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Excerpt from *The Rain God*
(Vermya: Moscow, 2008)

Ovid

...The days passed, but not very productively. Every morning she woke with the thought that a whole new day lay ahead, yet her heart was heavy, something acrid and malicious gnawed away inside and she could not get rid of it. Slowly she remembered the reason. She had lost touch with her heart, her happiness and her love. Every morning was the same.

She understood what heartache was. Heartache was exactly what she felt now. When you can't forget for a moment, whatever you do and whatever you say. So it would always be like this, the same as yesterday, the same tomorrow and forever. And somehow she had to get through it, cross this dark river of suffering. But how? How could she vanquish this everlasting internal convulsion, this knot inside her, this mute question that seemed somehow extraneous from her, so much that she wanted to answer: What do you want, then? But she knew what it was. Knew who it was.

The pain was so brutal and visceral she could find no way to alleviate it. She could have cried out, sobbed, written poetry, tried somehow to spit it out, at least partially. But it was too late now, the pain could not be grasped and spilled out in words, actions, or tears – although the tears kept coming to her eyes for no apparent reason and then dried up again, just as inexplicably. In the end Anya stopped noticing them, as if her emotions were leading a separate existence from her body, and she herself could only watch foolishly in a dull stupor, aware there was no way out.

She wanted this poison, this oppression, to go to her head and make her delirious, give her hallucinations – then he would certainly come to her. He would come and sit beside her. She needed nothing more, just let him call in for a moment or two. Just so he was there beside her. But he didn't even appear in her dreams. She slept at night all the same and went to bed praying for only one thing. Lord God above, let me dream of him, please let me dream of him! But he never appeared in her dreams, nor did he come to see her. What have you got against me, why haven't you come to see me all week? Cruel despair gripped her with increasing intensity: unable to endure her feelings, she sat motionless, curled up in a ball in one room or the other, switching the fatuous TV on and off. At one point she was seized by a fit of rage and rained blows on her bookcase – but the books were squeezed so tight that the vibration produced no effect, the bookcase just tottered slightly. Then, suddenly, a hollow thump. A copy of Ovid had fallen off the shelf. Anya gave a nervous laugh. An old 1973 edition, collected works translated by Mikhail Gasparov, that she hadn't looked at since the first year of her studies. No, she wasn't going to play those games: fortune-telling with books was childish and pagan, she wouldn't stoop to that. But the book lay spread-eagled on the floor with the black lines of text gaping up at her, and there was something pathetic in the way it was flung open, as if helplessly pleading to be read. All right then, if that's the way you want it. Anya crouched down to look at the page: "The white swan sings at the hour when fate calls. / I turn to you, although I cannot hope that my prayer/ Will touch you, and write, knowing that god is not with me..." Not with me. One of the letters penned by Didius. She lifted the book, glanced at the table of contents. Yes, of course! Apart from these heart-rending letters between lovers and *The Art of Love*, there was also *The Cure for Love*. God had sent this heathen mischief-maker to help her. She sat down on the floor with her legs tucked beneath her and began reading. Could she really find wise counsel amid all this irony and witticism, among the heavy sentimentalism and 'over-ripe frivolity', to quote Zhuravsky, that had always sickened her when she read Ovid? Could she really find the cure? But Ovid had no particular advice for lovesick youths. Of course, there was flight to another town, a journey – she would do that anyway, very soon – time out by the seaside. But now, where could she go right now? Ovid also recommended the search for a defect of some kind in the object of

affection: 'My beloved has clumsy hands...', 'She's too short...' Anya smiled. Amusing, but no use to her. 'Lie down with the first girl you come across, slake your first lust with her.' As she read these words Anya slammed the book shut and shoved it back in the gap between the other volumes on the bookshelf. 'Lie down with the first...'

She lay down, spread out on the floor. This was the solution. She lay on the floor and stared at a thin crack in the ceiling and a long grey stain like a footprint from a gigantic boot, where the upstairs neighbours had flooded their apartment some five years ago. Then up at the sky, motionless clouds gleaming in the sunlight. Clouds, she thought, nightgowns for goddesses. Or maybe pillows? Her back began to ache, cramped from lying on the hard ground, but instead of getting up Anya pulled a pillow off the bed, stuffed it under her head and lay back again. For some reason lying in this position somehow relieved the difficult position in which she found herself. The position in which she found herself was relieved by lying in this position. She turned on some music. Freddie Mercury belting out his songs, killed by AIDS and homosexuality. Both those factors invested him with a mysterious, frail charm and he sang beautifully, he was right in his own way. Led Zeppelin had long ago been banished and lived on the lower shelf, buried by other cassettes now out of favour. She shied away from even touching them: the sky was too close, the window too close, and from the window Jacob's rope ladder climbed quietly upwards, the Stairway to Heaven. Her feelings towards Mercury were neutral, this was superb. Only the bottle was missing from this familiar scene, but there was no bottle here. A strange stupor descended on her: only not that. That border must not be crossed. Not for his sake. The bottle would be a step too far.

