

From the Diary of Mikhail Kuzmin

translated by Jeff Radwell

When arriving at my city apartment last Wednesday, I learned that Grisha had not been there since the Assumption<sup>1</sup>, the time when we had parted ways rather coldly. I felt that this marked, in part, a resolution to the matter, and the thought brought me a sense of relief.

Consequently, when I drove into the city with Seryozha on Saturday, and the porter, after handing me some letters from Chicherin, mentioned that the key had been taken and that someone was waiting for me inside, I was somewhat taken aback. I told Seryozha that I would have to stay behind; I would try to make it to Ekaterina Apollonovna's place by one o'clock, though I couldn't say for certain whether I would be able to join him later. I had no check to cash, only a few silver coins to tide Grisha and myself over until Monday.

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<sup>1</sup>Dormition of the Mother of God, a major feast in Eastern Orthodox Christianity commemorating the death and assumption of Mary, is observed on August 15.

It turned out that he had indeed stopped by on Wednesday, immediately after I had left; he had spent Thursday night alone, polished off our entire stash of rolls, burned through the kerosene and candles, and left me a letter. In it, quite touchingly, I must admit, he described how he had come by several times only to find me out, how he had slept there alone, and how, toward evening, he would return just to see if my window was lit, before wandering off to the Island "after having a good cry."

Of course, everything always sounds more poignant when written down in a letter. I immediately sent him out to buy some rolls and sausage, as we were completely out of money. Chicherin had written that "one must be stern with oneself," remember the tribulations of the French émigrés—such are the times we live in; the Last Judgment is at hand, and so on.

Grisha didn't manage to find a job, but we had a wonderfully cheerful time drinking tea and chatting, especially when, upon realizing that we had only twenty-five kopecks left between us, I came up with the idea of going out to pawn our spoons and rings. I had already taken them out of the jewelry box and gathered them up, ready to take them out; while waiting, we lay down to fool around a little, when suddenly the doorbell rang.

Almost naked as I was, I took a letter from the postman through the door chain. Hurrah! It was a check. Grisha was still sitting stark naked atop his red shirt—looking just like Narcissus—dangling his legs over the edge of the chest. I rushed off to the bank, and then to Petrov's to run some errands. Upon returning, we went to the Mariinskaya<sup>2</sup> for lunch; afterwards, I headed over to see Ekaterina Apollonovna, but finding she wasn't in, I went on to my new apartment to give instructions and check on the wallpaper.

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<sup>2</sup> one of Russia's leading opera and ballet theatres, founded in St. Petersburg in the 19th century and long associated with imperial and later Soviet-era high culture.

On my way back, I stopped by Kazakov's shop, settled my debt, and had tea with apples; it felt remarkably cozy, and I fondly recalled how I used to live with them. He urged me not to sell my books to Bolshakov or Makarov, but rather to approach Skrobotov or the Academies instead. He promised to procure some money for me, about 300 or 400 rubles, sometime between the 26th and the 2nd. He asked me to refill their votive lamps for them, adding that whenever I wasn't around, his wife would light mine as well but "without distinction of faith." This gave me quite a laugh. Yet I hadn't felt this cozy in ages; the man's carefree nature is truly phenomenal and has a wonderfully uplifting effect, plus, for reasons I cannot fathom, he seems to be genuinely fond of me.

Grisha was already waiting for me; he had prepared the samovar<sup>3</sup> and gathered the laundry, so we set off for the bathhouse located in Apraksin Lane. It felt like stepping right into the slums of St. Petersburg: one had to walk nearly half a verst<sup>4</sup> through a narrow, pitch-dark courtyard; everything was old and rather grimy—yet the heat inside was absolutely delightful.

We enjoyed a magnificent steam, washed ourselves thoroughly, and downed copious amounts of truly vile kvass. The oil had already been delivered by Sergei, and the kerosene and candles had been purchased. We lit all the sanctuary lamps, got the samovar going, lit candles and an oil lamp; it was truly delightful to sit there, just the two of us feeling completely at ease and listening to Grigory's edifying tales about their visitors. Grisha went to bed; he undressed without any fuss or affectation, though, all in all, I found it difficult to sleep, for he continued his nightly habit of muttering, kicking, and pinning me against the wall with his elbows.

Upon waking in the morning, I was surprised to feel someone's arm beneath my head; only when I saw his face right up close did I realize where I was. When he is dressed, and

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<sup>3</sup> a traditional Russian vessel used to heat and boil water for tea.

