

ANTEAYER

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The Final Scene in a Novel by Dostoevsky

So they spent their last evening in the U.S.A. reading bits and pieces of Chekhov's Cherry Orchard. He read it aloud to her, in Russian. In the first act, returning from her sojourn abroad, Lyubov Andreevna says to the old manservant, the deaf and doddering Fierce, "I'm so glad that you're still alive," and he replies, "The day before yesterday."

Benson liked that line. It rang a dimly clinking bell from somewhere in his past. He read it, then paused and smiled, but his Russian child bride seemed not even to be listening. He went on reading anyway. When he finished and closed the book, he waited for her response, but Lena said simply, in Chekhovian intonations, "Душа у меня болит (My soul aches)." That's when he asked her, "Can anyone, anywhere help you?" and she answered in one Russian word: Никто (Nobody).

Now they were sitting side by side on the plane (U.S. Airways), waiting for the takeoff at Charlotte Douglas International Airport. An air bubble from the past gurgled up from the depths of his subconscious, then burst on the surface of his mind. Benson was in backwoods Belorussia, watching the performance of a provincial circus. In addition to the usual acrobats and strong men, the circus featured goat artistes, dogs, one rooster, a pig. Plus one bedraggled clown, gaunt to the point of emaciation, in baggy pants and a red-orange wig.

La grande Nathalie (Natalia Gorbunova), whose specialty was hula hoops, finished her act and backed on tiptoes, bowing, spreading her arms, smiling out of the arena. Then the clown came running in, clutching the strings of blown-up balloons, which floated all around him: red balloons, green balloons, yellow and azure-blue balloons. He stumbled, let go of the strings, then watched in alarm as the colored globoids jounced about in all different directions, bouncing off the ground.

Red blotches on his cheeks aglow with intense concentration, eyes darting this way and that, the clown watched until each of those globules of air had settled itself into a precarious balance. Then, taking care not to disturb that balance, he began picking them up, one at a time. Each time he picked one up he would say “Moë” (Mine); then he stuffed the balloon down the front of his shirt.

As the act went on, the balloons down his front ran out of space and worked their way to the back of his shirt. By now he had eight balloons stuffed onto his person, but he was far from through with the stuffing. He uttered the repetitive word “Mine” with ever more vehemence, peering out at the children in his audience, parodying a little child with his toys, determined not to share. The children in the bleachers began shouting, “Mine, mine.” He glared out at them

(How dare you yell, “mine”?), then stuffed one more balloon and declared in a still more aggressive voice, “Mine!”

Now he had a good fifteen balloons crammed onto his person; they had worked their way down into the buttocks and the pant-leg parts of his anatomy. He hobbled now instead of walking, in pursuit of the four remaining balloons. No longer hampered by the presence of their brother/sister globoids, those four had found space to move. Buoyed by a faint zephyr that blew from some wonderland world, they gamboled about on the ground, jouncing their brightly colored way into new positions. He would lean over laboriously, hampered by his freshly acquired bloat, lurch forward, seize a transient balloon, look out once more with that vehemence; then, once again, in defiance of all the “mines” of the shouting children, he stuffed that balloon down his shirt front, shouted “Mine!” and wobbled away in pursuit of the next.

Now, staggering around after the last balloon on the ground, which kept floating and bouncing out of his reach, the clown in the red-orange wig had become a kind of balloon himself, bulging with all the mine, mine, mine.

He leaned down one last time, careful not to burst. He picked up the last globoid, a blue one, cerulean blue; he held it high for all to see. Then he uttered one last triumphant “Moë!” and stuffed it in with the rest. At this point a circus flunky sneaked up behind him, stuck a pin into his backside and POP went a balloon. With a yelp of dismay the clown fell to the floor, bursting several others. Then he wallowed about, trying to get up, bursting still more. He made it to his feet, tried to run, fell again. The morality play ended with his gauntness restored and his cupidity deflated. He lay on the ground with all the balloons of his multicolored avarice having popped, awash in the triumphant hoots and guffaws of the children, deprived of each and every selfish mine, destitute.

Кроткая (A Gentle Creature), thought Benson, sitting on the plane. There's the novel she belongs in. Or is it a different novel by Dostoevsky? I assigned The Idiot in one of my classes. The students with their meat-and-potato brains, steeped in the McDonald's mores of heartland America--they were shocked. "What is this, anyway? People don't act like that in real life—the gross hysteria, the looniness!" I said, "But have you ever been in the company of Russians?"

