PRESENT IMPERFECT

Stories by Russian Women

edited by

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Introduction by

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When there weren’t any men around, or men’s voices, or the scent of a man, she would sit with her legs spread wide apart and listlessly pick at the chipped polish on her fingernails.

Her name was Raymonda Rybnaya, but everyone called her Monka or Monechka. She picked up the surname from her husband; for the first name she was indebted to her mother, my aunt, Gertruda Borisovna Faykina. Nature had endowed my aunt with a strong taste for beautiful things, as a result of which she was invariably carting from apartment to apartment (and there and then would hang up in the new place) a portrait of the writer Hemingway, a calendar for August 1962 with a lemon-faced Japanese girl reclining in her birthday suit, and a 3-ruble Christ dying on a plaster cross. My aunt’s other innate weakness was her uncontrollable passion for lying. Our weary relatives said that she couldn’t take a breath without lying. As a result of this predilection of hers there arose the touching legend, according to which she had chosen the name for her daughter solely in memory of her brother Roman, who had died at the front. (When she told the story, my aunt, where necessary, would make significant pauses.) A slight flaw spoiled this legend. The fact is that Gertruda Borisovna had a son who also came into the world after the death of this heroic uncle and, by the way, before Monechka’s birth—Gertruda Borisovna had tried out names for him ranging from Askold (Asik) to Erazm (Erik), and finally settled on Nelik. Kornely (Nelik) subsequently became a policeman.
Here’s a photograph. Monka’s fourteen and I’m, correspondingly, four. We’re standing next to a snow-covered spruce by my grandfather and grandmother’s house. Monka has a broad forehead, dimpled cheeks, but her eyes are frankly wily, or rather, they’re already quite lascivious. I only go up to her waist, I peer demandingly—and look a good deal like a wise, stern, and stubborn old woman.

From the myriad, scattered fragments, the stream of oblivion for some reason retrieves the one where Gertruda Borisovna is getting Monka ready for Young Pioneer camp.

My aunt is standing in the kitchen, hurriedly cramming ruby-colored salad into a fruit jar with a wooden spoon and with a lovely nuance of fatalism, shouts very loudly, since the neighbors had gone out, to her daughter on the other side of the communal apartment.

“And you better remember! I only drank one shot when I was sixteen! And I got Nelik with that glass!”

But Monka is already rushing down along the bank of Obvodny Canal with the laminated suitcase.

She’s running, smiling, skipping, her skirt, as always, much shorter than the customary length, Monka doesn’t change, she’s forever fourteen—the only things that change are the posters and slogans (I can’t make them out too well through the shroud of time, dust, blue-gray exhaust, and factory smoke): A man in a heavy space suit is making the Roman gesture for victory, the gesture is intercepted by a decorated war veteran with eyebrows as thick as a moustache—she’s running, smiling, skipping, the curves on the diagrams undeviatingly creep upward, road signs are glimpsed fleetingly, the canal is having a hard time pushing its turbid waters forward to God knows where—she’s running, smiling, skipping, a model youth displays his white teeth, picture-perfect, and there’s the Olympics bear, suspended over a sea of round loaves of bread and embroidered peasant women’s headdresses, diligently aping the cosmonaut, the old man, and the youth—she’s running, smiling, skipping, alongside the road monotonously stretches a red fence: XXVI XXVII XXVIII, without breaking stride she picks up a twig and loudly runs it along the fence: dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r! All of a sudden the parapet comes to an end, and the flat, unusually deserted bank lures her toward the quiet water. She looks with fascination at her dissolving reflection. The plash of a solitary oar is particularly distinct in this stifling soundlessness. “Fare”—the oarsman demands in sign language. She throws open the small suitcase. A fountain erupts—green stockings mended with blue thread, a red skirt with a safety pin instead of a clasp, wedge
shoes, makeup, a bra that's been ruined from too many washings and with a torn shoulder strap, a bright-colored blouse with the triangular vestiges of an iron, a gauze kerchief, worn-down boots, a ginger wool dress all nubby from wear, when she flings over the sleeves she displays the dark semicircles at the armpits. "You don't have to," the oarsman says soundlessly. She pouts like an offended little girl. Her confused expression fluidly spills over into a languid, naughty, coquettish one and finally is frankly inviting. She playfully giggles and smirks suggestively. The oarsman is immobile and old. Beaming, she narrows her eyes—in which legions of blue devils dance frenziedly—and shielding herself with her palm she whispers something to him, but I can't hear what. The oarsman begins to laugh. He laughs for a long time, light-heartedly—for the first time in a century of monotonous, joyless labor. His loud laughter cuts open the red carcass of the sunset, and the sun, scandalously violating the law of the universe, sharply makes a backward movement, illuminating for a moment the rapid-flowing water. "Fine," the oarsman says boldly. He even looks a bit younger.

* * *

Monechka's talent, as is the case with infant prodigies, manifested itself early, tempestuously, and noisily.

We would often sleep together when we went to grandmother's dacha. Once, accidentally, I felt a rough triangle of hair on Monka—in a spot where, to my mind, hair couldn't grow. I was even more surprised that she clearly approved and encouraged my discovery. But then my aunt sat me down on the chamber pot.

