

INVENTION OF A STORYLINE

Despondence, not spring: snow fell at Easter. Old women in villages dig paths around churches and walk past snowbanks in a procession, with icons and the cross. It's strange to look at them, half-dead, their dry mouths droning: *on those in the tombs bestowing life*. Candles go out, thick felt boots slip from feet, and the old women hold on to one other, but they walk. Though who is there to watch them? Nobody except perhaps the nocturnal birds sitting on bare black branches. The birds are quiet and the stars are silent, and they blink, all of them, the darkness alternating with the very existence of the old women.

Some say village churchyards have their own processions at Easter: the dead rise from their graves and walk in a circle along the fence, their empty chests singing, *Trampling down death by death*. This procession, if it actually does take place, must involve far more people than the one around the church. The living old women are but a drop in the ocean compared to the numbers of the deceased.

Earth spins on its imaginary axis and old women walk around villages with the deceased: *Christ is risen from the dead*.

Rivers flow, labored, through the woods, cold water rolls along with the snow, the wind blowing it forward. It would be terrifying for a person to be in darkness like that. But the drunks sleep and

the deceased have nothing to fear. And what could the old women fear when the priests proclaim to them: *Chri-i-i-st is risen?*

Masha isn't asleep. Unsettling music plays in her ears. She imagines she has no home, that she's walking alone along a road in the dark. Her body aches from fatigue and she would give anything for quiet and a warm bed. Masha's feet bleed, stars shine indifferently, and clouds race along the sky like ominous birds. She looks despondently at the windows of the houses: curtains are drawn. Nobody is expecting her. She begins to feel sorry for herself as she walks and her heart sinks, but there she is: at home, wearing a nightgown, with a blanket keeping her warm. And then the music stops when her player loses its charge. It goes quiet and she hears her heart thumping. Masha knows how to calm it. She walks to the kitchen in the dark, boards creaking under her tender feet, but creaking quietly—her parents won't wake up. Masha finds the refrigerator by feel and opens it: in the darkness, the pale yellow light accentuates the shadows of the table, cooktop, chairs, and Masha herself, a slender girl in a nightgown, with coppery coils of hair that fall almost to the floor when she leans toward the lighted shelves.

She takes a dish, closes the door, and uses a fork to eat icy-cold, amazingly delicious jellied meat in the dark. Now she doesn't want to sleep: the cold meat is too delicious and life is too sweet to sleep now. She leaves the dish and hesitantly picks up her father's cigarettes. She doesn't smoke, though she's tried it a few times, and now she feels like blowing puffs of gray smoke, the kind that pensively rolls and floats away. Quietly, so as not to break the silence, she puts on shoes in the hallway. It's cold and dark on the front steps of the house but that will make it all the sweeter when she comes back inside. Masha lights a cigarette and releases a thin stream of smoke straight ahead, not inhaling. The smoke rises, gets into her nose, and stings her eyes. Masha plays with the smoke, letting it out in puffs

and streams, and that makes her cheerful because it seems like she's not alone: it's as if the smoke itself is smoking with her. She feels like crying or laughing, but from the fullness of life, in order to fill the world with herself. When she's had enough of the cigarette, she puts it out on the ground and stuffs it in a crevice under the steps. Then she runs up to the fence, squats, and runs back to the house, when the gurgle of water hitting the ground has gone quiet. She quietly closes the door, takes off her shoes, and slips off to her room so she can get under the covers as quickly as possible and sit, hugging her legs with her arms, and experience happiness. Masha is happy.

