her. One of my first trips away.

It rained incessantly, we lived in a damp, mosquito-infested little house, and at first I was bored, nightly film screenings notwithstanding, but after a while the weather improved, we got a new canteen neighbour, Uncle Vitya, and our life took a turn for the better. We swam with him, took motorboat rides on the Volga, went on forest rambles. Sinewy and gold-toothed, Uncle Vitya made Mum laugh no end with his stories. I didn't get half of his jokes, but the way he told them made it impossible not

to laugh. I took a great liking to Mum's new acquaintance. What's more, I was bowled over by the fact that he worked in a recording van—a "Tonwagen." No doubt I was already spellbound by words.

There I go, presumptuously calling that teenager myself, though I'm not at all sure whether he'd agree to acknowledge himself in me as I am now: grey-haired, advanced in life, a sickly bore with a brazenly protruding belly. He'd be very surprised: can that really be me? I don't know that I could find anything to answer. Not likely. We may be namesakes—but so what?

Among Uncle Vitya's stories I somehow remember one about how, skating on the river as a child, he and other boys would sometimes happen upon frogs frozen into the ice. If you peed on them they'd come to life and start moving. And another one about the war. He told us about the penal¹ whose only hope was to get wounded. Redeem your guilt with blood and you'd have your decorations and rank restored. And so they'd resort to self-infliction, shooting themselves in the arm or foot through a loaf of bread so there'd be no gunpowder traces in the wound.

It had never occurred to me that Mum liked to dance, but now she'd be out dancing with Uncle Vitya every evening.

One day Mum started speaking to me in a strange voice. If Uncle Vitya ever asked me about Dad, she implored, I should tell him that he was dead.

"But he's not dead," I said, surprised. "He just moved away."

She pressed my head to her breast:

"But you're my clever boy and you understand everything."

I understood nothing, but nodded all the same.

And I began waiting for Uncle Vitya to ask me about Dad.

It was strange to see Mum rouging and powdering herself, making up her eyes, painting her lips, spraying perfume on her neck, and doing her nails—I'd be hit by the sharp smell of nail varnish. I had never known her like this before.

Mum was a teacher, she taught Russian language and literature, and by that time she'd already become head of School No. 59 on the Arbat. Ever since year one I'd commuted with her across the whole city—initially from Presnia, where we lived in a communal apartment, and later from Matveyevskaya, where we were given a two-room flat in a new housing development.

Naturally, she wanted to keep her child close by, at her school, but this made life much more complicated for me. Her role model was some retired maths teacher. His son had been in his class, and he knew the subject better than anyone else, but when his father called him up to the blackboard all he'd ever say was "Sit down, C"—even if his son had got the problem correct. I had to go through something similar when our class was being divided into English and German sets. I wanted to go in the English set—and with good reason, because German was a kind of punishment for those who weren't doing well: do badly, went the threat, and it'll be the German set for you. I was doing well, but Mum put me exactly where I didn't want to be. So none of the other parents could reproach her for anything. School came first for her, things personal and domestic second.

Her generation had grown up under the slogan "The Motherland is Calling!"

Perhaps, if I hadn't got into a university with a military chair after finishing school,² she would equally have sent me off to Afghanistan not only with sorrow but

also with a sense of having fulfilled her mother's duty to the nation. I don't know. Incidentally, it would seem that I am to this day a reserve officer of the nonexistent army of that nonexistent nation. I did, after all, once swear an oath in a military camp near Kovrov to defend the soon-to-disintegrate motherland till the last drop of my blood. We had to kiss the red standard, I remember, so I brought it to my lips—and got a great whiff of smoked fish. No doubt our commanders had been tucking into some beer and fish and wiping their hands on the velvet cloth.

While still at school I didn't realize, of course, how hard it must have been for Mum and all our teachers: they were faced with the insoluble problem of teaching children to tell the truth whilst initiating them into a world of lies. The written law requires that truth be told, but the unwritten dictates that if you do, you'll be facing the music later.

They taught us lies they themselves didn't believe because they loved and wanted to save us. Of course, they were afraid of wrongly spoken words, but they were afraid for us even more than they were for themselves. The country, after all, was in the grip of a deadly word game. You needed to say the right words and not say the wrong ones. The line had never been drawn, but inside everyone sensed where it lay. Our teachers were trying to save truth-loving youths from folly, to inject them with a life-giving dose of fear. You might feel a little momentary sting, but then you'd have immunity for life.