The Bicycle

That same evening Anya went for a ride on her bike.

She was 15 again. She forgot Gleb, forgot Petra, you're the only one in the world I love, you alone, if you only knew how painful it is, how painful, do you hear me, I can't go on living! She pressed hard on the pedals as she climbed uphill, soaked with sweat, but she loved the uphill slog: all her hot, hot love slammed down on the pedals.

If only she had a gun! She would fire accurately and resonantly at these windows illuminated in the light of the setting sun, at the tightly closed fanlights – the disconcerting crash of broken hopes, splinters flashing in the light before scattering on the ground, a cascade of fiery rain. How could she endure this world, the sun shining, the air heavy with jasmine, the warm evening, the drifting wisps of poplar fluff and unhurried figures out for a stroll in their bright summer clothes? If she had a gun she could destroy the lot, fire at them all: the trees, the fragrant blossom on the shrubbery, the passers-by – so that they too keeled over on the ground and lay silent and motionless beside her, like her unable to go on living.

Anya started going for bike rides every evening. Suddenly she felt young, careless and free. What did she have to lose? Soon she would be leaving for another world, she would quit this town. Soon, soon! She dreamed of the adventures she could have before leaving, how she would start a new life on the street, something she had never known coming from a family of intellectuals, although she was always attracted by the awful dark delights it seemed to offer. Sucking on the bitter, candied cardboard mouthpieces of cheap cigarettes, making friends with bad boys, thieving from passers-by – let the militiamen kill her, let them. Again she wanted to die, not for long, just like in her distant childhood – afterwards she would live on regardless, of course.

For a while Anya really did lose all sense of danger. As she turned the pedals she would sing all the songs she remembered – Okudzhava, Mercury, Tsoi, the Beatles – riding in silence bored her. She would dive into unfamiliar courtyards and start chatting with anybody, depending on her mood: now with some young mother pushing a pram – in a whisper she would ask how old the child was and the mother would stare in amazement ('He's still a baby!'); now with a Tatar yard keeper, enquiring if the scum round here left a lot of litter, although the yard keeper made out he was dumb. Then she asked a pockmarked youth lurking in the gateway for a cigarette and he even held out the

packet, but she laughed in reply: 'No, thanks. Just checking, you passed the test, congratulations!' These words were thrown over her shoulder as she sped away from him, almost knocking over a group of stout, garishly made-up women with bulging shopping bags, clearly school dinner-ladies. She screeched: 'Careful with those heavy bags!' The women leapt aside and yelled after her: 'Little blighter!', but she turned the pedals even faster.

The only people she was secretly fond of were the drunks sleeping peacefully under the bushes, and she rode towards them carefully, climbed off her bike to look – hey, you still alive there? Usually they made no reply, just mumbled softly. It was as if she had divine protection, she couldn't provoke anybody, everyone and everything glided past her, and if they turned round it was only to shrug their shoulders and curse her. What's your game? Move it, off with you!

But all the same two real adventures emerged from the indifferent bustle of street life: she got caught in the rain, and she got into a fight with a boy.

The rain was not unexpected. Not at all, it was bound to fall. All day the heat was stifling without a breath of air, the close, dusty atmosphere was unbearable, enough to make you swoon or give you convulsions, you could even feel it indoors, where clouds of dry dust rose as high as the fanlights. And when she wheeled her bike from the entranceway towards evening she was met by a howling wind, the first omen of the coming storm. Scraps of paper scudded across the yard and birds swooped crookedly overhead, flying so low they brushed the ground.

Mothers shouted anxiously from apartment windows: 'Grisha, Tanya, Mitka, come inside!'

Everybody, everybody could feel it coming, but the wind seemed to be driving the heavy storm cloud away.

Anya rode on with all her might. As soon as she was thankfully far from home the sun went behind the clouds, the sky grew dark, there was a roll of thunder, the first huge round drops fell on her bare arms and in an instant became a downpour. Too late to stop now! She went faster. The sky flickered and rumbled, iron globules rained down on her. The asphalt shone as it was covered with pools of clean water through which the wheels sliced in two precise halves, but with every passing second the puddles deepened and the bike sank deeper in the glittering, seething water. Nothing was visible through the veil of rain and falling darkness, even the cars apprehensively juddered to a halt – driving had become impossible. Alone, Anya raced down a broad avenue as the dense bright stream of rain lashed her shoulders. She gulped as the water splashed in her face and stared in wonder at golden flashes across the dark lilac sky. The bike slowed, lost momentum and hit an unseen obstacle with the full force of the front wheel. Anya was thrown to the ground. There was nothing to break her fall, only water, and her arm and knees began to bleed.