Monka hadn't used a chamber pot for a long time. More often than not she wasn't home at night. She would run off to late-night dances and in the morning somebody wearing a cap would help her off his bicycle.

"That's Vladik!" she would explain with extreme righteousness, of course judiciously not approaching the porch. "Don't you recognize Vladik? ... It's Vladik!"

It was a tough job keeping Monka home on a summer night. She would already have disappeared by morning. And if they tried to keep her home in the morning, then in the afternoon she would volunteer to go to the market, the center of the dacha settlement, to help grandmother carry the groceries—and she'd be gone for several days in a row.
They would thrash her. Monka's daddy, Arnold Aaronovich, a hero of the Finnish campaign, would unhurriedly wind his army belt onto the hand with the missing fingers. His pants would fall down and he'd step out of them. Wearing just his underpants, this snorting beast would start to approach his teenage daughter, who would have already knocked over chairs and was pounding at the door that had been locked earlier. Fixing on Monka his only eye, the cyclops-tarantula effortlessly accomplished his capture. Monka was rooted to the spot, frozen stiff in the corner. Her parent worked her over silently, with pleasure, from time to time voluptuously crying out and panting hard.

But her wet panties didn't have a chance to dry before Monka would be off once again.

I still have the tenth-grade anthology of Soviet literature that was supposed to be hers. Gertruda Borisovna picked it up secondhand from a warehouse, along with a box of compasses. As befits an old maid, the anthology is decrepit and chaste. Nobody had attempted to cut its signatures, the pages remained virginally clean, the dates of the lives of the classic writers aren't underlined, and there aren't even any doll-like eyes with implausibly long, curly eyelashes in the margins. True, the gray cover is stained reddish-lilac, like port wine, and on the flyleaf some simpering fool has set forth in cloying penmanship:

Study, my dear,
After all, time passes,
And the years go by.
You won't notice,
When you've become grown up,
And it will be late
To study then.

This book contains a number of valuable bits of information. Gorky, comfortably settled in between Zhdanov and Molotov, confidentially informs them that Man has a proud sound, while the perpetually agitated Stepan Shchipachev holds his slogan up high: KNOW HOW TO VALUE LOVE!!! LOVE IS NOT SIGHS ON A BENCH!!! Monka was delighted with this dictum, which she dragged back from a prenatal clinic during summer vacation after the seventh grade. The dictum was beautifully written on a health poster, which in the style of charades linked together a bottle of 40 proof, a nefarious park bench, and an inexperienced couple as well as the moon and the equivocal shape of an infant. I don't think that
Monka ever learned the name of the author of this text. She didn’t endure the tedium of learning to the end, so the vacation after the seventh grade became the last one.

“What can they teach me!” she declared contemptuously early in the summer of 1959, and those words became a matter of principle.

Monka was always one for carelessly cursing, swearing, vowing, and promising to give something up. This time, however, she remained true to her word: I never again saw a book in her hands.

But the last time before that was when I looked through a crack in the wall. It was the two-volume Nuremburg Trial. Monka and her girlfriend had locked themselves in the barn and, sniggering obscenely, were studying the indecent pictures of the naked men and women in this book. I caught them at it. They scared me and begged me not to tattle to the grown-ups, and I didn’t—what would have been the use?

She was always surrounded by noise and scandal. Her absences were accompanied by a general commotion, not a bit less intense in passion and volume than her morning arrivals. Arnold Aaronovich would yell at Gertruda Borisovna that she was bringing up a whore and a freeloader; Gertruda Borisovna with the regal air of a queen in exile was mending a cigarette burn in Monka’s dirty skirt (“Why do you do everything for her? For that filthy cow?” “Arnold, I’ll strangle you.” “To sit with her legs apart like that—she’s already grown-up, and to mend her skirt …” “Arnold, if you don’t shut up right now, those will be your last words!”); with his policeman’s straightforwardness, Nelik put in that you could get syphilis; grandpa, who used to happen upon Monka’s panties, all brittle from ancient menstrual blood, in the most unexpected places, would shout that it attracted mice.

That summer they decided to lock Monka in the kitchen for the night. It was a humane plan. They had taken into account her weakness for having a snack, especially at night, and out of despair consoled themselves with the hope that this would compensate, at least partially, for the prohibition on something tastier. Under the window, in the grass, they fixed up her brother Nelik, whose policeman’s passion for law and order was most easily satisfied at home.

Next morning the kitchen was empty. For a moment Kornely even allowed that he had gone mad. But after applying the requisite talents of his calling, he ascertained that Monka had leapt into the cellar—and more than likely had done the same through the cellar window. There was one thing the policeman couldn’t understand: If she was clever enough to climb through the hole, that meant that she had gone head
first, but Monka’s head couldn’t have made it through, because it wasn’t small in the least on account of her unbelievably thick black hair, which they had once shaved along with the lice eggs, and had then smeared with kerosene—all this resulted in an even more luxuriant new mane. He courageously hurled himself into the opening—and, of course, got stuck. Grandpa came running at his cries for help. Cursing up a storm, they hammered up the hole tightly, and for good measure they reinforced the patch job with a thick, blood-stained beam on which grandpa, after spreading with his boots the wings beating in the dust, used to chop off the chickens’ heads.

