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The Sky is Falling

A NOVEL



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Winner of the Marion Engel Award

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Books of Merit

The Sky Is Falling

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CAROLINE ADDERSON

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A NOVEL

THOMAS ALLEN PUBLISHERS
TORONTO

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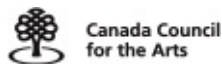
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In memory of my mother

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2004

Last night I had one of those dreams again. Nothing happened, nothing ever does—no central dramatic event. Usually I'm so busy puzzling over some vague inconsistency, some hint that I'm actually asleep, that I hardly notice the drifts of dread settling all around me. This time I found myself downtown at midday, or so it seemed from the quality of the light, the eyesmacking noonishness, though the empty streets contradicted it. I came to Eaton's, which is Sears now. (This was what I was puzzling over, not the eerie lack of traffic, the bizarre absence of pedestrians, but *Was Eaton's back in business? Since when?*) I pushed open the glass door and wandered around for a bit. Cosmetics. Women's Shoes. Soon I began to feel uneasy. Sick. Something wasn't right. Where was everyone? Well, in the shelters obviously, I realized just as the shrill whine of the approaching missile became audible.

The slap of the newspaper landing on the front porch woke me. These early-rising immigrants who fling the news on our city streets, they're unsung heroes in a way. How many innocent sleepers have they saved from annihilation? I should leave ours a card. I thought of this after my perfectly timed rescue, when I couldn't get back to sleep because of Joe making glottal sounds. Eventually I must have slept because the alarm went off, reset by Joe, who has to be at the hospital early. This time I got up well before the apocalypse.

Our front door mat reads "Go Away." Lying on the joke, helplessly bound by elastics, was the very paper that had saved me. I carried it to the kitchen, poured the coffee, sat at the table. It had snowed in the night. No. Spring had come. Spring was right outside the window. Filling the frame, our snow-white magnolia, peaking. I thought of *The Cherry Orchard*, all of us reading it on the front porch while we swilled plonk. The truth is every spring when the trees bloom I think about Chekhov and everything that happened, how Pascal betrayed my friend Sonia and she him in turn. We wanted to get rid of all the bombs, but look what happened. It was partly my fault, that bad, bad decision that we took. Only this year it all came together because, when I peeled the rubber bands off the *Vancouver Sun* and laid it flat on the table, Sonia was staring up at me. Not a recent picture, but Sonia when I knew her all those years ago.

The shock of seeing her again, the dis-ease of the dream. The inevitable self-loathing. Pete's picture was below hers. It took me a moment to notice him. As soon as I did, I turned the paper over. It was a funny thing to do, a token of respect, like covering the face of the dead. Except both of them are still alive.

But what about the boy? Whatever happened to him?

1983

I'm not from Vancouver. I came in 1982 to attend the University of British Columbia and, until I met Joe, I didn't know anyone who had been born here. Everyone in the group was from elsewhere, Sonia from up north, 100 Mile House, Pete from Toronto, Belinda—Isis!—from somewhere in Nova Scotia. I don't remember where Carla or Timo were from. Pascal had escaped the same small town in Saskatchewan that Dieter had grown up in, Esterhazy, which turned out not to be a coincidence after all. I'd fled too—a strip-malled neighbourhood of Edmonton where I'd been miserable for no good reason other than there always has to be someone to pick on and it's usually the smart, socially awkward person with the funny last name, skulking the hallways, binder raised up like a shield. Me.

During my first year at university I stayed with my father's sister, my aunt Eva, who manned her stove in a suburb to the east of Vancouver, cooking through cases of dented cans and frostbitten cuts of meat, by the vat, as though against some desperate contingency. Every day I had to travel all the way across town to the city's western point, the UBC campus, a three-bus journey. The commute took an hour and a half or more each way, I explained the following summer to my father, who had wanted me to go to university at home in the first place and now didn't want to pay for me to live in residence. "Read on the bus," he said. "I get sick," I lied. In fact, I'd grown so accustomed to the trip I never looked out the window any more, not even to check if my stop was coming up, somehow always feeling for the cord and ringing the bell at just the right moment even while absorbed in the evolution of Doric-order proportions or the impact of the Crimean War on modern warfare. I just wanted to be closer to campus and to get away from my aunt, who seemed more and more an embodiment of all I was destined to become, lonely and eccentric and obsessively cheap. By the end of the summer, I succeeded. I convinced my father that my grade point average was in jeopardy despite the fact that, hitherto, everything I handed in came back scarletted with the letter A.

When I returned to Vancouver in the fall to begin my second year, I stayed with my aunt again while I looked for somewhere closer, the very next day taking the long, familiar bus ride and spending the morning at the Student Housing Office making calls. I had come too late. The inexpensive basement rooms with a hot plate and a bathroom sink to serve all washing functions had been snapped up. The idea of a shared house unnerved me, but I made a few calls anyway only to discover that the cheaper of these had been taken as well. Although I had a full scholarship, it covered only tuition. An apartment was out of the question.