Freeing her legs from under the bike, she crawled from the stony road to the grass verge. Her foot was hurting and she began to sob bitterly. She sat in a huddle for a while, licking her bloody knee. Not too serious, the trickle of red had stopped now – to hell with it! The storm was dying down, but the rain still fell in sheets. Anya lay on the green grass and the sodden earth softened by rain, feeling the chill of the cold ground although still hot after the ride. The rain beat against her belly and face, beat down on her as if she wasn't human any more, just another object – who cares, who cares, it was even better like this, this was how it was meant to be! She began to pray: Oh, beautiful, strong rain, annihilate me, destroy me quick as you can! Oh great god, wettest god in the world, I can't take any more, can't live any longer! Let me perish, press my body down into the earth, kill me quickly, that's all I ask!

But the rain didn't hear. The downpour suddenly weakened and stopped. And as if everyone had hidden and lain in wait, even before the last drops had fallen people crawled out from their refuges and the shiny cars swished away, sounding their horns. Anya lifted her steed from the mud – all over, time to go home.

A few days later she had a fight with a boy. She was riding through an open courtyard, already deserted and veiled in soft twilight, singing at the top of her voice as usual. He appeared from somewhere near the gateway: about fifteen, a black sports jersey hung outside his jeans and hair that badly needed a trim.

'What a pretty girl, what a melodious voice, don't go away please. I beg you, beseech you, stop and listen to what I have to say.' Anya braked, picked up her ears – the words 'melodious voice' and 'beseech you' struck a chord with her. 'By the way, what are you doing this evening, sweetie? Perhaps you can find time for me. Just what I need!' he added boldly, changing his tone. She was about to reply – yes, of course I'll find time for you, even a whole evening. But the youth suddenly lapsed into vulgarities sprinkled with obscene language. His mates, whom Anya had failed to notice, stepped out from the gateway – lads even younger than he was, sniggering foolishly at their commander's witticisms. Apparently this was just a burlesque for their benefit. Timur and his gang. They didn't know who they were up against!

'How long since you got a thrashing? Shut your mouth, right now!' But the lad carried on in the same vein, swearing even more profusely. Anya abandoned her bike and ran up to the idiot. Close to, she could see he didn't look like an ordinary courtyard lout, this was clearly a student from a special English school – moreover, she should have guessed right from the start, from his refined, melodious speech, ha ha! What's more, she could smell alcohol on his breath. Kids on vacation, spending their school holidays as best they could. The boy stared at her curiously, even fell silent for a moment. Anya threw a punch and dealt him a sharp blow near the solar plexus. The boy's face expressed the kind of fear that only a small child knows. Took you unawares, did I? He bent double, but still managed to return the blow, aiming (how base human beings can be!) at her face. Anya dodged back and his fist landed on her ear. For a moment she went deaf and felt a wave of pure rage, unadulterated rage. With all her might she frenziedly punched him again, in the shoulder since he was still bent double, and he instantly crumpled to the ground. He lay there like a sack, without trying to get up or return the blow.

'Understand? You understand me? Hey, still alive? Up you get then!'

Seeing their commander on the ground, his gang took to their heels. The boy lay huddled on his side with knees bent, his face contracted – she must have hit him hard. One eye scowled up at her sideways. Clearly he was still alive but had no intention of rising to his feet. Surely he wasn't afraid? Anya planted her foot on his upper shoulder and all at once she felt like Anna Alexandrovna after dealing with a naughty fourth-grader.

'So you dare to swear at me? You're good as dead, know that? What's your name?'

He said nothing.

'What's your name? Answer me, sharpish!' She jabbed him with her foot.

'Sasha,' the boy croaked.

'Right then, Sasha, I want you to know, if you say those swear words one more time, I'll come back and shoot you with my pistol!'

After this edifying speech she hopped back on the bike and sped away. Sasha stayed behind, her pathetic little enemy. 'I forgive you,' she sang, and smiled quietly to herself: another evening that had not passed in vain, something at least had been achieved!

Soaked to the skin, Anya hoisted her bike to the third floor – the lift was too small. She wheeled the bike into her parents' room and propped it against the sofa. It stood there gleaming: weary, carefree and alive.