English sentences that ran through her head: *Why does the anteater eat ants, and is there an anti-anteater who eats anteaters?* Not only did I want to teach Russian literature; I wanted to be in Russian literature, to live Russian literature, and now I'm doing it. Been doing it for twelve long years. I've overextended myself—reached out for more balloon than I can handle. And right now I'm seated on a plane bound for the former Sovdepia, watching the bursting of the major Mine of my life.

From Charlotte they would fly to Atlanta, and then from Atlanta all the way over to the Homeland--Sheremetevo Airport in Moscow. After that there would be an exhausting, jet-lagged train ride, two days long, back to her parents in Rostov-on-the-Don. Benson knew now that his blonde, blue-eyed bride would have been better off never taking on the American Dream. She belonged with the Moist Mother Earth of Russia. Only in America had the voices of Russian literature begun speaking in her head, reviling her day and night, screaming obscenities. With her departure Lena had vague hopes that the voices would stay behind in America the Beautiful.

Benson thought those hopes forlorn, something on the order of slim and none. So what if the voices had taken up residence in her psyche only after emigration? They spoke to her, nonetheless, in her mother tongue, балбеска, сука (you goose-brain, you bitch), never in English. As for the marriage, he knew that the American marriage would stay behind, hallooing

to him (A-oo, a-oo) from the Redwood forests to the New York islands, calling him back. He was, after all, American; he would go back to his life. But the marriage, of course, wouldn't be there anymore.

Side by side they sat, and the engines roared once in a crescendo; then the roar tapered off. He looked out his window and saw the ailerons flap; the pilot was checking things out. All morning long, since five a.m., he had been speaking to her in English, and she, miraculously, had been answering in English. Answering immediately as well. Her usual habit of late was to answer (if she answered at all) in Russian, with a time delay of thirty seconds or more. For she lived in a different dimension, where questions from his dimension had to elbow their way through a dim, but formidable haze, or where questions required no answer.

Turning a corner behind the plane up ahead in the take-off queue, the pilot revved his engines again. Benson took her hand and asked, "So, are you okay with this then?"

"Fine," she answered in English, having adopted the American knee-jerk response to each and every adversity. Americans are always "fine."

In the last act they're cutting down the orchard. Leaving the manor house for good, Lyubov Andreevna moans out her final lines. "Oh, my dear, my precious cherry orchard! My life, my happiness, farewell!" Chekhov had subtitled his play "A Comedy in Four Acts." Dostoevsky's works are also comedies, reeking in black humor. Soon Lena would be back home, and if someone there were to ask her how she was doing, she would revert to the neutral Russian response: "Normal." Or, more likely, she would sigh a Russian okh sigh and say, "Don't ask."

The plane up in front of them was already aloft, spreading its wings now, sticking its nose up into the sky-blue. Lena whispered something under her breath.

"What's that you're saying?"

“Nothing.”

“No, I heard you say something.”

Long pause. Then the reply, in Russian:

“I feel sorry for Gogol. For Nikolai Gogol.”

“Why?”

“Because they stole his head.”

The voice of the U.S. Air pilot came over the intercom: “Flight attendants prepare for take-off.” Continuing his exercise in futility, Benson went on asking aimless questions. It was one more way of doing what he had been doing, not doing, for years now: not facing facts.

“Are you sure you want to go home?”

No answer. The elbows of that question, apparently, were not sharp enough to penetrate into her dimension. The play ends with old Fierce alone and forgotten in the manor house, abandoned, talking to himself: “All the sap in your bones is run dry; ain’t nothing left for you now; nothing. . . . Eh, you clumsy dunderhead.”

The fuselage shuddered, the dithering plane clenched its teeth, came out of its set stance on the starting blocks and raced down the tarmac. “Мы с тобой, Боже, мы с тобой” (“You and me, God, you and me”), muttered Benson, invoking the Lord’s help--a take-off and landing ritual prayer that he had been using ever since he studied Russian in the U.S. army, way back when. Lena said nothing, squeezed his hand.

Finally, just as the wheels left the runway and the plane was in the air, she answered his question:

“Позавчера,” she said, then repeated herself in English. “Day before yesterday.”

The First Scene in a Novel by Dostoevsky

It was May of a year twelve years gone now, back in the time of the good times, and Professor Carl Benson was in St. Petersburg, doing research at the Pushkin Institute. Today he had taken the day off; he was ambling about, basking in wellbeing. It was one of those sun-laden days when you could sniff the happiness in the air--on the wrought-iron black railings beside the Griboedov Canal, in the spangled sunlight on the ripples of its water, on the gilded wings of the griffins that stand, two on each end, holding the railings of Bankers Footbridge in their leonine mouths, while pedestrians pat their shanks (for good luck) as they cross.

