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Anna Galkina

THE COLD LIGHT OF DISTANT STARS

Sample translation by David Tushingham

OUR STREET

All the houses in our street are made of wood. The only exception is the white stone house belonging to the priest. The road surface is damaged. Cracks and holes everywhere. By the water pump on the corner there's often a wide, deep puddle that turns to ice in winter. In the summer old planks are placed across it, in winter it's gritted generously with salt.

Crooked wooden fences separate people's yards from the street. On the other side of our garden gate there is a junction box that often needs repairing. Some workmen can't resist the temptation and take pleasure in carving swear words into our fence. It's their way of immortalizing themselves.

If you follow the street past the water pump and over the crossroads in the direction of the station you can find your way purely by smell. The place is teeming with different odours.

The first landmark lies hidden behind the many trees and bushes but on hot summer days you really can't miss it. The old tip smells of rotten fruit, burnt plastic, used condoms, vodka and dark secrets. Lone drunks can find somewhere here to rest and have a quiet drink, and for adventurous couples it's a place to hide and have sex without being disturbed.

The smell of the first garden after the tip promises apples, pears, plums, cherries, flowers and herbs. The yard next to it carries a pungent odour of vodka. In the house beyond, where our friends live, it smells of old books, gingerbread and dog. The next building has the aroma of freshly baked biscuits, of cinnamon, cloves and saffron, of marzipan, rum and chocolate, of jam and childhood. They bake cakes here. The next two houses are run down: they smell of rotten wood, of mould, of moss, of old carpets, of soot and broken dreams. But before you can be moved by their gentle melancholy a stench hits you that's so strong you need to brace yourself. It's a mixture of vodka and wine, beer and spirits, tobacco, urine, mud, primitive desire, simple pleasures, suppressed tears and repressed pain.

This is the *Three Pigs* pub, a steamboat in danger of sinking on an ocean of alcohol. Walking past it on the narrow pavement, you need to be very careful. It can happen that one of the drunks standing outside the pub might fall on top of you.

After that, nothing can shock you. You calmly take note of the little wooden shack on the last corner of our street. This is the greengrocer's. The smells of rotten cabbages, sprouting potatoes and mouldy carrots, withered herbs, damp earth, old linen, hunger and poverty hang in the air and will haunt you in your dreams. Your whole life long.

WINTER

Winter is whiteness. Winter is quiet, and empty streets. Winter is the snow gleaming in the sunlight, myriads of shining crystals. Winter is snowflakes driven by the wind, floating through the frosty air like gentle blossom. Winter is your face numb with cold, frozen toes, red hands and stiff fingers.

Winter is black and white: raven black and snow white. Winter is tracks of faeces, blood and urine in the white snow. Winter is paths that have disappeared and have to be shovelled clear after heavy snowfall. Winter is the black sky high above and the cold light of distant stars. Winter is the sound of snow beneath your feet and the clear, sharp air of the forest.

Winter is skiing and skating. Winter is the sledge. You use the sledge to travel down the hill. You use the sledge to bring home buckets of water. You use the sledge to go shopping.

Fresh washing hung on the line turns into bizarre ice sculptures.

In winter it's cold in our house. It's so cold we keep all our clothes on at night. Under the dark hole in the privy a giant, icy tower of shit is slowly but steadily growing. If it gets too high, grandmother will have to break it down with a spade.

SUMMER

Summer is the smell of freshly-mown grass, asphalt glowing in the heat and dust on the road. Summer is the wind in the treetops, vegetable beds and overgrown woodland. Summer is balmy, pitch black nights, cats singing and mosquitoes humming. Summer is the bright blue of forget-me-nots and the tender pink of bindweed. It's sunbathing on the roof and secret walks through mysterious nocturnal landscapes. Summer is the echo and the dark mirror of standing water deep down in the abandoned well, the thicket of raspberry canes, a sea of dandelions and a riot of colours. Summer is morning dew and red and yellow apples hiding every morning in the long grass.

In summer, the path to the privy gets overgrown with all sorts of weeds and nettles. The little outhouse is alive. The shit is melting. Large flies with bulging green eyes buzz tirelessly around the craphole. The biting stench of shit is accompanied by the smell of mouldy, rotten wood.