My preferred place to study the previous year had been in the stacks under the old stone Main Library. I went there again after my disappointing morning, descending to the remotest and deepest parts of the bunker-like levels where the obscurest, bookiest-smelling tomes were stored. The carrels were tucked away singly wherever there was a bit of space. Under the glare of the fluorescents, the books emitted their wise scent. (I imagined print powdering off the pages, that I was breathing knowledge.) I found the Russian books and selected one at random. Cyrillic seemed vaguely runic. Latin letters were sprinkled in but the cases were mixed. R was backward. I should have been looking in the classified ads for a room but for the moment I felt so perfectly alone and happy.

Afterward I went to the Student Union Building to buy a cookie, a detour that entirely changed my

fate. I actually went for a newspaper, then, overcome by temptation, got in line at the cookie kiosk, ~~hiding behind the paper the way I used to hide behind my binder, like some cartoon Cold War spy.~~ A new study had just come out of MIT predicting that more than 50 percent of Canadians would be immediately killed in the event of a nuclear war. The pretrial hearing of the Squamish Five, a local terrorist group, had begun. The Great Lakes were an acidic broth. All of it reminded me why I never paid attention to the news. The line moved forward, bringing me closer to a bulletin board next to where the coffee was accoutred. *Rides. Used textbooks. Accommodations.* I stepped away, losing my place, drawn by a notice with a fringe of phone numbers on the bottom.

A man answered immediately, like he'd been poised by the phone. "Did you hang up on me a second ago?"

"No," I said.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Fuck."

"I'm phoning about the room," I said. "Is there a good time to come and see it?"

I could almost hear him shrug. "Come right now." Then he hung up, forcing me to dig in my change purse for another dime.

"*What!*"

"I need the address," I whimpered.

It took fifteen minutes to get to the house, which was in Kits, one lot in from the corner, on a street otherwise lined with genteel homes. Next door was a knee-high garden statue of a black man in livery holding up a lamp, as though to illuminate the adjacent eyesore. I walked past the Reliant patchwork with political bumper stickers parked in front—*Extinction is Forever. One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day. Impeach Reagan*—and up the path that cut through a steppe of unmown grass, climbed to the wide, crowded porch—bicycle, wearily flowered chesterfield, cardboard placards with their messages turned to the wall—and knocked on the rainbow on the door, knocked several times until at last a young man appeared, shirtless, but wearing a kerchief on his head. The year before, fishing for a major, I had cast my net wide over many subjects, among them Art History. Only now did I understand what the professor had been saying about beauty and its relationship to proportion.

He looked right at me, unblinking, in a way I was unused to. "I phoned," I said and he smiled. To show me he was capable of it, I thought, or to show off the investment (which was patently wrong, I would find out). In their perfect even rows, his teeth glowed. "Go ahead," he said. "Look." I stepped into the vestibule and, since he was barefoot, stooped to remove my shoes. By the time I straightened he was gone.

To the right was a set of French doors, each pane painted with a dove or a rainbow or some other optimistic symbol. I kept thinking about the fifteen minutes. How my life would open up if I were living just fifteen minutes from campus. I poked my head in the living room. Shag carpet, beanbag chair, posters. A fireplace extruding paper garbage. On its hearth stood a statue identical to the one in the next-door garden except for the sign taped to the lamp: *It's payback time!!!* Instead of curtains, a poncho was nailed to the window frame. Then I started because someone was sleeping on the chesterfield, lying on his back with a beret over his face. I ducked right out.

Bathroom: chipped, claw-foot tub, tinkling toilet. The cover of the tank was broken, half of it missing, the workings exposed. It embarrassed me to see someone else's plumbing. Above it hung a

poster buckled with damp. *Is Your Bathroom Breeding Bolsheviks?*

I peeked in the bedroom at the end of the hall and, seeing it looked well lived in—there were stuffed animals on the bed—returned to the vestibule with its battered mahogany wainscoting and went up the stairs. None of the three bedrooms on the upper floor was empty either. All had bare fir floors and plank and plastic milk crate shelves. The front-facing room, the largest, had a view of the mountains and the ubiquitous Rorschach Che painted on one wall. The middle room was an ascetic's cell with a pitted green foamie for a bed, the end room a postered shrine to Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, reeking of incense. I went back downstairs to the kitchen, which also smelled but of a more complex synthesis—ripe compost, burnt garlic, beans on the soak—so different from the cabbage and mothbait overtones at my aunt's. It was untidy too. Dirty, in fact. I glanced at my socks with their dust and crumb adherents. The fifteen minutes more than made up for it.

The shirtless one was outside on the deck smoking, leaning against the railing, his back to me. I could make out each distinct vertebra. They seemed decorative. When I tapped on the window, he waved me out through a door beside which a rubber Ronald Reagan mask hung on a nail. Out there in the overgrown yard the decorous history of the house still showed in the unpruned roses in their unmade beds and the old pear tree scabbed with lichen. The garage though, slouching and moss-covered, was practically in ruins.

“Which room is available?” I asked.

He exhaled his acrid smoke and pointed up to the window of the O'Keeffe/Kahlo room.

“I'd like to take it.”