So the next time Kornely got the urge in the middle of the night to have a drink of water, and not wanting to risk absenting himself to go to the well, he went to the kitchen, and Raymonda was lying on her mattress on the floor like a good little girl. Next to her a big, athletic fellow, wearing nothing but his tattoos, was diligently trying to have his way. A sailor’s striped shirt and a pack of Belomor cigarettes had been tossed onto a stool.

“This is Yurik,” Monka said as an invitation to share her happiness.

“What, you don’t recognize Yurik? It’s Yurik!”

Kornely found that he had so much to say and that the words were so ponderous that they formed a cold lead stopper in his throat. Rolling his eyes, white and round, like buttons, and with uniform buckle drawn, he dashed around the house after the screaming and, incidentally, completely naked Raymonda, which woke up the parents’ sole comfort, Patrick the standard poodle, who joined the marathon with loud barking, particularly loud in the enchanted emptiness of the white night. Rushing to the window like a whirlwind, Gertruda Borisovna spewed forth her voice, “Patrick, don’t run like that, Patrick! You’ll give yourself a heart attack, Patrick!”

A policeman showed up—at that very instant Monka scrambled through a hole in the fence and, already a bit more slowly, given her free-and-easy lazy ways, her buttocks retreated, twinkling, on the other side of the road.

Gertruda Borisovna majestically froze by the window shade, imparting to it the significance of a curtain in a theater. The nylon flounces and ruffles turned a magnificent pink on the green nightshirt that she called a peignoir, which couldn’t have better suited the pale violet smoke of her hair. The smoke fluttered ghostly in the wind. Gertruda Borisovna was filled with sorrow and a sovereign’s gravity. She resembled a widowed queen mother. And she told Kornely what she always did in such cases: “Leave her alone. She’s not long for this world anyway.”
Then, acutely sensing the incompleteness of the scene, she added, “Believe me, I know what I’m saying. I just had a dream ... oh, my heart’s acting up.” She winced, very precisely drawing out the pause, and sto­ically continued, “Not a pleasant dream, believe me.”

Gertruda Borisovna’s unpleasant dream portrayed the ominous inter­play of a white dove, our late great-grandmother dressed in black—and Raymonda, naked, completely naked, which, as everyone knows, rep­resents illness; what’s more, Raymonda was eating raven’s flesh, and that signifies the very ... thing itself.

“I don’t know where I’m going to get the strength to endure it,” Gertruda Borisovna ended with a flourish. “And after what I’ve endured already—who would’ve guessed?” The Biblical pathos was slightly marred by the fishwife delivery.

If you were to translate Gertruda Borisovna’s monologue into the strict language of facts, then it turns out that Monka recently had a bout of rheumatic fever complicated by severe heart trouble. The doctors lis­tened to the irregular knocking, shook their heads, and talked about a sensible regimen and fortifying measures. Precisely from that time on Monka’s heart began clamorously to take in the devil only knows what kind of men; each found a special place, each had a special spot, because all the spots were special; with inexhaustible readiness this crippled heart accepted, accommodated, and warmed anybody in the slightest de­gree endowed with the attributes of male characteristics, and thankful in advance for these dizzyingly beautiful attributes, it forcefully pumped the energized blood—through the veins, through the arteries, and once again gathered in the chest—where the heart warmed it, and warmed it­self, and burned. Evidently, this was the sensible regimen for her body and the primary, fortifying measure upon which she had stumbled intuitively. Disease and cure were united. They manifested this interrelation­ship with alarming regularity. And Gertruda Borisovna justifiably sup­posed that Monka couldn’t continue like this for long.

Due to their exaggerated notion of the role of the work ethic, her par­ents got her a job as a dishwasher in an ice cream parlor on Obvodny Canal, not far from home. Gertruda Borisovna thought that Monka would come home for lunch so that she could eat right.

Meanwhile, a little work was really just the thing: The broad-shoul­dered men ordered champagne, the ladies broke off pieces of chocolate, the radio played loudly, and Monka, standing at the sink all day long with her shining blue eye at a hole, watched this never-ending festival of life, and her buttocks, as if they had a life of their own, independent of
the rest of her body, swayed back and forth, twitched, and rotated as they were seized by the passionate urge to dance.

She didn't do anything on her own. She couldn't exist alone for a second.

* * *

Monka is toiling away under a bush at grandmother's dacha, painting her chewed fingernails with a red pencil. Bring me this, she says to me as I run past, bring me that. The little mirror, you know the one, in my purse ... fingernail clippers ... the thing to curl my eyelashes. But do you know what I want now? Guess. She dreamily rolls her heavenly eyes and affectionately sighs. You don't know? Her plucked eyebrows, which resembled mice tails, rise in deliberate surprise. Come on! It's nothing! She squints her eyes in disbelief (you've obviously gone soft in the head!), she capriciously wrinkles her little duck's nose. Well, have you finally understood? No? Her patience is at the breaking point. Her soft, freckled lips form an offended Cupid's bow. Well! This is too much! She sits down and starts to beat time with her foot, but it's more like she's wagging her tail. I stand with a sympathetic, vacant look on my face.