One time my great aunt's black straw hat disappeared down the shithole. It happened like this: my mother, my grandmother, my great aunt and her husband were sitting together after lunch on the bench underneath the old lime tree. My grandmother made a tactless remark about the straw hat's advanced age. My great aunt's husband, who found his wife's excessive stinginess hard enough to put up with anyway, was overcome with embarrassment. Without a word, he tore the hat off her head and made straight for the privy.

Summer is dancing in the rain and the gentle whisper of raindrops. It often rains in my room and in the kitchen. On its way through the roof the rainwater picks up different colours and turns a greyish yellow. The ceiling and the wallpaper turn yellow too. There are bowls all over the floor to catch the water.

Sometimes my mother wakes me in the middle of the night. I have to get dressed. Grandmother hastily looks for our passports, birth certificates and other documents hidden in the wardrobe under the bedclothes. After a few minutes of panic, everything has been found. Then we sit round the living room table and wait in silence. Flashes of lightning light up the room and there is loud thunder. Every time there is a storm outside, we go through the same ritual.

Summer nights are drunks singing. They make me giggle, though somehow I find the songs rather sad. They stop me sleeping and bring a restlessness with them. It feels like I'm not safe anywhere.

Sometimes summer nights are a fiery red. Then a red veil and clouds of smoke are drawn across the black sky. The next day you'll stumble across a burnt out shell somewhere in town that used to be a house. Hopefully the people who lived there managed to rescue their passports and birth certificates.

POWER CUT

Some evenings the light goes off by itself. At first you don't want to believe it. You press the switch hurriedly, inspect the bulb hopefully, shaking it to convince yourself the filament is still intact. Then you check the fuse, but it's not that either. In the end you step outside the house and see that the whole street has been plunged into darkness.

It's a power cut.

The usual rhythm of every day has been interrupted. It's hard to believe what a simple light bulb can do. The atmosphere, the way you think, what you notice – everything changes in flickering candlelight. Familiar things become unfamiliar and threatening, long shadows dance on the ceiling and on the walls. Hordes of invisible eyes watch you through the huge living room windows. The house is full of strange noises. There's a knocking at the window, whining under the roof, hissing, crying like a small child, drumming, splashing, scratching...

It's November. Outside the wind is raging and it's raining buckets. The scratching and howling goes on. I pluck up all my courage and go to the front door. The scratching gets louder. Then there's a miaow. I let our cat in. She's soaking wet. The storm subsides again. The world stands still. You feel abandoned, isolated, unsafe and one thing is clear: it could take a long time for the light to come back on again. Days, evenings, nights. Your sense of time evaporates.

The clocks keep ticking.

OLGA

My friend Olga is remarkably short. She has thin, shoulder-length hair that quickly goes greasy and slanty eyes, but she's also got pearl-white teeth and long, strong fingernails. Two qualities I secretly envy her for. Olga is convinced you can use salt baths to strengthen your fingernails and she asks me every time we see each other: "So? Have you tried dipping them in salt water yet?"

Olga is not your average girl. She has no mother or father. She lives with her grandparents in a tiny two room flat in a prefab block. Olga was two years old when her father killed her twenty year-old mother and her little sister. Her father is still in prison and Olga dreams of meeting him.

Olga's grandparents are still relatively young, though they don't look it. Her Grandma is fifty-two, her Grandad five years older. Her grandmother is even shorter than Olga, she works in a special school or I should say a residential school for children with minor mental disabilities. Her Grandad, who is actually just her Grandma's husband and not related to Olga, works in some mysterious ministry. When he leaves the house in the morning, he's always got a black briefcase with him. In winter he wears a special cap made of black goatskin. These caps are very popular with Communist Party members. Also, Grandad has two sons who work for the KGB.