“You have to come for an interview. There's a sign-up sheet.” He threw the cigarette over the deck railing and led me back inside where a loose-leaf page lay on the kitchen table, three names and phone numbers already written on it. I felt sick and made my writing neater than the others', only realizing after the fact that it would probably work against me.

“Jane,” he read off the paper before flashing his teeth again. “How do you say your last name?”

Most of the rooms that were advertised in the newspaper and still available were almost as far away as my aunt's, near Fraser Street or Knight. I went to look at a few only to leave undecided and anxious that someone else would get the place if I took too long to make up my mind. Then someone called “from the Trutch house,” she said, though the house I'd seen was actually on one of the numbered east-west streets. Trutch was the cross street. She told me to come at six-thirty.

I got there too early and waited on the steps. In the house across the street, the living room curtains were open and I could see through to the dining room, where a family was sitting down to supper. A child lobbed an oven mitt across the table. Someone and his dog walked past the stickered Reliant. The dog smiled but the man's straight-ahead gaze seemed to emanate hostility.

At exactly six-thirty, I rang the doorbell. A thin girl answered, her hair long and dark and not particularly clean. Despite this, despite dressing like a scarecrow and the deep shadows under her eyes, she was quite pretty, which made me leery and more nervous than before.

“Are you Jane?” She introduced herself as Sonia and led me in.

Pete from two days before was sitting at the kitchen table. Today he wore a shirt, almost a blouse, with full sleeves and a ruffled front and cuffs. He'd dispensed with the kerchief and I saw now that his hair was dirty blond and shoulder-length; he'd seemed Greco-Roman when we'd met previously, but my second impression was Renaissance for sure.

Two other men were at the table, one of them wearing glasses with big plastic frames and a T-shirt entreating the U.S. to vacate Central America. His hair was dark and wiry, nose very narrow, like it had been squeezed in a book. This was Dieter. The third man seemed cleaner than the rest. It took me a moment to notice the girl leaning against the counter, but as soon as I did she became the most obvious person there because of the deep coppery mane hanging halfway down her back and how her freckles contrasted with her creamy skin. Belinda, Sonia, Pete, Dieter, this other person—five complete strangers who didn't know anything about me, not my tormented high school years, not how I had blown it last year. Last year had been my chance to start over, to make friends, but I had forfeited it, blaming the bus ride. I couldn't imagine it had anything to do with me.

Seeing me hovering in the doorway, the cleaner man stood and shook hands smilingly all around. My heart sank when he picked a violin case off the floor and walked past without acknowledging me. He was my competitor. I felt like turning and running because no one would ever choose sweaty, bookish me over someone who could play the violin.

I sat and Sonia introduced everyone. Pete uncrossed one arm to wiggle his fingers at me. "This is Jane," Sonia said.

"Jane Zed," said Pete.

"That's easier," I admitted.

Except for Pete, they looked everywhere but at me so I felt cut out of the picture, as I usually did. Then I was flooded with embarrassment, for I knew it was childish to want two contradictory things: to be left alone and to be included.

"I'm Belinda," said the girl at the counter, who had not been introduced.

"Belinda's the one moving out," Sonia explained.

Pete: "She needs her space."

With two exaggerated tosses of her head, Belinda threw her hair over each shoulder. Years later, on nights I couldn't sleep (frequently, in other words), I would sometimes scroll the muted channels in search of a soporific. Belinda would flash past, executing this same ribbon dance, in the service of selling hair conditioner. But now she was indignant, telling Pete, "I do!"

"I know you do," he said and it was impossible to decipher his tone, whether he was sarcastic or earnest. He could be acidly sarcastic, but I didn't know that yet.

Belinda humphed and leaned back with crossed arms. The other two, Sonia and Dieter, seemed anxious to keep the interview going. Dieter took over the talking, stapling his eyes to the place I always thought of as my upper right-hand corner. Theirs was a communal rather than a shared accommodation. They each participated equally in the running and upkeep of the house. "We have a chore sheet." He got up to unmagnet it from the freezer door for me. I saw their different writing styles, Dieter's tight and precise, Pete's backward leaning, Belinda's too large for the space. Sonia had printed her name in a round, elementary-school hand.

"We rotate chores monthly. You do your assigned chore once a week. Every Sunday we put twenty dollars in the kitty. From that you buy the groceries when it's your turn to cook. We eat supper together. House meeting once a month. *Eso es todo.*" He pushed up his glasses with his middle finger.

I was not a serious candidate. His perfunctory delivery and the fuck-off adjusting of his glasses made this obvious. Sonia had been sucking on the little gold cross around her neck, but now she let it go to add, "We're vegetarian."

“So am I,” I said. It just came out. I was surprised too, because I had just decided I didn’t want to live there anyway so I didn’t care about being rejected by them. But now everyone straightened and Sonia smiled, acknowledging this specious point of commonality.

They asked what I was studying. “Arts,” I said.

“Me too!” Belinda bubbled from her corner. “I’m in Theatre!”

“I’m in Education,” Sonia said. “Dieter’s in Poli Sci and Spanish. Pete’s in Engineering.”

Pete: “I’m an anarchist.”

Belinda: “I’m a feminist.”

“Me too,” Dieter seconded.

“Actually,” Pete said, “I’m an anarcho-feminist.”