Then she parts her lips—and utters her very favorite word: "Tr-r-r-eat ..."

Monka, as usual, says it as if she were mimicking someone who resembles herself a great deal, someone whom everybody, herself included, of course knows is being a pest. She twists her mouth like a clown, and her nose—with the little flat area at the tip—crinkles into a fist, as if she were blowing her nose. There's a nasal quality. "Tr-r-r-eat." In general, it's all rather sickening.

Should I bring it this second? On a little tray?

A treat is some herring, an apple. Sugar. Bread and a lightly salted cucumber. "What's with her, she doesn't have legs of her own?" her relatives rage. But Monka is already pestering me about a glass of water or juice. Fruit punch. Sunflower seeds!

This was nothing more than her clever little tricks. In actual fact Monka simply needed company—for any routine undertaking. Her blood circulation, it would appear, functioned only in conjunction with the indispensable condition of the uninterrupted involvement of everybody, or at least somebody, in the process of the activity at hand. With-
out company she couldn't breathe, she grew dull and withered. Evidently her body from the beginning had been intended solely for the joint realization of specified rituals.

* * *

She's watching me with a look that promises some wonderful adventure. Once again I'm standing sympathetically and vacantly. She's losing her patience. Again she quickly winds up all of her pantomimic contortions. Finally, she grumingly drawls, “Let's go you know where.”

Sometimes she designates this differently: “Come with me to the potty!”

Or like this: “Should we go to the trust?”

Or: “Do you want to go to the toilet?”

She had plenty of synonyms! All these names, of course, referred to the wooden, two-roomed little hut behind the barn. As she came out of her side, she would immediately share her interesting impressions.

* * *

She had girlfriends everywhere. The exhaustive description Monka supplied for any one of them was confined to the familiar formula: “It's Galka! What, you don't know Galka? It's Galka!”

At first they were all unmarried girls, full of foreboding languor and immodest dreams. Later—divorced, battered women, or married ones, full of foreboding languor and immodest dreams of divorce, a lover, and a new husband. In the interval between these set cycles of their transformations fell—randomly—Raymonda's own marriage.

An alley cat can always guess precisely which grass to chew so it doesn't up and die. Monka's powerful instinct, evidently in very early childhood, luckily recommended that the indispensable joint activities are more dependably realized with persons of the opposite sex.

This proved to be the major discovery of her life.

And indeed, it was as if she'd had a premonition that her childhood girlfriends would hardly always be there to keep her company while she looked at pictures. And by its very nature this discovery guaranteed her
a firm and, so she dreamed, a sufficiently long-term point of contact with
the company of men. In this most natural of associations for two people,
she was forever protected from lonely depression, she was saved by her
communion with the very essence of life. This exit from the dead end
opened up golden, rosy horizons. She was excited, and the peddlers of
delicacies at the earthly feast unwittingly poured her a slightly larger
drop of peanut oil.

In her wedded state there was no hint of the marriage of a grown
woman and everything of adolescent play, or more precisely, of play that
had not taken place. Well, the overripe maiden had ventured to play
house, and well, she cooked everything: She made plantain soup,
pinecone cutlets with a garnish of finely chopped glass for the main
course, and little sand cakes with fresh raspberries for dessert; well, she
placed the dishes on the tiny table; the dolls—diapered and lulled, were
sleeping. What now? Somehow the game's not going well. It's boring ...

But in general, everything was going all right for her.

And so she remained forever dazzled by the unfading Scheherazade-in­
the-harem mystery of marriage. This mystery somehow never lost its charm.
It bewitchingly twinkled, it invitingly gleamed at the end of the day and
helped her bear the mocking, daily whip. Monka patiently fulfilled all the
rituals of the game—precisely because this adult, dishonest game called the
Institution of Marriage, a game that she had not thought up, and which was
exhausting and aggravating with its heaps of insipid and trivial rules, te­
dious rites, and hourly Draconian fines, a depressing game that guaranteed
the hardy victor 100 percent stupefaction—this game possessed a limited
nightly ray of light. Crushed by everyday life, these female creatures—
those who founder and, in accordance with their ordinary talents for fast­
ing, regularly pay off the nightly quitrent of wedlock (and receive according
to their labor), in this ray of light they are able only to extract their tem­
porary allowance of virtual asexuality—a stale cake seized as compensation for
a slave's patience, an ox's labor, and a dog's life, but many are deprived of
that cake, that final responsibility of a day's labor.

It wasn't like that for Raymonda. With frenzied delight she pushed her
way through to the long-awaited, shining chink, as narrow as a needle's
eye—and landed in the hypocritically concealed paradise.

A Tree grew in the garden of paradise.