Every time I go to visit Olga, her Grandma is always wearing the same felt coat with flowers on it. Her Grandad wears very little, usually just a vest and underpants. Olga's Grandma and Grandad lead a regular working life five days a week. But from Friday afternoon to Sunday night they're allowed to let their hair down. They start drinking on Friday evening and by Saturday morning they're both so out of it they can hardly move. During these orgies of booze, Olga looks after them. She stocks up on vodka and cigarettes, wipes up the sick and changes the bedclothes. By Sunday morning they need to start sobering up so they can be good little workers again on Monday morning. So Olga gives them the brine from pickled cucumbers, a traditional hangover cure.

"One night I heard them screaming," Olga tells me. "I got really frightened and thought Grandma and Grandad were having a fight. So I stormed into their bedroom and turned the light on. They were only fucking, can you imagine: them fucking!" Olga repeats with a daft smile. "I told my neighbour Dimka. He said it was impossible, Grandad wouldn't be able to get it up. But they were actually fucking..."

One day I spend the night at Olga's. There's another guest there apart from me, Olga's uncle, a man in his mid-thirties. I've never seen him before, which is hardly surprising: he just spent several years inside for theft. He was released two months ago and since then he's been living with Olga and her grandparents. He has skilfully redecorated the flat and painted a portrait of his mother. He does the shopping, he washes the dishes and he plays a full and active part in the obligatory weekend's drinking. During the night shouting and other noises drag us from our sleep. The sound is coming from the hallway. People are arguing and swearing loudly.

"I'm going to kill you, you old cunt!" a man's voice shouts.

"You haven't got the balls, son," a second voice replies, calmly. Suddenly several people are shouting at the same time. Something hits the floor hard.

Then there's a ring at the door and a woman with a high voice says: "Stop it! Or I'll call the police!"

Once things have quietened down, we slip out of the room. On the floor in the hallway Olga's Grandad is lying in a pool of blood, dressed as always in just his underpants. His balls are peeping out, reddish purple and thinly covered with grey hairs. Olga's uncle blocks our way holding a kitchen knife and tells us to go back to our room.

Like most people living in this little town, Olga's grandparents have no phone. While Olga's uncle is busy intimidating his mother and the woman next door, I run to a phone box in the street. It smells strongly of urine, the windows are all missing and the walls are covered in swear words. Most of it's about male and female genitalia in varying combinations. The floor is scattered with the shells of sunflower seeds. Luckily the receiver is still there. After a couple of rings someone picks up at the other end:

"Police. Hello?"

"Hello," I say, agitated, "My friend's uncle is killing her Grandad. Can you come quick?"

"It's a family problem, sort it out yourselves," a sleepy male voice answers. Then the hard-working officer hangs up.

Terrified, I go back to Olga, who is shut in her room. It's quieter now. There's no sign of her uncle. Her Grandad is sitting on the bench in the hall, still half naked, staring into empty space. His lower lip is cut in two. Blood runs down his chin and drips onto the floor.

Olga's Grandma is barely functional. I assume she's in a state of shock, then I realise she is absolutely wasted. Her neighbour, Auntie Tanya, who's not exactly sober herself, takes Grandad to the hospital. To get there it's a good five kilometre trek.

A couple of weeks later, the stitches Grandad had to have in his lower lip have stopped bothering him. The uncle is back inside, for theft and attempted murder. Grandma has taken some leave and is drowning her frustration and grief in vodka. Grandad is in a good mood. When Olga and I are in her room, he looks in now and again, still wearing just his underpants:

"Ooh, I really want to give you a..." Grandad says to me.

"Forget it, you'll never get it up."

"I would. For a sweet little pussy like yours, it'd be hard all night," Grandad says and smacks his stitched lips.

With great difficulty, vigorously using both her hands and feet, Olga manages to throw her lecherous Grandad out of her room.

The scene is repeated several times.

TAMARA GERASSIMOVNA IS A LATE DEVELOPER

So Viktor's homelessness and with it Tamara Gerassimovna's life without a man both come to an unexpected end in the space of a few days. There might be less room in Tamara Gerassimovna's bed now, but it is cosier. Her son has been moved into the dacha as planned, the children's room turned into the living room and the library's driver Yuri Stepanovich fired for some triviality. The vacant post has promptly been given to Viktor. As the new driver doesn't need to be paid in vodka, this relieves a great burden on the library's finances.