“I’m a pacifist,” Sonia sighed, and Dieter tugged a lock of her hair twice, tooting, “Pacifist! Pacifist!”

Pete: “More precisely, I’m an anarcho-feminist-pacifist.”

Declarations winging by me, fast and furious. I nearly ducked. I was relieved they didn’t ask because I, I was nothing.

I moved into the Trutch house officially the Sunday before classes started, after transporting my belongings in my suitcase over several trips throughout the week. My aunt didn’t have a car and, anyway, I didn’t want to involve her. Belinda was still occupying the room the first time I came; Pete was there, too, lolling gorgeously on the bed. He smiled right at me while, blushing violently, I stacked my things in the corner Belinda had indicated with a careless, freckled wave. Each time I came back there was a little less of her in the room and none of Pete.

On Sunday the bed was still there, the mattress stripped. I crept downstairs for a broom. Dieter was in the kitchen with another man, older, well into his twenties and dark-complected, who was reading but stood politely when I came in. He wore granny glasses, the gold rims of which matched one of his front teeth. “Ector.” He put out his hand.

Dieter was boiling coffee in a saucepan, watching it so intently I got the impression he was deliberately ignoring me. I asked about the broom, but then Pete came in and told everyone to freeze. “You and you and you. Come.”

Ector and I obeyed. We didn’t think twice. We followed him out and waited in the vestibule while Pete took the stairs up two at a time. A moment later he and Belinda started down with the mattress between them. Ector snapped to when he saw Belinda, pulling a beret from his back pocket, donning it, then opening the door for them to hurl their burden out. He insisted on taking her place, then up he went with Pete. There was banging. From the swearing, not the fucks but the words I couldn’t understand, I realized that the chivalrous Ector spoke Spanish, also, when Pete screamed out his name that it was actually *Hector*.

“Hector! Hold it!”

They manoeuvred the heavy frame down the stairs, further distressing the walls, out the front door and down the steps with Belinda directing them like an air traffic controller. “Jane and I will take the mattress,” she said when they dropped it in the long grass. “You guys take the bed.”

Pete turned to me. “What do you think of that, Zed?” I didn’t know what he meant. He was the one who had recruited me. “A real fair-weather feminist,” he said, pointing his chin at Belinda. “All for

equality until there's something heavy to carry."

Hector squatted, ready. "Come on, Peeete."

"Oh no. We'll *all* carry it."

"God," said Belinda, rolling her eyes.

Single-handedly Pete threw the mattress on the frame, then we each took a corner of the bed. It was heavy. We shuffled down the walk and straight into the middle of the street. When a car came up behind us, we moved to the side to let it pass.

"How far?" Hector asked.

"Blenheim Street," Belinda said.

Hector looked across the bed at me. "I'm forgetting your name."

"Jane."

"I'm Ector."

"Yes," I said.

At the corner we set our burden down and breathed collectively for a moment before struggling on another block. By then my hands were screaming. I wanted to stop, but didn't. Hector voiced my feelings. He said carrying the bed was killing him. Belinda said that if we died, it would not be in vain; she would erect a plaque.

"To the Glorious Committee of the Bed-Carrying International!" Hector cried.

Another car came up behind us. "Keep going," Pete told us. "Move to the side," Belinda said. "God."

The car honked. We were panting now.

"Why?" asked Pete. "Why should cars have the right of way and not beds? If beds had the right of way—do not let go, people!—this world wouldn't be so fucked up!"

The driver craned out the window. "Excuse me?"

"Get a bed!" Pete yelled. "Make love instead of polluting the world!"

I dropped my corner. Everyone stumbled forward, and Pete, using the momentum, tackled Belinda on the bed. It seemed he couldn't let her go after all. She shrieked, then succumbed, letting him twine his body around hers, squid tight, as they necked, demonstrating for her, or us, their interconnection. He flipped onto his back so she was on top, her astonishing hair falling around them, a privacy curtain. Hector burst into applause. When the driver got out of the car, I turned and ran.

My main occupation that first day was putting together the futon I'd bought as a kit and alternately dragged and carried on my back like a peddler all the way from Fourth Avenue without any help from anyone. I found the broom and swept, opened the window to uncloy the air of sandalwood, piled my books against the wall in alphabetical order. Now I lay on the futon trying to read *Anna Karenina*, but mostly fretting as suppertime approached. I didn't know why they had picked me. Were there so few vegetarians around? When I went downstairs, would I be accused of letting them down when I let go of the bed? I truly couldn't have held on a moment longer. Then why did I run away, they would want to know. Because I was scandalized. Was that how people really acted?

"Supper!" one of the men called.

I was first to arrive except for Dieter, who was at the sink dumping the contents of a pot into a

colander, the lenses of his glasses opaque with fog. Maybe he really didn't see me this time. "Supper" he screamed.

Sonia appeared next, pretty and unbrushed, fingering her cross, then Pete, who skated across the floor in socks. As soon as Dieter thumped the pot of spaghetti down in the middle of the table, Pete lunged for it while Dieter waited, poised to get the tongs next. It surprised me, the carnivorous way vegetarians ate; Sonia and I had yet to serve ourselves. She gestured for me to go first. I took half of what remained, she a few tangled strands. The moment the tongs were returned to the pot, Pete snatched them and claimed the rest.