Masha's parents sleep in the next room, sprawled on their bed. They sleep soundly and don't remember that they conceived their daughter on this very night, sixteen years ago. It was like this. Lena and Pasha were out for a walk, hand in hand, and they liked holding hands. Pasha smoked into a clear, gleaming sky and Lena squinted. They kissed, Lena pressed her palms against Pasha's back, and Pasha embraced her neck with one arm, hesitantly caressing Lena with the other, in the direction of her bottom. Lena's parents were out visiting someone and Lena served Pasha tea in the warm kitchen; later, she allowed her sweater to be pulled off. Pasha impetuously put Lena on the rug but she took him by the hand and led him to her room. There, on a made bed, Pasha frantically entered Lena on the fourth attempt and Lena endured the pain, clenching her teeth, with her eyes squeezed shut. They were both happy, each in their own way. Then Pasha left Lena's house because his parents were waiting for him at home, and Lena stayed and went to bed, her heart pounding hard. Now they're asleep together, and their daughter, God only knows why, can't fall asleep. The years have passed easily for her, moving along on their own: it's only adults who have to nudge time to keep it from stopping, heavy and sluggish as it is.

Masha crawls out from under the covers, sits at her desk, and turns on an old desk lamp covered with stickers. The animals and people on the stickers gaze at her with shabby, worn eyes. Musicians

and movie heroes smile in half-shadows on the walls. Masha has a lot of things. All of them are completely worthless to the rest of the world, but for her, for Masha, her room is a treasure trove, stuffed to the brim, like the Nibelungs' castle. When she turns on the lamp, these things—pieces of wood, bark, and clay, little icons and prayers on ribbons, as well as zodiac signs, Futhark runes, Chinese characters, plastic dogs, and little fabric mice on chains, threads, and leather strips that hang from corners of shelves, and from nails and pushpins—all step out of the darkness, covered with blurry shadows in the yellow light, and begin their tense existence. And then there are her books: books too big to hold in her hands, with colored pictures and informative captions; and thick old books with page corners thinned from being thumbed through, where heroes and heroines love each other so sweetly and painfully; and disintegrating textbooks, handed down from class to class each year, are held together with tape—drawn on each portrait, in pen, is a blue stubbly beard and disproportionately large genitalia if the person is standing. The books are lying on shelves, in a cabinet, on the desk, mingling with thin and thick notebooks whose margins bloom with blossoms, fish- and bird-eyes flash, and towers rise in cities; in addition to the notebooks, there are lonely torn-out pages with uneven edges, spiral-bound notepads, pens that have run out of ink, and gnawed pencils. Toys, dolls, and animals covered with dust sit under the ceiling, where darkness thickens. Some of them have glass eyes that reflect the yellow lamplight. Even more things are hiding in desk drawers, behind the closed doors of cabinets, in the underbelly of the couch, and in little bead cases and wooden jewelry boxes. After glancing around her depository, Masha opens the bottom desk drawer and takes out a sketchbook and a large box of colored pencils.

The essence of a river is the fish that live there. But people don't see fish when they look at a river. Meaning the only way to represent a river is to draw it in cross section, with fish swimming in it.

Anything else would be superficial. Ancient Egyptians understood this; children understand this. Masha also grasped this long ago and hasn't ever forgotten. There's no point in drawing what a person sees. In her album, then, a bird has four wings and a person's head grows out of his back.

Masha was six years old when Aunt Valya came to visit from the next town, softened up after beet-and-herring salad and vodka, and let out a piercing, emotional yelp: *You really need to sign your little girl up for a children's art circle!* Masha, who was playing on the floor with pencils and paper, looked out from under her brow at Aunt Valya with suspicion, then shifted her glance to her mother, as if asking for protection. But her mother was already a poor protectress: she'd also drunk some vodka and chased it down with herring. *Oh come on*, she said, waving off Aunt Valya. *But why not? She can*, Masha's father said dreamily.

A week later, Masha's mother explained that the art circle wasn't scary at all, that Masha would draw there with other children and a nice lady would explain what to do. This didn't ease Masha's suspicions: Masha already knew how to draw and didn't need the nice lady's explanations. To be nice to her mother, though, she allowed herself to be taken by the hand and brought to the children's art circle.