We may have been badly taught in chemistry or English, but at least we got illustrative lessons in the difficult art of survival—how to say one thing, and think and do another.

The gods of the grownups were long dead, but we had to venerate them during idolatrous rituals. School taught us children of slaves the meaning of submission. If you want to achieve anything, you have to learn how to pronounce the dead words of a dead language, in which that dead life stagnated and rotted away.

Generally, what does it mean to be a good teacher?

Clearly, a good teacher under any regime must cultivate in his pupils those qualities which will help them later in life, and will not teach them to go against the current, because they're going to need a completely different type of knowledge: the knowledge of the traffic laws in this particular life. Veer into the oncoming lane and you're heading for a crash. You need to reverse and merge into the mainstream flow. If you want to get somewhere in this life, earn a decent wage, provide for your family and children, you have to blend into the mainstream: you're the boss—I'm the fool, I'm the boss, you're the fool, honour and profit lie not in one sack, who keeps company with wolves will learn to howl.

A bad teacher, meanwhile, will instruct his charges to live by a different law, the law of the conservation of human dignity. By and large this is a road to marginalisation at best, and to jail or suicide at worst. Unless they just shoot you.

Does this mean that bad teachers were good, and good ones bad? Then again, it's always been like that in Russia: the right on the left, the left on the right. It's an age-old question, and one that still hasn't been answered: if you love your Motherland, should you wish her victory or defeat? It's still not completely clear where the Motherland ends and the regime begins, so entangled have they become.

Take hockey, for instance. On both sides of the barbed wire, USSR–Canada

matches were regarded as the symbolic clash of two systems. By the end of Soviet power we were supporting the Canadians against the Soviets. But in seventy-two, the year of the epoch-making Summit Series, the teenager I obstinately refer to as myself still inhabited an unshadowed, prelapsarian world—and supported “our lads.”

It really was a strange old nation. Hockey victories prolonged the regime’s life, while defeats shortened it. You couldn’t tell from close up that *that* Paul Henderson goal, scored from the goalmouth 34 seconds before the end of the final game, not only changed the outcome of the series, but became the point of no return for the entire world empire created by the moustachio’d despot. From that moment on, its disintegration became only a matter of time.

It’s curious that a man who struck at the very heart of my country should accept his fate in an eminently Russian manner: first he turned to drink, having ditched hockey, and then became a proselytiser.

Hockey has found its way into these pages because our school happened to stand just opposite the Canadian embassy. In front of it would park incredible foreign limousines that had turned into our Starokonnyushenny Lane straight from American movies. You could press up against the window and take a good look at the dashboard—the number 220 on the speedometer was especially impressive—and we boys in our mousy-grey uniforms would heatedly debate the merits of Mustangs over Cadillacs or those of Chevrolets over Fords till a policeman leapt out of the booth outside the embassy gates and sent us packing.

A reception for the Canadian hockey players was held in the embassy. Word of the Canadians’ arrival spread instantly, and we crowded on the opposite pavement, trying to get a look at our idols. These were our gods, come down from television’s ice rink, and it was strange to see them in suits and ties. In the first-floor windows of the Arbat townhouse, flung open on that warm September day in seventy-two, we caught glimpses of Phil Esposito, “Bullyboy” Cashman and brothers Frank and Pete Mahovlich. In response to our adoring screams they peered out of the windows, smiled, waved, gave us thumbs up—all as if to say, Well, fellas, ain’t life just dandy!

So many years have passed, yet still I can see, vividly as ever, the toothless grin of Bobby Clarke, who’d leaned out of the window and thrown us a badge. Other players, too, began throwing badges and sticks of chewing gum. Even some biscuits. It all really kicked off then! Try as I might to catch something, anything, I was shouldered aside by those with more luck on their side. I would have ended up empty-handed. But then the miraculous happened. Bobby Clarke, who was almost lying on the windowsill, began jabbing his finger in my direction. I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was looking at *me*, and threw *me* some gum. I caught it! He laughed and gave me another thumbs up—you did good, son! It was then that we were driven off by the police. I shared the gum with my friends, but the wrapper I held on to for ages. Need I mention that it was the best-tasting gum I’ve ever had in my life?

The next day Mum came into our class. She had her strict face on. Mum knew how to be strict, and when she was the whole school was afraid of her.