<sup>4</sup> historic Russian unit of distance, equal to roughly 0.66 miles.

especially out on the street, one could never imagine how beautiful he looks when naked, or gazed upon at such close quarters. The first thing that struck me was the beauty of his body and the peculiar sensuality of his face (I remember thinking to myself: "Now *this* is perverse<sup>5</sup> beauty"), even though, admittedly, his features are somewhat broad and he bears a resemblance to a Tatar.

It was foggy that morning; after tea, we played cards. It is such a charming little apartment, the rooms themselves, and the view of St. Isaac's Cathedral, that I truly feel sorry for the place, and for the Kazakovs. Had I stayed on with them, I could have taken Grigory into my own household; he is so eager to become a servant, yet regrettably, that is simply out of the question. I gave him a ride as far as Nevsky Prospect, and as I looked back several times, I saw his face turned toward me, wearing a smile.

Nothing new to report from Udelnaya. My teeth are aching a bit. I wrote the lyrics for the "Alexandrian Songs." I read *Pierre Nozière*. It was excellent. The legal case has been postponed until December, at the very earliest. Will Kazakov be able to hold out that long?

Yesterday Varya and the guys went to the Uspensky Cemetery, and I went to town. At the apartment I found a letter from Grigory saying he would be there in the evening; a letter from Yusha, although with instructions, was favorable. The janitor asked whether Grisha should be registered, and said that he had spent the night the day before, and that when he (the janitor) was at Kazakov's apartment, the latter did not say anything special to him.

I'm afraid there's a catch, that Georgy Mikhailovich hasn't changed his books for so long. With Georgy Mikhailovich, who borrowed 25 rubles from me, "see you tomorrow," and Ivan

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: The Russian uses the term *педерастический*, a period pejorative applied to perceived effeminate or eroticized male beauty.

Ivanovich<sup>6</sup>. We went to dine with Zakharov at the Mariinsky. I liked Ivan Ivanovich more than before, although he speaks too floridly and delicately. In the hotel there were two hilariously drunk merchants, one of whom declared: if he had 100,000 rubles, he would not sit on his balls, but would set any quota, while the second insisted that showing the quota also requires skill. At dawn there was a pouring cheerful rain with hail; through... the sky turned yellow, and cheerfully laden with provisions, I made my way home. I felt a pang of regret at the view from our window, St. Petersburg bathed in the evening glow; it evoked the impression of a vast, quieting city—some sort of Alexandria—and a sense of melancholy along with it.

I lit the lamps and votive lights, stoked the stove in the bedroom, set up the samovar, and, having changed the pillows and linens, decided to lie down in Kazakov's bed. Around ten o'clock, Grisha appeared; he had been drinking, but was cheerful and in high spirits. He was joining the Cossack Regiment and was due to report for duty the very next day, bringing all his belongings with him. He immediately ran out to fetch some jam and vodka. At first, he recounted whom he had fought with; then he kept complaining about Mikhailo, threatening to give him a beating, until suddenly he fell asleep. I simply could not imagine that a person could fall asleep so instantaneously. Later, he remarked that one shouldn't mix beer and vodka, that he hadn't anticipated such a result, and complained that he felt nauseous; he then stumbled over to the tap to splash water on his head and lay down, with all the windows thrown open, on the wooden sofa in the kitchen.

"As soon as I come to my senses, I'll be sure to come into the bedroom and wake you up; the breeze out here will sober me up in no time."

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<sup>6</sup> a generic upper middle class male name; roughly akin to "so-and-so," and occasionally used in informal contexts to imply anonymity or indeterminate identity.

I extinguished the lamps and, by the light of a single candle, began reading the *Limonarion*, but I wasn't in the mood for it. I took off my boots and began pacing through the rooms; votive lights glowed everywhere, the bedroom was warm and quiet, and Grisha—lying face down—was snoring softly: it felt just like Easter. Later, I led him, now somewhat more lucid, into the bedroom, helped him undress, and lay down beside him, though I remained awake for a long time. Eventually, he asked for a drink and responded to my inquiries.

In the morning, he left. Yes, that very same morning, while I was at the dentist to have a tooth pulled, I noticed what a wondrous, intoxicating sight blood is.

Kazakov gave me only three rubles and asked me not to mention that I was leaving, or that he was leaving, for that matter; and as I drove past, he remained standing thoughtfully on the porch of his shop, just as he had when he came out to see me off. Oh, my hopes seem rather dim. How will it all work out? Varya has already gone to move her things today; as for me—how will I manage? Will I receive the money on Saturday? Our situation is not entirely hopeless yet, though it has been put on the back burner. It rained this evening, and I played *Aida* and Schubert at the Kudryavtsevs'. Nothing remarkable. Grisha promised to come visit, even every Sunday, if he could; I honestly do not know how I am going to receive him.

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