The children's art circle turned out not to be a circle at all but a square, a big rectangular room with cracking paint on the walls. Large windows that covered nearly a whole wall had each been fitted with heavy double frames divided into nine sections, as if for a game of tic-tac-toe. The white paint on them was peeling, too. That didn't trouble Masha, though, because something else was far more interesting: there were easels in the room. Masha had never seen an easel before. Easels, cases and boxes with paints, glasses full of pencils, and jars of brushes reconciled Masha to the art circle.

The little girls—only little girls went to the art circle—peeked at Masha over their shoulders, contorting their little faces. They pulled Masha over to their easels and showed her their little houses,

little rivers, smoke coming out of chimneys, and little doggies with doghouses. Masha saw that their little houses looked like little houses and their little doggies looked like little doggies but she didn't want to draw that way. When the nice lady tried to find out why (*Mashenka, come now, how many legs does a doggie have? Are there really birdies without beaks?*), Masha tensely kept quiet, though one time she burst into tears. The nice lady left her alone because she was kind and didn't really care anyway. Beyond that, when they put a marble in front of Masha and asked her to make a photolike drawing of it, Masha's face turned tragically tired (like when a person who can crack his knuckles is asked—*Come on, please, please*—to do so) and then she drew the marble so precisely that if there were some sullen guard who fed marbles to a cat, the cat would have immediately pounced on the paper.

Masha's hands fill with warmth and grow hot, like the eggs her mother boils to press against her nose, then they grow heavy like a fishing lure disappearing under water. She tears a sheet out of her album and draws with a pencil. Wind circles Earth in her drawing, catching the tops of trees and roofs of houses. Men and women sleep in high, soft beds, and old men smoke toxic cigarettes, leaning halfway out of doors. The smoke from their cigarettes mixes with a warm, damp snow that rushes from house to house. Old women grumble under stifling blankets, fumbling at the empty, warm place beside them. Dogs sleep uneasily, twitching their ears. The streets in Masha's city are empty and dark.

The city where Masha lives is always empty. The wind fills the emptiness with snow in winter, with sand and dust in summer, and with dead leaves and cold water in autumn. When the wind dies down, the emptiness begins to ring with insects, hum with smokestacks, and whisper with little melt-water brooks. Emptiness here isn't like the emptiness of a bottle from which everything has been drunk: here it's the emptiness inside the old yellow guitar Masha's father takes off the wall when despondence poisons his heart. The

guitar's emptiness sings along with him. The city answers God's despondency with its emptiness.

The men here are sluggish and the women are quarrelsome, jealous, and stingy. The people who live here are covered with the scab-like days they've lived, and toward old age they grow deformed, like death itself. There are more dogs than people here, and their howling crosses the city from end to end like a wave.

Masha's hands suddenly become light, as if she's asleep. She feels frozen, lifts her head, and looks out the window: dawn is pouring into the street like water diluting milk. Looking at her drawing, Masha is surprised it turned out so gloomy when she was so happy. Surprised, she wraps herself up in a blanket and, when she's warm and stops shivering, falls asleep: her breathing steadies.

Shadows gather around the sleeping Masha, thickening in the corners, flowing down walls, creaking the floorboards, seating themselves in chairs, folding hands on dry knees, and old women appear, out of the darkness, in the doorway and on the edge of the bed: they rub their hook noses with hook fingers, shake prickly chins, barely move the craters of their mouths. Their dim, dark eyes have sunk into the depths of their heads.

Women are immortal. Only men are mortal. Masha's grandmother and Masha's mother's grandmother and Masha's grandmother's grandmother all live in Masha, around Masha, and mumble her name with toothless mouths. The rustle of those voices breaks into Masha's sleep, disturbing it, but she doesn't wake up. She sleeps.