She began saying that our behaviour had brought shame and dishonour upon the school and the whole country as well. We’d been photographed by foreign correspondents, and now the whole world would see how we’d debased ourselves by fighting over their chewing gum.

Everyone was silent. I felt injustice in these accusations. And suddenly, to my own surprise, I spoke out.

“Why does our country have no chewing gum?”

“Our country doesn’t have a lot of things,” Mum replied. “But that doesn’t mean you have to lose human dignity.”

I didn’t forget that.

As headmistress, Mum was the school’s representative of that prison system, and she had it hard. I know she shielded and saved the skins of many. Trying to do whatever possible, she rendered unto Caesar the things which were Caesar’s, and Pushkin unto the children. For several generations Pushkin was a secret code, the key to the preservation of the human in this bedevilled country. By then many already believed that the worse things were, the better, the sooner everything would go to pieces, but those like her strived to endow an inhuman existence with humanity. There was no saving her own skin, though—she got what was coming to her, and then some.

By the time I was seventeen our relationship had deteriorated to the extent that I’d stopped talking to her. Completely. We lived in the same flat but I wouldn’t even say hello to her. I couldn’t forgive her being a Party member, nor our having to write essays on *Virgin Lands* and *Malaya Zemlya*³ at school. I thought that the struggle against the odious system must be waged without compromise—starting with yourself, your family, those closest to you. I wanted to live not by lies,⁴ but I didn’t understand then that I wasn’t a hero, I was just a little brat. My silence, too, I think, shortened her life.

Now, no sooner have I written that I’d stopped talking to Mum than I sense that I’ve not written the whole truth, and have ended up lying as a result.

Yes, I never even said hello to her, but not only because I’d read *The Kolyma Tales* and *The Gulag Archipelago*,⁵ which had inexplicably ended up in my possession around that time and changed much in my youthful conception of the world. Of course not. The conflict arose because of my first love. Mum didn’t like that girl. She didn’t like her at all.

At school she was the all-powerful headmistress, she could quell an inexperienced teacher’s unruly class with a single glance, but at home, in her relationship with her own son, she turned out to be completely helpless. Of course the mother wished her son well. But she didn’t know how to do him good. And of course Mum was totally right about that girl. But I realised that only later.

Disaster struck at Mum’s school when Andropov came to power. No one knew he was already mortally ill. Once again everyone got frightened of their own fear.

The seniors wanted to organise an evening dedicated to the memory of Vysotsky. Mum’s colleagues tried to dissuade her, but she authorized it. The evening went ahead. The kids sang his songs, recited his poems, listened to his recordings. Someone informed on the headmistress.

The school got an exemplary slap on the wrist to teach others a lesson.

I’d already moved out by then. I remember how I came home and Mum told me how she’d been summoned, boorishly spoken to, yelled at. She tried to defend herself, to explain. No one was going to listen to her.

She wanted to live out her life without losing human dignity. For that she got

absolutely trampled.

For the first time, I think, Mum burst into tears in front of me. I didn't know what to say, I just sat beside her and stroked her on the shoulder.

Suddenly I wanted to ask her forgiveness for not having spoken to her for almost a whole year, but I never did.

Mum got kicked out of work, a blow from which she would never recover. School was her whole life.

She fell seriously ill. First her heart. Then cancer. So began the hospitals, the operations.

By then I was working at a school myself, at the no. 444 on Pervomaiskaya Street, and after lessons I'd go and see her. I spent hours in the hospital ward, doing my marking, fetching Mum something to drink, giving her the bedpan, reading her the paper, cutting her nails, just being close by. If we spoke at all, it was of trivialities. Or rather, of what seemed important then, but now, so many years on, seems unimportant. I kept meaning to ask her forgiveness, but somehow I never managed to.

Later I described it all in *The Taking of Izmail*: her neighbour in the hospital who, bald from chemotherapy, never took off her beret, which made her look like a caricature of an artist; how bits of her nails, grown long on her gnarled toes, would fly all over the ward when I clumsily attempted to cut them; how I brought in some boards for her bed, because Mum couldn't get to sleep on its caved-in wire frame.

The novel, written a few years after Mum's death, took its rise from Russian literature, containing as it does many quotations, associations and interweaving plot threads, but by the end I was simply describing what was going on in my own life. From the complex to the simple. From the literary and the learned to Mum's foam-filled bra, which she wore after they cut off her breasts. From Old-Slavonic centos to her quiet death, which she so longed for to release her from the pain.