No one spoke—because of me, I presumed. Because I'd dropped the bed. I fixed my self-conscious gaze on the flayed face of Ronald Reagan on the opposite wall, the nail jutting from his empty eye socket. The men seemed intent on their food, Sonia too, but while they ate with gusto, she was a baby bird grappling open-throated with a very long worm. I suspected, though, that if I got up and left the room they would probably start twittering like birds at the precise crack of dawn. Twittering: *She dropped the bed! She dropped the bed!*

Dieter inflicted a goofy smile on Sonia, who grimaced and turned her tired eyes to me. "Are you all moved in?"

I gulped some water so I could speak. "Yes. There wasn't much to move."

Pete had already cleaned his plate! He went to the fridge for a loaf of bread and a tub of margarine, slapped a nubbled slice down, painted it with the spread. There was a jar on the table full of yellow powder, which he dumped on his bread. Only now did he and Dieter begin to talk, heatedly, as though they were picking up an argument they'd called a truce on before supper. When Dieter called, I'd been reading that scene in *Anna Karenina* where two prominent Moscow intellectuals come to Oblon-sky' for dinner. *They respected each other, but upon almost every subject were in complete and hopeless disagreement, not because they belonged to opposite schools of thought but for the reason they belonged to the same camp.* Dieter was defensive, emphatic, offended, Pete aloof. "You agree?" Dieter asked. "Don't you?" He would glance over at Sonia every time he made a point, to see the effect it had on her.

When Sonia pushed away her plate, Pete used the excuse of scooping the remaining noodles off it to end his conversation with Dieter and go out on the deck, the strands hanging from his mouth, like hay. Dieter began stacking the dirty dishes. He paused to tug Sonia's hair and say, "Ding dong, Avon calling!" which drove her immediately from the room. That left just me sitting at the table. It was over, the agony of my first supper, with no one mentioning the bed. I'd hardly been required to speak at all. "Thank you," I said to Dieter before slinking out, relieved. He looked blankly at me through his big plastic frames.

Back upstairs, in my near-empty room with *Anna Karenina*, I thought that if it was going to be like that every night I would probably survive, which was, anyway, all I ever expected.

The year before, I'd come to Vancouver with only a general idea of what I wanted to study. I'd made a shopping list of possible courses, but when I showed up to register I discovered it really was like shopping, my least favourite thing, the gym a marketplace crowded with hundreds of students. For every course you had to stand in line to receive a computer card, first-come, first-served. It was a hot day and I was perspiring madly in the crush. At the Slavonic Studies table the line was negligible. I'd always wanted to read *War and Peace*.

Later in the year Professor Kopanyev told me he'd assumed I'd enrolled in his survey course because of my Polish background, but this was not the case. My father had come to Canada when he was my age, eighteen, so had lived most of his life here. He never talked about his childhood. When I came to stay with my aunt, she told me cabbage rolls were his favourite dish, but we always ate Canadian—pork chops with Minute Rice, Sloppy Joes, McCain frozen pizza. Other than an unpronounceable last name, nothing remotely Polish could be said about me.

In the first semester of Slavonic Studies we covered the history, geography, and economy of the Soviet Union. I wrote a paper on the emancipation of the serfs. We turned to literature in the second semester with Kopanyev presenting a biographical lecture on the greatest writer who ever lived—Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn—depending on the week. We read a sample work by these authors, discussed them in tutorials, then selected one as a subject for a paper. At the end of the year someone put up his hand and asked, “How can they all be the greatest?” It seemed obvious to me by then.

Kopanyev was tall and bearded, always tweedily dressed in shades of brown. One day he asked me to stay after class, which was when he commented on my surname. He said that my paper on Chekhov was both entertaining and insightful and he hoped I would continue in the department the following year. Ours was a small class, not even a dozen students, so I knew not to take his praise too much to heart. But I did. All year I had slunk from lecture to lecture praying that no one would notice me but now I was both thrilled and grateful that someone had.

My paper was titled “Boredom and Sadness in the Short Stories of Anton Chekhov.” I'd chosen a collection of eleven of his stories in a popular translation and counted how many times he used words associated with these emotions. *Bored* appeared sixteen times, *bore* three times, *boringly* once. *Not interesting*, *uninteresting*, and *uninterestingly* once each. People, society, life—these were described four times as *dull*, and a further seven as *monotonous*. *Monotony* was used three times, *dissatisfaction* twice, *dissatisfied* once. One character gazed *apathetically* at her empty yard. I didn't count the condition of the yard, but I did include her later feeling of *emptiness*. Also the fact that on first impression Dmitry Dmitrich Gurov thinks there is something *pathetic* about Anna Sergeevna, “The Lady with a Lapdog,” soon to be the great love of his life. I interpreted *pathetic* as *sad*, an emotion referred to ten other times in the collection. *Sadly* (3). *Sadness* (2). *Unhappy* (2). *Sorrow* (1). “Were these *depressed* (3) characters full of *melancholy* (3) and *despair* (3) because life was *boring* (5), or does perpetual *boredom* (3) lead to a *mournfully* (1) *depressing* (1) and *despondent* (1) life?”