The old women can't scare off her sleep; Masha's cheeks are rosy under the blanket and her nostrils quiver evenly. The old women look at her, sighing and winking at one another from under their gray brows. There is tenderness and condemnation in their eyes. Tenderness because Masha's fresh life is worthy of tenderness. Condemnation and fear because the old women's flaccid skin and cold, lazy hearts know: Masha isn't like them, Masha is different. There is a lot of the masculine in Masha and she wants to steal

immortality from them, the old women, without even knowing it herself. To knead it with young, blood-filled hands and soften it like clay in the warmth of her fingers, shaping it into her own destiny.

The old women despondently shake their heads, finger the fabric of their skirts with hands swollen from the darkness, and say something to one other: they are lamenting.

When morning comes and the stars grow pale in the sky outside, the fears melt away because the dead cannot be among the living.

Masha goes to school—first crossing the street (an archipelago of bumpy asphalt in a puddly sea); then through an empty lot where dandelions bloom in summer, ferret tracks appear in winter, and in April frozen frogs shriek from streams that have begun flowing; and then between rows of gray, frightening garages with rusty doors—as if she’s headed to war. Masha knows (she’s been told this many times) she’s “not like the rest.” The force with which her desk-mate moves away from her (she rolls her eyes so everybody sees); and the force with which the teacher, fifty years old with a dyed roof of hair on her head, presses her fingers (“lady finger” tomatoes, that’s what they’re like) as she carefully traces a middling grade in the book; and the force with which her classmates push her when they run between classes (*Regina, move your ass...*) all combine to form the force of the hatred Masha experiences toward school. The only thing Masha thinks about at school in recent months, ever since she heard from a freckled girl in another class who was bragging that her brother... right, that this girl’s brother had gone to Petersburg and been accepted to a school and was living in a dormitory, and so that’s what Masha thinks about during classes, between classes, and after classes, walking down the hallway, stepping so her feet land only on the chessboard linoleum’s green squares, not the gray ones.

But then, when Masha comes home (garages, empty lot, the road), she’s by herself: her mother and father are at work. She kicks off her shoes (one sole is coming off a little but Masha doesn’t notice), takes off her jacket, tosses her backpack in the corner, and unwinds

her scarf in a spiral; her grimace of contempt for the world, which is essentially an item of clothing, too, dissolves.

Masha eats her soup as if she's in a race (it's impossible to explain to her mother that eating is boring), composes a sandwich out of cheese and a roll, and chews it, all yellow and orange, as she goes into her parents' room. Videocassettes sleep a sacred slumber, one on top of another, in that room: take the heavy ficus off the stool, climb up on the stool, open the cabinet door (the hinge groans), and there you have it. Cassettes and a videocassette player are something of a luxury here, though they turned up in Masha's house by chance: the cassettes and player were given to her father by Uncle Misha (who wasn't actually her father's brother, but Masha couldn't figure out how people were related, and she didn't care) to pay back a debt after a videosalon set up on the Moscow model went bust in six months. This was a few years ago, back when Masha couldn't turn on the machine herself; Uncle Misha'd hit the bottle pretty hard since that time and was now, as a former history teacher, often to be found at the market with his drinking buddies, explaining current events to them by drawing historical parallels.

On the cassette boxes, narrow-eyed men with headbands wave their flying feet, men in hats wield pistols, and half-naked women voluptuously squirm (this is why a ficus guards the cassettes). Not many of them have translations (the Moscow vendor forgot to warn Uncle Misha about this) but that doesn't matter to Masha: after feeding a cassette into the dusty black maw, she herself thinks up stories for what the small, bulging screen shows her. The stories are always about her. She annihilates villains, saves gorgeous women, and withdraws from the world (walks away, drives away, sails away) all by herself, hiding a smile: that's the final frame that Masha hardly ever gets a chance to watch because shoes tromp outside on the front steps and then her mother's home from work. There's a series of efficient motions and only the ficus, its leaves quivering, wails about the profaned resting place.