There were a great many people at her funeral: teachers with whom she'd worked, former pupils. She'd accumulated a lot of pupils over the years. Only through your own life can you truly teach anything of any significance.

I was stunned to see her lying in the coffin with an Orthodox chaplet on her forehead. I don't know where it came from, Mum was anything but a church person. She was a completely sincere non-believer. That's how she'd been brought up. So when I was born she didn't want me christened. And not because she feared repercussions—at the beginning of sixty-one, when Stalin still lay in the Mausoleum, she was the school's Party organiser. She just genuinely couldn't understand: what would be the point? Grandma had me christened on the sly at the church in Udelnaya, where we spent the summer at our dacha.

Even as a child, it was clear to me that church was a place for uneducated grannies, like my own, with three years of parochial school under her belt.

Later I thought that the old go to church because they fear death more than the young. And I didn't yet know that, on the contrary, it is the young who have the greater fear.

It was only after Mum passed away that I sensed acutely how essential it is for close people to engage in one all-important conversation. Usually that conversation gets put off—it isn't easy to start talking about the things that matter most over breakfast or somewhere in the metro. Something always gets in the way. I needed to

ask Mum for forgiveness, but in all those years I never did manage to. When I began writing *The Taking of Izmail*, I thought it a novel about history, about the nation, about destiny, about the word, but it turned out to be that very conversation.

Most likely, such a conversation cannot take place during life in any case. It's vital that it should come about, but what matter whether it happens before or after the end? The important thing is that she heard me and forgave me.

Between operations, during the time she had away from the hospitals, Mum would sort out her lifetime's worth of photographs. She asked me to buy some albums and glued the photos into them, annotating each one with the names of the people it featured, and sometimes she'd write stories associated with these people into the margins. The result was a family archive—for the grandchildren.

After her death I took the albums over to mine. And when I was leaving for Switzerland, I left them all with my brother. The albums were stored in his house near Moscow.

The house was burnt down. All our photographs were destroyed.

All I have left is a handful of childhood snaps.

One of them, a picture of me, was taken, probably by my father, while we were still living in Presnia, though we moved to Matveyeskaya that same year. I'm in year four. I'm wearing an overcoat with a half-belt that's out of the camera's view. I remember that overcoat perfectly—it was a hand-me-down from my brother. I had to wear all his hand-me-downs. But here's why the overcoat has stuck in my mind. Mum would often tell this story. It's very short.

To get to school from Matveyevskaya we'd take the no. 77 bus to Dorogomilovskaya Street, where we changed to an Arbat-bound trolleybus, or alternatively we could take the same bus in the other direction to the railway station, and then on to Kievsky Station. That morning we went to the station. The first snow had fallen during the night. Thousands of feet had trampled the platform into a skating rink. When the train pulled in everyone dashed for the doors. You had to storm the already overflowing carriages, squeeze yourself into the jam-packed vestibules. Between the edge of the platform and the door was an enormous gap. I slipped and was about to fall headlong into it. Thankfully, Mum held me back by the half-belt.

That, essentially, is the whole story—nothing extraordinary. But this incident held such significance for Mum that she continued to recall it even on the eve of death. She'd smile and whisper just audibly—she'd lost her voice by then, and could only whisper:

“I'm pulling you by the half-belt and all I can think is, what if it snaps?”

Maidenhair, written in Zurich and Rome, also actually took its rise from Mum, or more precisely from her diary, which she gave me before her last operation. A thick oilskin notebook, its yellowed pages covered with pencil notes—written not, I may add, in the “clinical” hand I was used to, but in a cosier, more girlish one. Mum began it when she was in her final year of school and continued writing in it for several years as a student. This was the end of the forties and the very beginning of the fifties.

I remember her telling me about the persecution of the “cosmopolites” in her institute, during which its best professors disappeared. But there's no mention of that in the notebook. It's a most ordinary girl's diary: yearning for someone to love, she listens anxiously to her heart—has the feeling already come over her, is it the real

thing? And it radiates a great deal of happiness. From books she'd read, from girlfriends, from the sun outside the window, from the rain. Its pages are awash with the unthinking youthful confidence that life will give you more than you asked of it.

It contains no traces of the fear that had gripped the country. As if there were no denunciations, no camps, no arrests, no queues, no penury.

I read it then and marvelled at the naivety of that blind girl who could not see what she had fallen into.