The books that Monka didn't read call it by different names: the Staff
of Life, the Root of Passion, the Coral Branch, the Beast, the Devil, the
Little Sparrow, the Night Snake, the Viper, and even Dagger, the Maiden
Spoiler—depending on the temperament and aesthetic foundations of
the author's nationality as well as the local climatic conditions, the calorie content of the food, and the author's personal inclination for exaggeration.

In paradise, and only there, while Monka embraced her Tree of Happiness, her husband, Kolya Rybny, would call her his little mouse, goose, or lamb or even his little ragamuffin (probably an attempt to extol her reckless slovenliness).

Paradise abounded in shameful splendors.

While abiding in paradise, Monka would soundly forget the day's trials. The voice of common sense had long ago convinced her girlfriends that Hymen, like the proletariat, had nothing to her name save fetters. Raymonda didn't believe that. For her the gilded core of wedlock continually beamed with honey and moonlight and bestowed its glimmer upon the dull realities of day, decking out a chicken's tailfeathers with the design of firebirds and peacocks.

In general, Monka knew the school conduct code. No smoking in the open, no putting on lipstick during class, no matter how much you want, even if you really want to, and you're better off not drawing obscene graffiti on the desks. It was the same thing in the Institution of Marriage. One ought to pretend that the main thing were classes, good deeds, and exemplary behavior, but the main thing was something completely different, and, as is the custom among adults, hidden from sight, and Monka was at a loss to understand how those puffed-up A students could so deftly pretend that they were only interested in homework, that they were completely absorbed by these assignments (as if that were the reason for going to the Institute), and they had absolutely nothing to do with that delightful, radiant ... Oh!

Gradually Monka accepted this routine of life, one that she had not instigated. She did the disgusting lessons, when she could she did the minimum, and when she was lucky she loafed, but she didn't grumble at all, since she thought that all this was the usual requirement to get that examination question that was in such short supply. You only had to endure: morning, noon, and night. Just think.

* * *

She was living on Obvodny Canal as before, due to the fact that Gertruda Borisovna and her husband had received their own apartment. In the
room appeared a homemade couch and a daughter (Kolya Rybny was a skilled craftsman), and the top of the rented piano that was always open was permanently graced by sheet music to the Ukrainian folk song “Oy, the wedding band has cracked” (Monka was sending the child to music lessons). Behind the piano and parallel to it lay a mummy of small proportions—paralyzed from head to toe. Monka’s mother-in-law, acquired as a supplement to her out-of-town husband—she just lay and lay there, looking at the ceiling.

Monka would sing resoundingly until she was hoarse the ditty that had been written by somebody else: She gave her neighbors curlers, loaned them a fiver until the next morning, abandoned the child until evening, and, generously covered with bruises, she would explain to Gertruda Borisovna that she had fallen, bumped into a piece of furniture, or even that she had suffered an injury on public transportation. After such explanations she would usually live with mama for several days and everything would go on as before. Yes, Monechka knew by heart absolutely all the little words and all the notes, from beginning to end, of that grown-up ditty.

At this time she was already working in the bar at the Baltic Train Station. A small train car, such as you’d see at the beach, served as the bar. The frivolous appearance didn’t fit the exhaust-filled no-man’s-land, but the rickety construction was entirely appropriate. On the outside the train car was thickly plastered with American-looking stripes and stars, and inside it offered cognac, toffee, and dried-out cheese, but the main thing was the sinister semidarkness, so delightful after the inhospitable day, a dissolving semidarkness in which a silver ball twinkled as it floated divinely on the waves of imported music.

Monechka shone behind the counter, like the incarnation of a rainbow. Around her the fruits of the Mandragora ripened and became juicy. The impatient flirts were so decked out for love, so lushly bristling with love’s arrows, that they looked like porcupines with wings. Monka poured drinks left and right. She winked, giggled, and danced. She even managed to read cards and tell her girlfriends’ fortunes.

It’s true that the woman doorkeeper had blabbed that Monka and her eight-month pregnant belly had climbed a drain pipe to see her lover. Well, maybe she had climbed it, so what? Nobody else had seen her, okay? And it’s true that Kolya Rybny at an inopportune moment had found in Monka’s purse an empty envelope, on which instead of the return address was written: “Joke lovingly, but don’t love jokingly!” The
address was given as general delivery, the handwriting was unfamiliar, and it was postmarked Leningrad. Well, the slut ...

* * *

And that's when Gertruda Borisovna enters the scene once again. The fact of the matter is that apart from the two passions already mentioned, she had two other overwhelming ones. You could bet any amount of money, even the Hermitage itself if it were in private hands, that nobody in all his life would guess what these hobbies were. My aunt would simply end up in the Guinness Book of World Records with these hobbies of hers if you discovered the interesting aspects of each one.

She exchanged apartments for herself—and wives for her son. There was no direct correlation or logical dependence between these two pursuits (all the more so since her son lived on his own), but they occurred constantly. To be more precise, the start of the game was signaled when my aunt got her first separate apartment. But from that moment on the exchanges occurred constantly, so it was possible to compare their tendencies: Auntie's apartments became better and better, while her son's wives became so bad that they couldn't get any worse. That is, it was as if an inversely proportional metaphysical dependence existed between these two undertakings.