Kopanyev flipped through my handwritten pages. “I read some out to my wife. We had good laughs. “Really?” I said.

“This word *skuchno*. It implies boredom, of course. But also sadness, desolation, gloom, yearning. Russians are always sad and it's boring. Aren't you?”

I stared at him.

“No?” He rolled my paper into a tube and poked me with it. “Come back next year. Take Russian.” And so I did.

Kopanyev assured us learning Russian would be easy because, he claimed, it was a phonetic language. But right from hello, from *zdrastvuytye*, I realized this wasn't always the case. There was the matter of stress, too, how an unstressed *O* will convert to an *A*, for example. If you stressed the wrong syllable, the meaning of the word would change. “Like with *pismo*. *PisMO*. Letter. *PISma*. Letters.”

He seemed even more ursine this year as he handed out the alphabet. Cyrillic, he explained, was named for the Byzantine monk who gave the Slavs a written language. He'd had to draw on Greek, Hebrew, and old Latin. Three full alphabets plundered to represent all the Russian sounds. My eye went straight to the familiar letters, but only five of these actually corresponded to their English equivalents. An *M* might have sounded like an *M*, but *B* was *V*, *P* was *R* with a roll, *X* a truncated gargle. A gargle! *A* and *O* were ostensibly the same, but then Kopanyev was shouting at us, "They are long! Long! Open your mouths! Open them!"

There were two special symbols, sort of lower-case *bs*, that were not letters per se, but signs meaning *soft* or *hard*. "You must soften preceding consonant. Like so." And he showed us what was happening in his mouth, his tongue cozying up against his palate. He drew a picture on the board.

"Okay. First letter: *A*. Repeat: *A* like f*A*ther. Like I am doctor looking down your throat."

We recited the alphabet. That was all we did until, walking out of the room at the end of the fifty minutes, I felt like I was drowning in unutterable sounds.

Now everything had a different name. *Dom*. (House.) *Spalnya*. (Bedroom.) *Kniga*. (Book.) I took over Belinda's chore, vacuuming upstairs and down, practising my Russian as I worked. In the living room the *gastinaya*, Hector was playing the guitar. He didn't live there, but he often stayed over, and when I came in with the vacuum he perched on the chesterfield, like a crow on a power line, so his feet wouldn't be in my way.

I was still wrangling the machine, the *pylesos* (I'd stopped vacuuming to look it up), when Sonia burst in the front door. The way she looked at me, I thought of Anna Sergeyevna without her Pomeranian. Anna Sergeyevna, uncombed. But how could Sonia be pathetic? If I'd been her, of course, I would have been the happiest girl in the world.

"Did you hear?" she asked me. "The Russians shot down an airliner."

Strum! went Hector's guitar. Sonia made a sound, too, like the last of her wind was being forced out in one invisible squeeze, a little huff of terror, as she bolted past me to her room.

A few hours later, Pete and Dieter came home and consulted the rabbit-eared black and white TV. It hovered in the French doors to find out more. A Soviet jet fighter had shot down a South Korean civilian airliner, sending two hundred and sixty-nine souls plunging into the Sea of Japan. A U.S. congressman, five Canadians, and twenty-two children were among those aboard.

Hector left after the news and Sonia wouldn't come out of her room, so it was just the three of us at supper that night. "This is it," Pete announced. "This is the shot that rang out in Sarajevo. Get ready, people."

Dieter: "It had to be a spy plane, don't you think?"

"I don't think anything yet."

"They just happened to be flying over Soviet territory? Right over where the Soviets just happen to have bases? Flight 007. Get it? Double O seven? Isn't that just a bit of a coincidence?"

"I don't believe anything the media says."

Dieter squeezed his nose in his fist. Then the telephone rang and they both turned to stare at it on the cluttered counter, tethered to its twenty-foot cord. *Telefon*. It rang a second time, yet neither of them moved. They suffered some collective neuroses regarding its functioning, I'd noticed. They would come running only to stare like this, as though it had summoned them and they were sore afraid.

in its mighty presence. An ordinary yellow phone, their golden idol. It wasn't for me, that was for sure. Finally Pete took a chance and answered, then covered the receiver. "Sonia! Mommy's calling!"

Sonia stomped in, swollen from crying, and snatched the whole phone up, carried it off in her arms, the cord unwinding with her departure, loop after loop. I finished the dishes and went up to my room, which was directly above Sonia's. There was a decorative metal grate in the floor for passive heat exchange. I could see right down onto her dresser. At night, when I woke, the light coming from below would cast a filigree pattern on the ceiling, like a leaded glass window. Sonia's insomnia gave me a night light. Her sleeplessness gave her those dark dramatic circles around her eyes. Maybe she was a sleepwalker, a *lunatik*. Someone who walks on the moon.

She was still on the phone, murmuring below me. I heard her sigh and say, "Ma? I'm so scared."