That girl was born into a prison nation, into darkness, yet she still looked upon her life as a gift, as an opportunity to realise herself in love, to give love, to share her happiness with the world.

When I found out that Mum's diary, too, had perished in the fire, I felt its continued grip on me. And at some point I realised: no, this was not the naivety and folly of a silly young girl who had failed to understand what was going on around her, this was the wisdom of the one who has sent, does send and always shall send girls into this world, no matter what hell we've turned it into.

The world around is cold and dark, but into it has been sent a girl so that, candle-like, she might illuminate the all-pervasive human darkness with her need for love.

Mum loved to sing, but knew she had no voice, and felt embarrassed. She'd sing when there was no one to hear her. Most often she sang what she used to listen to as a child. One of her favourite singers was Izabella Yurieva. My father had some old recordings of her romances, and would often put them on when we were still living together in the basement on Starokonyushenny Lane and in Presnia.

I was convinced then that all these voices from old records belonged to people long since dead. Stalin and Ivan the Terrible were much of a muchness to me—the distant past. Then it suddenly transpired that Izabella Yurieva was still alive, her records started being re-released and she began making television appearances. You could even go and see her at the House of Actors. I never did get to meet her while she was still alive.

When the singer died, I was staggered to learn that she'd lived a hundred years—she was born in 1899 and died in 2000—the entire monstrous, accursed Russian twentieth century.

I wanted to write about what I had felt and understood thanks to Mum's diary. I started writing about Bella. The result was *Maidenhair*.

Little of the singer's life remains—there are no diaries, no memoirs, leaving us with no more than a spare outline of her life story. In those years people were afraid of their own past—it was impossible to tell what might later put you in mortal danger. Danger might spring from any source: past meetings, things said, letters. People would destroy their past, would strive to rid themselves of it.

I wanted to restore her obliterated life to her. I began writing her reminiscences and diaries.

As far as possible, it was important for me not to fabricate anything. For example, I would pick out real-life accounts from the memoirs of people living in pre-revolutionary Rostov, restoring to my Bella her actual teachers at the Bilinskaya Gymnasium in Khakhladzhev House on Taganrog Prospect, the clerk in the Joseph Pokorny stationary shop on Sadovaya Street, where she bought her exercise books and quills, and that gymnasium porter who, having read "Kholstomer," bequeathed his

skeleton to an anatomical cabinet.

Detail by detail, I restored her vanished life history to her.

She never did anything but sing—like that grasshopper from the fable. Only in real life the survival of the ants building that Babelian ant-hill up to the heavens and turning into camp dust depended no less on her singing than on supplies for the winter. She was the proverbial candle that illuminated, however faintly, their darkness. She sang to the slaves about love. She helped them preserve human dignity.

I was eager to restore her life to her, if only in a book—and there's no other way in any case.

Of course, much in the life of Izabella Yurieva wasn't the same as in my Bella's.

But I know that when she and I finally meet, Izabella Danilovna shall forgive me and say:

“Don't worry yourself! Everything's fine. Thank you kindly!”

And now I return to the rest home on the Volga, where the woods are full of wild strawberries and everyone is still alive.

I see images from that time:

The herringbone brick path leading to the canteen.

The defiled nearby forest, strewn with scraps of paper, bottles, greasy newspapers.

The Volga in a downpour, white with frothy foam, as if there's laundry being done.

We've been mushroom picking in the faraway forest and are taking the track homewards, but our eyes still can't stop searching, and rove about the track verges.

And now, having gone for a morning swim in the Volga, Mum and I are coming back to our little house. We walk barefoot over the wet moss, dew seeping up between our toes. We climb the porch steps, already warmed through by the sun, and Mum draws my attention to our rapidly disappearing tracks:

“See, I'm flatfooted!”

Our room on a hot day: mushroom dampness, the curtains are held together by a pin, the wallpaper's curling and bulging, and Mum closes the creaky cabinet door, sticking a piece of cardboard into the crack so it doesn't open.

And now I see the boozier in the nearest town—Uncle Vitya's popped in for just a moment, and there we stand, Mum and I, waiting a good half hour for him in the heat, and still he won't come out.

I kept waiting for Uncle Vitya to ask me about Dad, but he never did, right up until the very last moment.