As she washes fingers blackened by other people's money, Masha's mother questions her—grades, soup, what she ate—then nods and squints: sandwiches again? First she washes the filth out of the wrinkles, cracks, and folds on her fingers with lye soap then she lathers her palms with the good soap (the kind she uses sparingly) and dries with a thick towel—each finger individually—and finally, casually, she asks Masha to go to her grandmother's. Her voice quivers with the slightest bit of alarm (*go on, go on, bring her some bread, talk with her, your grandmother's by herself for days at a time, you know that yourself...*). Masha doesn't know it, but her mother has listened to the dull, even sound of the phone ringing all day, pressing the receiver to her shoulder with her ear as she shouted out a little window—*All that's left are places by the lavatory, will you take those?*—but Masha's grandmother didn't answer.

Masha walks to her grandmother's, the city tosses shadows from building to building, dogs howl to one another, and bean soup splashes against the sides of the glass jar in her bag. Masha's grandmother loves bean soup. When she eats it, she brings the spoon to her mouth and pulls out the piping hot beans with her lips, as if they were hands instead of lips. Masha's grandmother loves food.

Masha's grandmother loves talking about her hungry childhood. When she does, Masha feels like her grandmother is reproaching her. That's just how it seems to Masha, though. In reality, when they're talking, the horror of starvation that has penetrated her grandmother's life blends with the pleasure of remembering her youth.

She was five the first time she went hungry, during the Civil War; the last time was after World War Two, when she was already just this close to becoming a grandmother. There's always been bread ever since, but Masha's grandmother feels a platonic passion for food—for the idea of food—just like how it was during Collectivization and the war. Her grandmother loves borscht when they bring her borscht and she loves cabbage soup when they bring

her cabbage soup. Today Masha is bringing her bean soup. It won't be needed today, though.

The door is open. Masha pushes the door and goes into the room: her grandmother is lying on the high bed (how many yellowed mattresses are there? two? three?) under a blanket and looking attentively at Masha. *Hello, hello, sit down*, she says and points to a chair next to the bed.

Masha puts the bag with the jar and bread on the table by the window and tensely sits down. Her grandmother catches Masha's hand with a chubby, dry palm and strokes it every now and then. Masha notices that her grandmother is lying in her robe under a blanket. There is a slipper on one foot; the other slipper is lying on the floor. Masha is at a loss over whether to take the other slipper off the floor and put it on the second foot or vice versa. Her grandmother has other questions that Masha knows by heart, and they're awkward to answer: what grade is she in, how are her marks, and does she have a beau. Ninth, fine, no.

Her grandmother nods with pleasure at Masha's responses then sits up a little and nudges her pillow with an elbow. She's now half-sitting in bed and the corner of the blanket has slid to the floor. Masha springs to straighten it but her grandmother catches her hand, presses it between her two palms, and lists a set of instructions: obey your mother; be a good student; obey your mother; love your parents, they love you; be a good student. The next instant, her grandmother dies.

It appears to Masha that her grandmother's eyes are wide open and that she's grasped everything and seen everything from some external point: her life (piglets, cow, drunkard husband, collective farm, bonus pay, one television for the whole village, a son dead of methylated spirits, breadcrumbs in a drawer, china service from Leningrad, Stalin's death, a lover who married one of her friends), the life of all people, the horrible fate of an unlucky country, the heavy din as the cart of that world rolls over the precipice, the

whistle of the wind on the streets of a dying city, the pounding of a thousand discos, and the blows of hammers driving piles into Earth's tender body... and then, an instant later, the dead body of a hairless, yellow old woman with a matte, waxen shine to her skin is lying in front of Masha.

Masha sits for a while, vacantly gazing into her grandmother's still eyes. Then she suddenly notices she's still holding her grandmother's hand; it's heavy and Masha places it on the blanket. She shakes her grandmother by the shoulder. Looking around, everything is as it had been—the round white alarm clock with the little copper feet ticks, the shadow of a pear tree moves on the lace curtain, a scratched yellow wardrobe darkens and smells of old things—and Masha turns her attention to the bag she brought. It's standing on the table, holding the jar of bean soup, still slightly warm. Masha's thoughts are so commandingly occupied by the question of whether or not to take the jar home that she forgets about the telephone that stands in the entry hall under a snow-white doily: she ought to make a call. Masha pulls the bread out of the bag, breaks off a piece of a heel baked to black, chews it, and looks out the window.