She was totally exhausted. The thoughts had been chased from her head, no pain in her heart now. On purpose she tried for a moment to force herself to think of Father Antony, but in vain. She took a shower, hastily crossed herself in front of the icons, commended her spirit into the hands of the Lord and fell into a deep sleep.

This is how, with the aid of her bike, she solved the problem of evenings and nights. The only thing was, they were preceded by mornings. She woke up late, as late as possible, compelling herself to sleep, sleep. Her body ached from her evening excursions and it was nearly eleven, getting on for midday, when Anya left her bed, but even that was of little use. The endless, boundless, insuperable day still stretched before her like a fearful desert. How could she make the leap, how could she reach the other side?

Her parents returned from the dacha. Just three weeks left before she was due to leave. Last preparations of the things she must pack, everybody fussing about, but everything passed her by and

Anya remained indifferent as she automatically did only what her mother asked – Go to the dentist, it's very expensive *over there*. Let's go and buy you at least one decent pair of trousers and a blouse – we don't know how much these things cost *over there*. They made a trip to the Moskva department store and bought some trousers, a long-sleeved blouse and two rather dubious-looking casual tops from a cooperative clothing manufacturer.

And again she lay alone, vacantly listening to music, unnoticed in all the agitation that surrounded her. Granted, she moved to the sofa to appease her mother and tried to read, but wherever she looked in these works of fiction the same triangles danced before her eyes, triangles everywhere. It was impossible. The same slippery trident, personal life getting in her way again.

II. From the collection *A Contemporary Patericon: to be read in times of despair*

Father Vasily

Father Vasily was very humble. Although he was a bishop. True, an American bishop. When he first visited Russia from America everyone was astonished when he stroked children's heads after the service with a quiet smile and gave them candy: who would have believed it of a bishop. One day Father Vasily set off to visit a priest who lived in a remote village miles from anywhere, but the priest had pleaded with His Grace to pay a visit – the church dated back to the 16th century. And His Grace consented. It was a bumpy ride and the car jolted from side to side, but they endured it in silence. Suddenly the driver braked. The road was blocked, there had been an accident. A motorcycle had crashed into a truck. Beside the motorcycle a grey-haired man lay face-down on the ground. A second man stood clutching his helmet, weeping as he stared down at the figure on the ground, for this was his own father, he had been killed by the impact.

'If your father was a believer, I can read the funeral rites,' said the bishop.

'Yes, yes,' the young man nodded. 'My father always believed in God, used to pray. He didn't go to church, all the churches round here fell into ruin long ago, but he always said he had a father confessor.'

Father Vasily's vestments were brought from the car and he began to put them on. Before he started the funeral service he turned to speak to the man. 'But how could your father have a confessor if he never went to church?'

'He tuned in to those religious broadcasts from London, listened to them nearly every day. The services were held by a priest whose first name I forget, but the surname was Rodzyanko. My father called this priest his confessor although he never saw him, of course.'

Father Vasily slowly kneeled before the spiritual son he was meeting for the first and last time.

Set Meal

Father Pavel, already elderly and half-blind, found himself in the big city. He had been summoned to take a service with the metropolitan. The metropolitan had given Father Pavel money for the return journey before they parted. With time to kill before the train departed, Father Pavel decided to get something to eat.

He went into a café, but the girl behind the counter told him: 'You must smarten up before you eat here, granddad.'

She stared at his feet. Father Pavel was wearing felt boots. It had been bitterly cold when he set off from his village, but by the time he arrived in town the thaw had set in and his boots left little muddy puddles on the floor. The priest's coat, too, was old and worn, and the small travelling bag in

which he carried his surplice was threadbare. Obviously the girl thought he was some kind of vagrant. Father Pavel went on his way.

When he came to another café that looked more like a canteen they told him: 'We only have set meals here!' 'That's fine by me,' answered Father Pavel. He stood his case against the table leg, took a tray and collected his set meal – starter and main course with fruit compote. He brought his dinner back to the table and was about to begin when he realised he'd forgotten to take a spoon and fork! When he returned with the spoon and fork he found a man sitting at his table, eating his first course. So much for the set meal. Father Pavel sat down opposite and without a word started on his second course. After finishing the second course he pocketed the bread and they each drank exactly half of the compote.

The man got up and went to the door. By chance Father Pavel glanced under the table – his travelling bag had gone! The miser had stolen it. Eaten half his dinner, and taken his bag too. Father Pavel got up from the table and was about to chase after the thief when he saw the bag was still there. Only it was standing by another table. And the meal on the table was untouched. He had sat at the wrong table!!! The man was already out of sight. At this Father Pavel's head ached. What a forgiving soul, not a word of protest although Father Pavel had eaten half his dinner!