The night before we left I woke up with the thought that someday Mum would die. I lay there in the darkness and listened to her puffing in her sleep, snoring herself awake, then, after much tossing and turning, puffing away once again. I remember this acute sense of pity which wouldn't let me get back to sleep. It was strange somehow—she lay there in the bed next to mine, very much alive, and at the same time it was like she'd already died. Also, I really needed the loo. The houses had no toilets. During the day you had to go to a rather unpleasant establishment that stank to high heaven of chlorine, but at night I'd just find a spot somewhere near the porch.

I got up quietly and went out, carefully closing the door behind me.

Damp, mist, cold night air. The cusp of daybreak.

I stopped at the nearest bush. Steam rose from the stream.

And suddenly something happened to me. As if I'd stepped from the unreal into

the real. As if, like a lens twisted into focus, all my senses had been sharpened. As if the whole world around me had donned my skin, chilled in the August morning frost.

I looked around and couldn't understand what was going on: after all, I'd passed by this spot on so many occasions—and took notice of nothing; but now I saw, as if for the first time, that honeysuckle bush, and this rowanberry tree, and the towel forgotten on the washing line.

In the silence, sounds came forth from the mist: the distant hum of a motorboat on the river, the barking of dogs from the village on the far shore, the anxious call of a night bird, the whistle of a train at the station. Hoarse profanities floated in from the main road, accompanied by a girl's drunken guffaws.

And I heard myself breathing, heard my lungs gulping in life.

Suddenly I felt that I was no longer by a bush amidst the mist, but amidst the universe. No: I *was* the universe. That was the first time I experienced this remarkable sensation. And this was not only an anticipation of all my life to come. For the first time everything fused together, became a single whole. The smoke from an unseen bonfire and the wet rustling in the grass under my feet. Dad, who'd died no death, and Uncle Vitya, who'd asked no questions. What was and what would be.

Everything is still unnamed, nonverbal, because words for this do not exist.

And the Volga courses somewhere close by, swashing in the mist, but flows into no Caspian Sea.

And Mum died and yet lives still. She lies in her coffin with an Orthodox paper chaplet on her forehead, puffing away in her sleep in that rest home.

And everything melts into one: the half-belt overcoat, and Bobby Clarke's toothless grin, and Robert Walser's snowdrift, and that rickety 77 that never made it to Dorogomilovskaya Street, forcing us to splash our way through the puddles. And so, typing these words on my notebook, do I. As does the I now reading this line.

And the only way to die is to choke with happiness.

Translated by Leo Shtutin

1 I.e., the completely expendable members of penal battalions, which consisted primarily of convicted military personnel, Gulag inmates, and POWs.—*Trans.*

2 Enrolling in a higher-education institution with a military chair was (and remains) a way for young males to avoid otherwise compulsory military service.—*Trans.*

3 The first and third installments, respectively, of Brezhnev's ghostwritten memoir trilogy, for which he was awarded the Lenin Prize for Literature in 1980.—*Trans.*

4 An allusion to Solzhenitsyn's essay "Live Not by Lies" (1974), an appeal for moral courage.—*Trans.*

5 Varlam Shalamov's *The Kolyma Tales* (1978) and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) are classics of Gulag literature.—*Trans.*

Calligraphy Lesson

The capital letter, Sofia Pavlovna, is the beginning of all beginnings, so let us begin with that. It's like a first breath, a newborn's cry, you might say. Just a moment ago there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. A void. And for another hundred or thousand years there might still have been nothing, but suddenly this pen, submitting to an impossibly higher will, is tracing a capital letter, and now there's no stopping it. Being the pen's first movement toward the period as well, it is a sign of both the hope and the absurdity of what is. Simultaneously. The first letter, like an embryo, conceals all life to come, to the very end—its spirit, its rhythm, its force, and its image.

Don't go to any trouble, Evgeny Alexandrovich. I'm just a little chick and this is just my scratching. Why don't you tell me something amusing? Interesting things happen at your work every day, after all. All those crimes, murderers, prostitutes, and rapists.