And for the first time in her life Tamara Gerassimovna is happy. As happy as a newly-wed on her honeymoon. And she has no intention of keep her new-found happiness to herself. So the director is generous enough to share it with all her colleagues in the planning department, most of whom either live alone or are single mothers.

She serves out portions of joy while they are eating together. Usually over lunch, but also in smaller groups, over a cup of tea and fresh biscuits, in the library toilets, on the way home or even during the monthly clean-up in which the whole team takes part.

Tamara Gerassimovna doesn't hold back in telling them how lucky she is. And because her colleagues know everything about her marriage, they really do deserve to share the best parts. So Tamara Gerassimovna reveals every detail of her intimate life wherever possible. Because the more everyone communicates, the closer the team becomes and the better the working atmosphere.

It goes roughly like this: "I'll never forget my first time with Victor!" Tamara Gerassimovna exclaims, once her colleagues from the planning department are all comfortably settled over their tea. The women present freeze. Tamara Gerassimovna ploughs on cheerfully: "Suddenly he stopped moving. He just lay there, not moving a muscle. I was so frightened!"

At this point she pauses briefly and waits for them to react appropriately. But it seems her colleagues are in no better state than Victor was then. They don't move. There is total silence in the planning department. And a good thing too, because the story suddenly takes a rather dramatic turn.

"Then he screamed. And I must say I would have wet my pants, if I'd had any on," Tamara Gerassimovna says frankly. "I shook him and pinched him

and shouted: “What’s the matter, love? Don’t you feel well? Shall I call the doctor?” But he just whispered: “No, wait... wait... wait!”

Here Tamara Gerassimovna pauses for effect again. And one of her colleagues wakes up and asks: “So? What happened then?”

“Then he came!” says Tamara Gerassimovna with great satisfaction.

“You live and learn,” another colleague observes.

“That is so true,” says Tamara Gerassimovna, “after all, it was with Victor that I first learned how a woman can have an orgasm. At the age of fifty-nine!” She laughs out loud.

“You’re a late developer, Tamara Gerassimovna,” Mila Antonovna nods. “I was never that keen either, but with the menopause some things really got moving.” Mila Antonovna laughs out loud too. “I’d even arrange to see my husband at home in my lunch hour. Luckily he’s older, so he’d already retired.”

“I wish I could do that!” Tamara Gerassimovna observes enviously, “But I can’t!” She laughs out loud once again and looks at her watch. “What really turns Victor on is my bottom. He always says: ‘Darling, you have got a fantastic arse!’”

“And what’s so special about that,” a younger colleague asks, curiously.

“What? About what he says?”

“No, about your arse!”

“Oh! It’s as white as snow and round and delicious...” Tamara Gerassimovna says dreamily, making one of her colleagues choke on her biscuit.

“Delicious? Is he a cannibal?”

“No, though he loves kissing it,” Tamara Gerassimovna says proudly. “Then he turns me over on my back and kisses...” Now she whispers out loud: “... the front!”

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Fortunately at that moment the conversation is interrupted by the ringing of a telephone and Tamara Gerassimovna leaps up to answer it as if she's been bitten by a tarantula.

And just as well, because it's Victor calling.

THE THIRD COLOUR

Suddenly my periods stop. They've never been particularly regular. But this time I have my suspicions. Two weeks go by. Then I'm sitting in the waiting room of the gynaecology clinic. It takes hours for my name to be called. The female doctor feels my stomach, frowns and shakes her head. She says: "I can't find any pregnancy." The way she puts it drives me mad. Does she mean I'm not pregnant or that she's not sure?

I go home and two more weeks pass. Then it starts. I feel sick cleaning my teeth, I feel sick at the dinner table and in the kitchen, I feel sick after I get up, before I go to bed and in bed. I have hunger cravings for garlic with salt and pickled cucumbers.

I go back to the gynaecology clinic, to a male doctor this time. The gynaecologist is the only man there. It feels very odd letting yourself be examined down there by a strange man. Most women aren't so brave, they'd rather do without his professional expertise and be examined by a female doctor. But Dr. Baranov is the best gynaecologist in our town. His examination chair is made of black artificial leather. It has cupped leg supports on either side whose white lacquer has flaked off.