One shouldn't interpret this to mean that my aunt as if in some parable found an ear of corn in a field, exchanged that for a belt, exchanged that for a birch-bark basket, tra-la-la, and finally, say, moved into nothing less than the Yusupov Palace. In her exchanges there was nothing of that despondent advancing movement forward, just as there weren't any monotonously triumphant spiral revolutions; my aunt loved the pure idea and, it seems, she intuitively subscribed to the notion that the goal is nothing, motion is everything.

Each dwelling that arose on Gertruda Borisovna's path possessed a heap of new virtues in comparison to the previous ones, that is, you couldn't even compare them. During this time, Monka was voraciously savoring the honey of domestic bliss and continued, trembling, to crave it insatiably—in other words, during this five-year honeymoon, Gertruda Borisovna managed to move from Karl Marx Street to Barmaleyev Lane, from there to Rasstanaya, from there to Mozhaiskaya, from there to the
Fontanka, and from the Fontanka to Obvodny. The Obvodny apartment was near the Frunzensky Market and, incidentally, not far from Monka, or from the place where my aunt had spent her youth, but then she moved to Pushkin Street, since, in her own words, she had dreamed since childhood of living there: “It’s quiet! Culture! The greenery!” — and later she moved to Vosstaniye: “A bay window! The ceilings!” — and later to Vladimirsky Prospect: “The center! The market!” — and later to Tchaikovsky Street: “The Tauridic Gardens! To walk with Patrick!” — and later to Griboyedov Canal: “The subway station Peace Square! The first floor!” — and later to Sofya Perovskaya Street: near the DLT department store.

The one-room apartments became two rooms, the two rooms once again became one room, and then later again two rooms, then later again one room, you couldn’t tell the first one and the last one apart.

The ritual of the move always followed the same pattern. Having seen off the moving van, my aunt would hang her favorite pictures and quickly shove the junk out of sight. All that took her half a day. Then she would sit down at the telephone.

“Well? There isn’t any comparison!” My aunt summoned her customary pathos and would roll her eyes. “It was stifling there! The ceilings were just under eight feet. But here! You could put in a second floor! Arnold is going to do it … no, this is definitely the last time. Believe me!”

(One was given to understand: “Could I really survive another move? Believe me!”)

But in two weeks’ time it turned out that the kitchen was a bit dark, the bedroom a bit noisy, after all, and the stairs a bit of a climb. Then the cycle of looking would begin. It never lasted very long. My aunt was lucky and had a keen eye. And then—sheer coincidence, an apartment out of nowhere: “The kitchen faces south! One room looks out onto the courtyard! And there’s an elevator …”

“No, this is definitely the last time,” my aunt would say, with the emphasis on this.

A characteristic trait of my aunt’s exchanges was that the neighbors on her floor, the ones above and below, in all directions and without exception, turned out to be academics. My aunt simply didn’t settle in other places. They might be professors of disciplines that she couldn’t even pronounce without stumbling, that wasn’t important, and there were even some members of the Academy of Sciences and Ph.D.’s—she didn’t know exactly, but that wasn’t important.

But it was completely the opposite with the daughters-in-law. My aunt would say on the telephone, “Well? There isn’t any comparison!” (One
was given to understand: The former one was simply trash, but this one is trash in all respects.)

Had my aunt possessed one atom of common sense, she would not have undertaken to aggravate the process of unmistakable deterioration. But she just couldn’t stop herself.

In her raged the soul of desert nomadic peoples. Or to look at it differently, an obsessive fear of death raged, lacerated, and tormented my aunt. She probably couldn’t imagine that she was fated to live in that dwelling until the end, that it would turn out to be the final one, that there she would ... no, I won’t say the word. And she couldn’t, she didn’t wish to imagine that namely this final daughter-in-law would give her the final glass of water ... and this scum would even poison it, you can rest assured!

And so my aunt was running from death all over the city, while she simultaneously introduced new characters into Nelik’s family with a director’s powerful hand. The moral overtones of being married so many times kept him from rising higher than sergeant, but my aunt assured everyone that if she hadn’t saved him it would have been even worse.

And then the conflict with her son-in-law came to a head.

Kolya Rybny, in the opinion of Gertruda Borisovna, was a country bumpkin (of the highest order), it was precisely he, in the opinion of Gertruda Borisovna, who started Monka drinking and smoking (and with her health!), and besides that he was clearly guilty for dragging along the mummy who lay parallel to the rented piano (“You can’t breathe in the room! That’s deadly for the child!”), and because of him Monka stopped looking after herself, and didn’t eat a thing, so that Gertruda Borisovna had to phone every day and check on her. “Have you touched any food today?”

For all this Kolya Rybny called Gertruda Borisovna a people’s artist of the Soviet Union.

And my aunt realized that it was time to shuffle the deck.

She set out to deal Monechka kings, that is, for example, naturally, the manager of a vegetable warehouse or the director of a dietetic cafeteria.

In bed, sated, they would say to Monka confidentially, “Tomorrow I’m taking my Volga in for a tune-up.” Or, “Could your brother arrange an appointment in Kresty prison? With my assistant?”