Then Pete came up. I could differentiate their footsteps now, Pete's stomping, Dieter's soundless sneaking, the creak of the wood giving him away. Pete was the door-slammer. *Slam!* He put his music on (Hendrix). When Dieter banged in protest on the adjoining wall, Pete, out of principle, cranked it up. By the time he relented, Sonia had hung up and I still didn't understand what she was so afraid of.

On the weekend, I took the long bus trip back to Burnaby to have supper with my aunt, fulfilling the promise I had made about Sundays, which assuaged both her hurt feelings and my guilt. This actually worked out well because every Sunday there was a potluck at the Trutch house, followed by a meeting, neither of which I was invited to.

My aunt answered the door, throwing open her arms, pulling me to her size Z bosom. I smelled her perfume, Eau de Thrift Store Sweater. "I made your favourite," she said, and I knew she intended to lure me back.

I piled on the sour cream, the fried onions, the bacon. Lots and lots of bacon that probably straddled the Best Before date, but I didn't care. My aunt took note. When I moved out, she had inflicted on me doleful glances and squashy, overlong embraces, their implication being I would not thrive. Beyond her protection there awaited only loneliness and constipation. Now her cheeks, squiggled with capillaries, glowed in triumph.

"Have you been eating?"

"Of course," I said, but the truth, we both knew, was not enough. I hadn't really felt full since I'd moved to the Trutch house. I wasn't getting the protein I required. Also, competition for food was fierce.

"You look thinner."

"I'm not thinner."

Though I was always conscious of her accent, strangely, I never heard my father's any more. She was older, in her late fifties, the one who'd sponsored him to come to Canada all those years ago. Briefly they'd lived together, then my father went to Alberta where there were more jobs. He didn't like Vancouver. People were unfriendly, he said, and the red two-dollar bills looked phoney and it rained all the time.

"How are you sleeping?"

"Fine."

"And?" She meant my bowels.

"Yes, yes."

“Your studies are coming along?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about the girls you’re living with. Are they nice?”

I hadn’t mentioned that two of them were boys. And while I didn’t think of my new housemates as nice, neither did I consider them unkind. Unkind was names scrawled on my locker, papier mâché projectiles fired through an empty Bic. In high school these torments had come erratically, and I was by no means the only one who suffered them. In fact, on the scale of universal adolescent suffering I might not even have attained a rank. It was the haphazardness that caused the most damage. For weeks some other victim would suffer, then it would start up again, usually under some friendly guise —“Jane, do you want to eat lunch with us?”—so I learned always to be on my guard, like some armoured wallflower with its tin petals tightly closed.

As for my housemates, I never expected to make friends with them. I had my books and the people in them were more than enough. Except for supper, I ate toast in my room. Toast was quick to prepare and I could get out of the kitchen fast. But I definitely wasn’t getting enough protein.

What to tell her? Belinda was around a lot, having sex with Pete. She stayed overnight several times a week because, I’d overheard, the house on Blenheim Street was “Women Only.” I talked about her as though she were still living there—leaving out the sex. “She’s very dramatic.” I said she walked like she was doing an interpretive dance and got up to imitate her gliding step. As for Pete and Dieter apart from the phone idolatry and the fact that they argued all the time, I had a slight impression of them, hardly more than Pete was an anarchist as conceived by Botticelli and the owner of the patched Reliant. Dieter was a zealot for composting (I’d learned by mistakenly throwing a banana peel in the garbage), and possibly a Marxist. Both more or less ignored me, but I still didn’t want my aunt to know about the anarchism, or the possible Marxism, or that the house wasn’t “Women Only” but a locus of premarital sex. She’d surely write my father.

I said Sonia was pretty and very nice. My aunt retorted that I had “beautiful eyes.”

Sonia was pretty, yet she neglected her appearance and, since the airliner incident on Thursday, she seemed in distress. Anti-Soviet demonstrations were taking place across the country. In Toronto, performances by the Moscow Circus were cancelled. The circus business seemed especially to wound Sonia, causing her to stare uncomprehendingly at her plate all through Friday’s supper. In “Lady with a Lapdog,” Chekhov wrote that Anna Sergeyevna’s *long hair hung mournfully on either side of her face*. He wrote, *It was obvious she was unhappy*.

“I’m glad it’s working out,” my aunt said. “You’re young. You should be having fun.” She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin.

After dinner we cleaned up. There were a number of dented cans by the side of the sink, which I rinsed and stripped of their labels. Then my aunt removed the tops and bottoms with the opener and took them out on the back porch where she savagely stamped them flat in readiness for her basement repository. This was how we’d spent Sunday evenings last year: she in front of the TV unravelling the old sweaters she would later reknit into odorific Christmas and birthday presents, me studying in the kitchen. Tonight I joined her for the start of *The Wonderful World of Disney* until I could politely escape.

When I got back to the Trutch house, the porch was more crowded than usual due to additional bicycles. “*Oni velosipyedy*,” I said out loud, to no one. *They are bicycles*. (I was starting to form sentences.) I hoped to stash the care package of perogies in the freezer and slip up to my room

unnoticed, but there was no need to tiptoe around. The double glass doors to the living room with the flared and faunated panes were still closed. I knew what their meetings were about because of the leaflets and petitions foisted upon apathetic students like me almost weekly. Voices overlapped, several conversations going on at once, while, in the kitchen, the dirty dishes from the potluck stood around on the table daring me not to do them. Then someone began singing. It was a woman's voice, quavering and strange. "We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace . . ." Others joined in. "We shall live in peace some da-a-ay!"