Good God, what criminals? They're ordinary people. One blind drunk, another out of his mind, commit God knows what atrocity and are now thoroughly horrified themselves. We have no idea, they say, not a clue. And anyway, how could you even think that I, fine, upstanding man that I am, might do something like that? So they write petitions and solicitations and then more petitions and solicitations, begging for mercy, but no one has the slightest notion of how to hold a pen. Allow me to demonstrate. Lay the left side of the middle finger, down by the nail, against the right side of the pen. Like this. Lay the thumb, also close to the nail, against the left side, and let the index finger rest but not press on top, as if it were stroking the pen's back. The pen rests against the base of the index finger's third joint. These three fingers are called the writing fingers. Neither the pinkie nor the ring finger should touch the paper. There should always be space, air, between the hand and the paper. If the hand is constrained and lies on the paper, if even the tip of the pinkie rests there, the wrist has no freedom of movement. The pen must touch the paper lightly, easily, without the least tension, as if it were simply playing. The pinkie and ring fingers, I assure you, are nothing but bestial atavisms, and one can both write and make the sign of the cross without them.

You see, I can never get anything right. For instance, a few days ago I decided to drown myself. Really, don't laugh. I dashed off a note and taped it to the mirror. But first, for some unknown reason, I decided to stop in at the bathhouse. I have no idea why. Oddly enough, I remember this one sturdy woman washing her red hair across from me. She was sprinkled all over with freckles—on her breasts, her belly, her back, her legs. Her hair was thick and long and soaked up so much water that when she straightened up, the washtub was nearly empty and an entire waterfall came crashing down into it. When I finally got to the bridge, a barge was drifting by below. The men down there shouted something and laughed, as if to say, Come on, jump! I waited for it to pass, but right behind came another barge and another. They kept shouting and laughing from each one and there was no end to those barges in sight. All of a sudden it struck me as funny, too, so I went home, arriving before anyone else, thank God. I

took down the note, grabbed a loaf of bread, and gobbled up the whole thing practically. Actually, this is all totally beside the point. Go on. Now where were we?

Why don't we move on to the line then? But first, sit up straight and relax your shoulders. You can't write hunched over or at attention. You see, at the basis of everything is the line, the stroke. Take any two points in space, any two objects, and you can draw a line connecting them. There are these invisible strokes between all the things in the world. They make everything interconnected, unseverable. Distance is totally irrelevant. These lines can stretch like rubber bands, which only makes the connections between objects stronger. You see, there's a line stretching between the inkwell and this ace that fluttered down to the parquet, between the piano pedal and the branches' shadow on the windowsill, between you and me. It's like a tendon that keeps the world from falling apart. The pen-drawn line is that connection materialized, so to speak. And letters are nothing but strokes, or lines, held together by knots and loops for stability. The pen ties the line to the form, the shape, and endows it with meaning and spirit—humanizing it, so to speak. Try to draw a straight line! All right, now admire this trembling curly hair. Mortals can't draw a straight line. A straight line is nature's unattainable ideal toward which myriad curves aspire. Just as letters cling pell-mell, so too do they all have an inherent harmony and beauty—in the symmetry of their curves, the impetuosity of their slant, the correctness of their proportions. The pen is merely the registrar that faultlessly imprints on paper every dream and fear, every virtue and vice, taking us by the arm each time we press down. Everything that happens in your life immediately ends up on the tip of your pen. Tell me about someone, and I'll tell you exactly what kind of handwriting that person has.

So start on me.

You are magnificent. You are extraordinary. You have no idea how wonderful you are. And your handwriting, Tatiana Dmitrievna, is pure, fresh, childlike. The letters actually get bigger as they approach the end of the line.

You mustn't go on like that, Evgeny Alexandrovich! You're much too kind. Just look at a bit of my writing. Take this. No, better this. No, don't. Never mind about my handwriting. You're nothing but a sly widower, chasing after me, and now you're spinning tales for this gullible, simplehearted woman. I can see right through you even without any handwriting. After all, you aren't indifferent toward me, isn't that so? Well then, declare your love right now, this instant. Not that any of this matters. Better not to say anything.

Just think, it's been eight whole years since my Olya's been gone. I'm not saying she died, of course. I haven't told anyone about this since it happened, but I'll tell you. She and I had been through so much, but for better or worse we'd survived it all together, and suddenly I found myself living with a complete stranger, someone I didn't know at all. At one point Olya's right eye started to dim and she started going blind. I took her to Moscow, found a specialist, and they operated. Thank God, she recovered. After that, every six months, and later even more often, she went back for checkups. Whenever I asked, she would say everything was fine, but it felt like she was leaving something out. I was afraid Olya was going blind and wasn't telling me. She'd changed a lot. She was withdrawn, got annoyed over the least thing, and often cried at night. Before, she'd loved to read Kolya his little books in the evening; now she wouldn't touch them. I was frightened. I wanted to help somehow, realized there