And Monechka gladly shared with every Tom, Dick, and Harry the impressions she carried away from the kings’ apartments. She didn’t particularly accentuate what exactly she had been doing there. It turned out that she had been invited on an excursion—to examine the color televi-
sion and all those wonders from across the ocean. And so, one had a special machine for cleaning shoes: You just press a button and—one!—out comes a squiggle of polish, you press another button—two!—please be so kind!—and the brushes clean them—I don’t believe it! Another had a bottle: You pour, say, vodka, or wine, say, or cognac, whatever, into it and you reach to pick up your glass and there inside the bottle (Oh, at first I was even scared!) somebody with a Georgian accent says, “I drink to you not because I love you. I drink to you because I love you very much.” A third had liquid soap, a fourth some different-colored little balls that you use to chill cocktails, and he gave Monka one to remember him by—so! By the way, how do you think he feels about me? No, just a minute, I understand that he has a family, his wife is in the hospital and all of that, but, for example, he says to me, “I could spend eternity looking into your eyes!” What do you think, does he like me?

Maybe Gertruda Borisovna would have made a successful madam if she had been operating in a civilized world. But here the material she had to work with was defective, good for nothing, and the most disappointing thing was that it came in the shape of her own child: a cloud of dust—and nothing will come of it, you can’t fight genes. But she tried! First, she thrust upon Monka her almost new nylon blouse (she’s walking around naked!), then her almost new dyed fur hat that looked like a neutered cat (she’s going to catch meningitis!), then a pair of almost new sheets with Romantika Sanatorium stamped in black letters—everything disappeared into a yawning abyss, into a black hole. And once again rumors would reach the newly settled parental nest about Monka’s reckless, muddleheaded adventures. And again she would run off to mama “to spend the night”—all covered in the bruises of lawful wedlock—babbling about the furniture and public transportation. The cyclops, Arnold Aaronovich, didn’t thrash her anymore, but without fail and with the same ardor would conduct an educational hour, where he spoke about his daughter, who was sitting right there with a vacant look on her face, in the third person.

“If only she knew how to take something from a man! Just something, why even something eensy-weensy.” He would stick out his stump, trying to illustrate the smallest trifle—and did the same with his voice. “Even just a ruble, well, I don’t know. Mama is forever giving you things—this and that! But we aren’t going to live forever! Others know what to do when they’re with a man—this way! And that! They’re women and they know how. But this one! She even pays for everything herself! She’ll give away the last thing she has—to anybody! What’s wrong with her?” To flesh out his illustration, the invalid would start to
tear at the shirt on his chest. "Here! Take it! People like our Raymonda should be donated to a museum, to that, what’s it called, yes, the Kunstkammer!"

"She needs to be taken to a lunatic asylum, to a clinic!" interjected Gertruda Borisovna. "Look at what’s become of you! You’re not eating at all! You’re going to collapse soon—and that’ll be that! It’ll be too late to do anything, mark my words!"

"No, I know what needs to be done!" Arnold Aaronovich burned with anger. "Just once you listen to me! She needs to be taken to have those, what do you call them, to be sewn up like they do with cats!"

"Arnold, if you don’t shut up right now, those will be your last words!" proffered Gertruda Borisovna as her final rejoinder.

And when Monka was already choking on her tears in the spacious parental bed (under the portrait of the writer Hemingway), Gertruda Borisovna would perform her encore in the kitchen. "Ah! (Clutching her heart.) I’ve always said that she should be left in peace. Let her do what she wants. She’s not long for this world anyway." (A sorrowful contraction of her features.)

But they didn’t leave her in peace.

Not being completely out of her mind, Gertruda Borisovna, of course, wasn’t hoping that the kings would turn Raymonda into a queen. (Who needs her!) But it wasn’t so she could run her lips over other people’s cocktail balls. Ancient as the desert, the exchange itch egged her on to begin first with breaking up the Raymonda-Rybny union.

"And then it will be obvious," she would say significantly, but nothing stood behind that significance, just as a guardian angel doesn’t stand behind a suicide.

If Kolya Rybny had decided to fashion a chastity belt for his dear, good-for-nothing wife, it would have been most effective to execute it in the shape of a muzzle to close the jaws of the gloomy suitors his mother-in-law was palming off—not overly expeditious in terms of the flames of passion, generally speaking, the old fellows were inclined to laziness. Without exception they were family men, big-bellied, flabby, and deadly boring, but (out of laziness) they suffered from incontinence when it came to holding back the compliments they had once invented, compliments that each time, as if it were the first time, brought Monechka closer to that blue color of the dark blue sky. And so, by forcefully closing the mouths of his mother-in-law’s agents, who bleat their driveling ambiguities, it would be possible—at least from that side—to avert completely the adulteries. Because (and one should pay particular attention to this)
the cavaliers that Monka's mother threw her way, all those tired economic planners who saw in Monka such a refreshing little rose from the garbage dump, the magnetically sinful miasmas that gave them a fleeting respite from the virtuous fumes of the family kitchen—all those possessors of hemorrhoids, briefcases, and money belts elicited only childish delight on Monka's part and nothing more. The old fellows' homes were so interesting and clean that to get in was an honor, just like getting on the battleship *Aurora*. And of course the senile talkativeness of mama's protégés was not the dazzling, reserved laconicism of the objects of Monka's own choosing—the beaten-down workers from the Baltic Factory and, in their own way, the striking fellows who had a sense of fashion in no way inferior to that of sailors and pilots, the drivers and truckers that streamed in after their shifts to Monka's bar. Monka, who valued the secondary characteristics in a man much more than the tertiary and following ones, never—and one must give her credit (and, incidentally, in contrast to the "respectable" ladies)—discussed and never compared in a confidential conversation the manly capabilities of her admirers, be they talkative or quiet.