I found out about that chair when I was nine years old. I'd climbed over the fence between our garden and next door's yard. I made a clumsy movement, and whoosh, sat down on one of the spikes of the fence. I'd impaled myself. I came to with my legs wide apart in that white room, in the examination chair. There was a lot of iodine, needles and a long line of stitches.

My confused state is not lost on the sympathetic doctor. With a pat on the bum he makes it clear I need to sit in the chair. He strokes my tummy to help me relax. Next to him, in a white enamel bowl, there are some shiny metal instruments. The doctor picks up a mirror and something else. He takes a careful look inside and says: "You're nine weeks pregnant."

I'd thought as much. But the news still hits me like a hammer. I've dreamt of having a baby ever since I could think. I would so love to have the child. But not here, not now, not like this, not in this town, not in this country.

My mother says: "Pull yourself together. If you're old enough to have sex, then you'll survive this too. All women have to go through it at some point."

She's right. Contraceptives are in short supply. Soviet condoms don't prevent babies, they prevent sex. The only women in our country who don't have abortions are infertile. For us, abortion is like a test of maturity.

When the day comes I can't get to sleep until dawn. A short time later I'm woken up again. It's a dull rainy day. I leave the house at six thirty in the morning. Nobody comes with me.

The ward has ten beds. All the beds are taken. We are referred to as aborters. A nurse comes in. She measures our blood pressure then leaves the room again. Now we have to wait. The room is filled by a strange silence. A white silence. The children in our bellies are silent. Time stands still, silently. And I'm silent, though I feel like screaming. I'm on the verge of making a run for it. I'm going to leave this damned room, I'm going to have a sweet little boy with dark eyes and forget this white silence like a bad dream. I stand up.

Suddenly the door opens. A nurse enters. The time has come. All the women have to take a seat outside the operating theatre at the end of the tunnel-like corridor and wait. We can decide the order ourselves. The first woman goes in. The door is closed. It takes a long time, a very long time. Then she comes out. Pale as chalk. She seems dazed, as if she's drunk. She's wearing a nightie and a worn old dressing gown. Two of us support her and take her back to the ward. The next one goes in. The silence is unbearable. Then I stop thinking and feeling. I lose all sense of time. Then it's my turn.

In the operating theatre there are three colours. But to begin with I can only see black and white. A white room, a white doctor to perform the abortion and two white nurses, who are preparing the instruments for the procedure. In the centre of the room stands a black torture chair. I approach it slowly, ready to sit down on the chair. Underneath the chair is a white bowl. I'm about to sit down on the seat, then suddenly I see the third colour. The bowl is full to the brim with blood. It's the blood of the women who were here before me. There are peculiar lumps floating in the blood. I feel faint. Everything is red.

"What are you standing around for?" the doctor who is going to perform the abortion asks angrily.

I climb onto the chair. The doctor examines me. She says to the nurses: "She's supposed to be sixteen? She must be at least twenty-five!"

I know she's lying. I look my age, maybe even younger. I look into her face. But there's nothing there, only eyes with no colour reflecting the emptiness. Her emptiness, my emptiness and the emptiness that will soon take the place of the burgeoning life inside my womb.

Everything inside me is screaming: "Run!" But I stay sitting in the chair as if I've been turned to stone. The last thing I'm aware of is the needle going into my arm. The room vanishes.

Suddenly I can hear someone shouting. Someone's shouts are filling the room. But I can't see anything. There's a terrible humming noise, it feels as if all my insides are being sucked out. The shouting gets louder. Then there's another voice: "Shut up! Can you hear me? Shut up!" Now I understand. I'm the one who's shouting.

"Get up!" the nurse commands.

"Can you help me out of the room?" I stammer uncertainly.

"Look, are you mental or do you just act like it?" she asks, outraged.
"Do you seriously think I'm going to hold your hand and take you back to the ward?"

On shaky legs, I walk out of the operating theatre. Outside two women are already waiting, they hold me tight under each arm and lead me carefully back to our ward.

I am lying in a white bed. I've passed the test. I no longer crave pickled cucumbers and I no longer feel sick. I feel alone. I cry. I can't stop crying.