THE ARTISAN

Once upon a time there was an artisan skilled in the crafts of Orthodoxy. He lived well, for there was no shortage of work. Most of his clients were women. From all over Russia they converged on his remote workshop at the humble peasant's log hut in a village outside Moscow. Each of them had one and the same request: 'Make me Orthodox, good fellow. But careful you don't overdo it. I want everything just right, down to the last detail.'

'No need to worry, dear lady, I'll make a perfect job of it,' the artisan replied deferentially, and putting on his black leather apron he began his task. He worked quickly and deftly, and in a few hours the deed was accomplished.

He always began with the voice, giving the client a throat of iron so that from that day forward they spoke in a quiet voice that seemed husky, although it was meek rather than hoarse. Then he moved to the eyes, squeezing drops of his special pellicle-potion from a pipette and filling them with a faint mist. This lent the women's eyes a permanently sorrowful expression as if they carried some secret reproach, and if required, he could add a slight squint as well. Actually they were neither reproachful nor cross-eyed, this was a recognition of their own wickedness. Next the artisan turned to the lips. He made an injection at the corner of the mouth and thereafter the women were unable to smile. After all, Christ never laughed. Most likely He didn't smile either, so His followers must do likewise. That is how the artisan explained the procedure.

After that came the complexion – the special green cream, an infusion of medicinal herbs that made the face sallow and also hinted at some hidden asceticism. Then the artisan worked on their gait and posture, and after a short massage his clients' walk became unhurried and they shuffled along with head bent, so that the newly sorrowful eyes clouded with reproach not only squinted, but stared down in one direction. Only one small touch remained: the artisan presented each of his clients with a special scarf as they left. They only had to tie it over their head or even round their neck to make any other clothing look drab and baggy. And that was it. The clients paid the artisan each according to her means, but usually with great generosity. Country folk always gave him produce from their poultry or their vegetable garden, while those from the capital (the majority) brought expensive offerings like cognac or whisky. All in all, the artisan never fell on hard times and his customers went home content with their tranquil Orthodox contentment.

The artisan became quite skilled at crafting women in the Orthodox mode, and it somehow became second nature to him. When men turned up for a consultation he felt rather ill at ease, although he never showed it, of course. He would reach for his hammer, his nails and cream as

usual. But the men were never as successful, they had an inevitable, enduring femininity in their eyes and overall appearance, with their long hair, roving glance and weak will. Sometimes they began to stutter. Maybe he mixed up the powders, or he was making a botched job of it by giving the men potions that worked on women? Who knows. But the men too acquired a sickly countenance, shuffling walk and gloomy wandering eyes. Many of them grew long hair and tied it in a ponytail to perfect the image.

Sometimes people brought children to see the artisan, but children were very resistant to the process. After the session they were pale and nervous, and some just refused to comply, so in the end the artisan asked people not to bring him children. They had to wait for their mothers in the corridor outside.

Particularly advanced subjects would ask him: 'But the heart, what about the heart?' 'The inner man is most important, not his outer appearance. Can't you make hearts Orthodox?'

'I can't change their hearts,' was the artisan's reply. 'If I could, the Kingdom of God would have ruled the Earth long ago. That is not the will of Our Lord.'

In his free time he liked to read the Book of Revelation to John the Divine. He was particularly keen on the descriptions of fantastical beasts.

From the cycle **EDIFYING TALES TO BE READ AT SUNDAY SCHOOL**

Harry Potter's bad!

Larisa Yepifanova attended a Russian Orthodox high school. It was forbidden to read Harry Potter there. Because he used magic, and the Church does not favour magic. This had been explained to the pupils at several assemblies by their class teacher, and by the school priest Father Vladimir. Only silly Larisa didn't listen to the sensible words of her elders and borrowed the Potter books from the girl next door, who went to an ordinary school. One by one she read all the books, and she went to see all three films, several times over. But it all came to a terrible end. One night Harry Potter himself came to visit Larisa Yepifanova on a broomstick. A nice boy with glasses. He flew straight in through the open balcony door, zoomed right round the apartment, called 'Cu-ckoo!' to Larisa and flew away, vanishing without a trace. Ever since Larisa has a permanent stutter and she can't sleep at night.

Questions and assignments after reading the text

- 1) Should Harry Potter have flown to see Larisa on his broomstick that night?*
- 2) What do you think: why couldn't he come another way, without the broomstick?*
- 3) Why did Larisa begin to stutter? Think hard and take plenty of time to answer this question.*

Translated from the Russian by Patricia Donegan