Mature women, so full of their own virtue and sensibility—all those exemplary, model wives, and bashful housewives, and the rapaciously chaste ones, especially the ones with brains, keepers of the hearth who conduct themselves in intimate relations in just as business-like a manner, tenaciously and soberly as when they stand in front of the meat counter, all those meek, patient darlings, selflessly loving their little rich impotents, or the ones that weren't very rich but comfortable nevertheless, or not impotent, but not loved—they fulfilled their social and civic duty with genteel laziness (besides vigilantly watching so as not to be cheated in weight or cut)—of course, all those women made a show of holding their noses as they turned away from the depraved Monechka.

The skilled craftsman Kolya Rybny meanwhile continued to decorate Monka with a flourishing design of bruises that depicted a garden of eternal flowering; behind the rented piano, the Red October model, the mummy of small proportions was yellowing as before; Gertruda Borisovna moved from Sofya Perovskaya to First Soviet Street. God forbid during all this time Monka should confess to her husband that the tree of paradise bore fruit beyond the confines of the conjugal bed. She still couldn't explain, after all, that she wanted to stay a bit longer at the festival where they were handing out prizes and presents, and she so loved festivals, presents, prizes, and the main thing—to dance, and it's still an absolute mystery what prizes, presents, and dances will be handed out tomorrow—
maybe they'll be one hundred times better than today's, and maybe the rose-colored roosters will be replaced by sugary matryoshkas wrapped up in lightly crinkling foil and tied with a shiny blue ribbon.

If the truth be told, Monka cried a lot of stormy tears at this festival. She solemnly believed every new sideshow magician, she'd hop in the sack race ever so merrily, but the magician would disappear, and the sack would end up on her head every time.

Of course, it was a different matter that Kolya Rybny was also tempted to dance at this children's matinee, but his dancing was lumbering and forced, as if he were counting time in the army, and no matter how much you tried to get his feet in line with the others, everything still looked sack-like. He frequently bumped into the door in the winding and dark bowels of the communal apartment, but Monka was proud of the fact that she continued to be on friendly terms with the neighbors, went out with them to have a beer, got involved in all their troubles, and finally, that she prevailed over them on account of her expansive nature.

And all this in no way hindered her from poisoning herself with iodine, and later, after being discharged from the hospital, it didn't in the least hinder her from washing down a whole handful of sewing needles with a glass of water. After traversing the expected path, the needles exited in a single, tidy bunch, and Monka was wheeled out from that very same hospital to another where the needle-marked are strapped to their beds with belts and are pierced by transparent tubes filled with strange, gurgling liquids; the trusting suicides arrived hoping that they had ended up in the terminal ward. During the brief visits with her girlfriends Monka would pull ever so hard at the waist of her ratty nightgown, and, eyes shining with embarrassment, she would laugh up her sleeve. There were a lot of good-looking young doctors in this hospital, some of them wore glasses and even had beards, and while making the appropriate notation in the medical chart, they carried on such sincere conversations with Monka and—best of all!—told such funny stories (appropriate to the notations), the like of which nobody had ever before carried on and told her. To make a long story short, Monka liked it there.

For the first time the return to the former stage setting stifled her and gave her a pinched look. But fortunately, that passed. More precisely, it continued until she showed up at my place the day after she was discharged from the hospital. In keeping with her inexcusable habit, she flung open my wardrobe without so much as a pause. Do you still wear this skirt? And where did you get this darling thing? I'll try it on, okay? It's my color. Oh, I'm going to be sick. Let me wear it for a while!
I still remember that threadbare dark-blue dress that was shorter than would be decent by three hands ("Look how it shows off my waist, what do you think?"). That dress reanimated Monka instantly and completely. The next day, shining, she was already dancing in her new dress behind the counter at the bar.

During this time Auntie Gertruda Borisovna had managed to live for a while on the Moika, moved to Turgenev Square, and from there to Moscow Prospect; her daughters-in-law had sharply declined from the position of nurse in the narcotics ward to patient in the aforesaid ward; the wedding goblets that Raymonda and Kolya Rybny had shattered for happiness on the day of their wedding turned out to be only the beginning of the end of those countless glasses, plates, bottles, decanters, lampshades, and even mirrors and windowpanes; in vain had they paid with their own lives to pave the road to domestic prosperity, which was as distant as the horizons of gentle utopias.

Translated by Ronald Meyer