I shivered and hurried up the stairs.

The bus stop was two blocks away, on Fourth Avenue. In the morning buses came at convenient intervals, though sometimes, if one was too crowded, it would speed indifferently past. Every time this happened, I took it personally, which was what I was doing when Sonia came around the corner nicely dressed for once in a skirt. Not until she was almost at the stop did she realize it was me. "Oh! Hi," she said.

I wanted to say something consoling about the airliner, but had no idea of the etiquette in that particular circumstance so, as usual, I defaulted to saying nothing and feeling awkward. The bus arrived and we got on and Sonia followed me to the back. All the seats were taken there too. She could barely reach the strap, so I wordlessly gave up the pole and we do-si-doed, exchanging places. "What time is your first class?" she asked.

I told her. She said she had to go out to a school and observe a grade two class that day. "That's why I'm dressed up like this." Meanwhile the bus lurched along, accumulating more passengers before making a run for the hill. When it reached the top, a view opened over the plated ocean. I lived mere blocks from it now, but had yet to go and see it. Sonia glanced at me from time to time, as though deciding whether or not to speak. At the campus loop, we were disgorged, and with everyone pushing to get off, she got ahead. I didn't expect to see her again until supper, but she was waiting when I stepped down.

"Did they shoot it down on purpose?" I asked.

She knew immediately what I was talking about. "They thought it was a spy plane. Now who knows what the Americans will do? Probably start firing." She pressed her fists into her temples. "Which way are you going?" I pointed and she walked with me toward the Buchanan building. "I don't know what to do about Dieter," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"He always sits next to me at supper. Haven't you noticed? He knocks on my door for no reason. Now he's started pulling my hair. It's driving me crazy. I don't like him. I mean, I like him. I like everybody. He's in my group! But I don't like him *that way*."

So what I'd always suspected was true: other people's problems were shockingly trite.

"His father died last summer."

"Really?" I said. "That's terrible."

"It makes it hard, though, to say I'm not interested. Last night he came in and lay on my bed and said he'd protect me." She turned to me, exasperated. "How does he think he's going to do *that*?"

Outside the library she plucked entreatingly at my sleeve. "Jane? Sit beside me tonight?"

I thought of that little tug as I took a seat in my seminar. The fabric pulling against my arm, her

plea for my presence. The other students meandered in with their backpacks and throwaway coffee cups, chatting, but not to me. No one talked to me. I always sat in the same chair, at Kopanyev's right hand, and always the seat on the other side of me was empty. No one wanted to sit next to the overeager girl. Keith, the punk, clomped in. They were completely freaked out by him. Then Kopanyev arrived, folders bursting under his arm. He was not the most organized lecturer. Frequently his tangents tangled us up and, in this, a second-year course, Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature in Translation, he seemed to recognize that he was an unreliable driver and so threw the reins to us. We were given a reading list and assigned a date, not to make a presentation per se, but to offer a passage a character, or simply an observation, as a topic for discussion.

He ticked our names off with a massive fountain pen. "Now, my conversationalists." Looking around the table, rescrowing the cap. "Michael? Ha! Did you see him jump? What have you brought for us to talk about today, Michael? What have you been reading? Speak! Speak! We are waiting."

A wing of blond hair hung over Michael's eyes. He performed the affectation, sweeping it aside. "Chekhov."

"Ah. The greatest writer who ever lived. And?"

"I notice, well, a couple of things. First, the stories are unbelievably gloomy. Second, the characters always, or often, seem to be in love with people who don't love them back."

"Unrequited love," Kopanyev sighed.

"They're even married to people who don't love them back."

Kopanyev: "Example?"

"Three Years," I said.

"Remind everyone, please, Jane. Summarize story."

"Go ahead," I said to Michael but he only made a face.

"Laptev is in love with Julia, a friend of his sister Nina," I said. "Nina's dying of breast cancer. Actually, Nina's also a victim of unrequited love because her husband lives in another part of town with his mistress."

"Men!" expleted the ponytailed girl at the end of the table and everyone laughed, except Mohawke Keith who generally limited himself to expressions of contempt.

"Laptev proposes. At first Julia refuses because she doesn't love him. Then she agrees. Because Laptev's rich and she doesn't see any other opportunities for herself. The story basically relates the first three years of their marriage."

Michael swept his bang away again. "Their *unhappy* marriage. It's completely *depressing*."

"Chekhov is funny too."

"What's funny about that story? Find me one funny thing."

"I don't have the book with me."

"Cancer? Ha ha ha."

"Doesn't their baby die?" someone asked. "That's the same story, right?"

"That story is more sad than funny," I agreed, "but others are really funny. The people are funny."

"And we have two cases of unrequited love," said Kopanyev. "Can anyone think of other stories with this element?"

"Lady with a Lapdog."

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