After she's done chewing, she pulls the jar out of the bag, takes off the tight-fitting plastic lid and carefully—so as not to spill—carries it out to the yard. She slowly pours the bean soup around the pear tree. Masha comes back inside, rinses the empty jar under a stream of cold water that smells of iron, puts the lid back on the jar, and takes it with her. That's everything.

On her way back home, Masha places her feet randomly, either into a wet snowy *crème* or into dark tufts of last year's grass, and feels a strange power within, as if her grandmother's death has given her some sort of gift: confidence or a lucky opportunity right now to do what she envisioned and planned out long ago. After stopping at a fork in her route—to the left is a paved road with streetlights, straight ahead is a dark path through bushes—Masha

chokes for a minute on the clear understanding that this will happen after all.

And it will be like this: Masha will leave this city after overcoming her mother's resistance and surviving a multiday hysteria. Her mother will urge, cry, implore, coax, sob, curse, and forbid, using her parental will. Her mother's despair will be tangible: Masha will see it in eyes red from tears, in the wet wrinkles on her face, and in tenacious fingers closing in to grab Masha by the hair, like when she was a child, to pound some sense into her. And in her mother's pleading humiliation, too, as she sits with one buttock on the sofa, *But what are we going to do without you, have you thought about that?* No. Masha will have an ally in this bacchanalia of female despondence: her father, who will initially bug his eyes out and start laughing for effect—*What?!—*and of course he'll say no, *go do your homework, don't scare your mother*. But then, somehow recklessly inspired, he'll burst into tears and talk with Masha the whole night, after driving her mother out of the kitchen and, toward morning, after keeping quiet for about a half-hour, take out the metal buckwheat canister where there's money hidden away for a rainy day, exactly enough for a ticket to Leningrad (they still call it Leningrad here). A week later, after closing her ticket window for lunch, Masha's mother, who's just aged an entire life, will spill tears on the sickly train-station computer but still manage to pound out a ticket for her daughter.

Masha sees all this not as a sequence of events but in the unity of a complete storyline, in the fullness of a life taking shape. Her clenched fists hurt and—Masha feels this—will spurt warm blood any minute. Masha crosses the pitted road covered with slushy snow and walks away, along the dark, narrow path: it's the short way home.

Masha doesn't know it—and will never know, since the only person who knew this has already died (that being her grandmother)—but this place, the intersection of the narrow path and the road leading to the city, was important in her grandmother's

life. Many years ago, Masha's grandfather, who'd gone to the largest city in the region to take courses, was coming home on this road. In the pocket of his new jacket were a graduation certificate from the courses—he's now a machinist's assistant—and a passport smelling of fresh ink. Masha's grandmother is sitting alongside him, squeezing his forearm with both hands. She'd fallen in love with this strong and already mustachioed little man and one morning—her parents, thrown for a loop by new Soviet ways, just tossed up their hands—the cheerful tobacco-scented director of the newly painted civil registry office smilingly pounded their passports with a rubber stamp: *Congratulations to you, comrades!* Masha's grandmother, who is pressing against Masha's grandfather, holding a bundle of clothing with her feet as she bounces around in a truck overrun with straw and cow shit, gazes at a road overflowing with sun, and feels an inevitable, unjustified happiness for what might be the only time in her life. This is the same grandmother whose redundant body is now growing cold in a stinking bed.

Back at home, after her mother's hysterics, screaming, tears, smelling salts, a call for the ambulance, and tears, tears, tears, Masha locks herself in her room and writes *Maria Regina, Maria Regina* in all kinds of ways in her sketchbook, between unfinished profiles and tall buildings in foggy cities.