All morning Benson had been wandering the streets of his favorite city, admiring the pale yellows of neoclassical mansions, marveling at the tenacity of sculptured atlantes and caryatids, who were doggedly holding up, on their shoulders, the buildings of the northern capital. He ambled about the Dostoevskian parts of Petersburg, strolled down Bol'shaja Pod'jacheskaja Street, which, despite its usual grimness and sleaze, managed a bleary smile today. Occasionally he would stop to sit on a bench and read from the book he carried: a compilation of Chekhov's plays. He was in the middle of re-reading The Cherry Orchard, enjoying the comedy of the thing.

Today, for the first time, Benson was to meet with Lena Bezobraznikova, a young woman he had corresponded with on the Internet. They were to rendezvous at the pedestal of the most famous statue in all of the Russian Federation: Falconet's monument to Peter the Great--the Bronze Horseman.

On his way to the meeting place, strolling through the grassy green park that lay between the Bronze Horseman and monumental St. Isaac's Cathedral, Benson suddenly recalled something from earlier that month. In the ancient city of Great Novgorod, returning one morning from a visit to the Cathedral of St. Sophia, he had passed the Museum of Fine Arts. In the large open square to his right, with the red-yellow-orange promise of its huge flowerbed (not yet planted this year), twelve-year-old boys on skateboards, not wearing helmets, had been guiding their vehicles, kickflipping, hippie jumping, 360 popshoving, through a clatter of intricate maneuvers. Grownups on rollerblades zipped back and forth in front of the Lenin statue, while the Great Ilyich ignored them, stood perplexed, pondering over the grandeur of a Socialist Future that was now in the past.

Then Benson noticed several men in front of the white columns of the museum, on the top steps near the entrance, struggling with some fingers. There were four of them (the fingers), and they were huge and alabaster white, with carefully trimmed nails and no knuckles. Those nails had the look of faces under hooded heads at the top of bodies, but the faces were bare and smooth: no eyes, no noses, mouthless, chinless.

The workmen were trying to mount the fingers into the structure of a sculpture. One guy was handling what the Russians call the no-name finger--what is to Americans the ring finger--another was tottering under the weight of the middle (longest) finger. The index finger lay on the ground, waiting its turn to be lifted and mounted, pointing out toward the walls of the nearby fortress. As if to say, "Go that way, back toward the Monument to One Thousand Years of Russian History, for in that direction your whole future happiness lies." The auricular finger (the pinky) was already in place, standing all on its lonesome, dreaming, mused Benson, of a giant ear into which it could poke and rotate.

People passing by stopped to watch. Little children let go of their mothers' or grandfathers' hands and ran toward the museum, shouting with glee. Soon the sedulous workmen had dragged all the parts of the sculpture into place. They stood side by side, four alabaster digits, on the top step at the front entrance to the museum. People took out their cell phones and snapped pictures, posing with an arm around a finger. The children were still squealing, and Benson heard one of them, a three-year-old blonde girl in heavy wool stockings and a red watch cap, cry, "Mama, mama, piles see, piles, see?" What she was saying in Russian was, "Fingers, fingers!"

The museum was featuring an exhibit by Aleksandr Burganov. There were more of his works inside, but the sculpture of the fingers (titled "Hand of the Creator") was mounted outside, as a way of attracting museum-goers to the exhibition. Benson stood there looking at the four fingers. Three of them, the middle, the index and the no-name seemed to be in communion with one another, leaving the pinky to fend for itself. Benson felt a kind of sadness for the lonely pinky, and although he liked the sculpture he was bothered by the absence of a thumb. *How (he thought) can the hand of the creator ever grasp anything without the all-important grasper-apposable?*

Benson sat down on a nearby bench and went on watching, enjoying as much as the fingers the joyous reaction to the fingers. When he left he forgot altogether the advice of the prone index finger. Benson went off in the other direction, wondering later why a sudden malaise had knotted up in his viscera as he walked. He would not have thought about that again, had not a nightmare galloped into his sleeping mind two days ago. In the dream that irate index was wagging itself at him, informing him that he had chosen, or was about to choose, the wrong path

toward future happiness. He awoke in a sweat, thinking anxiously of the alabaster fingers and the missing pollex, and it took him two hours to get back to sleep.

Today all such morbid thoughts were washed into oblivion by the bright sun of May, which was warming Benson's head and beard, as he stood at the railing beside the equestrian statue of Peter the Great. *Am I early?* he asked himself. Looking at his watch, he confirmed that he was right on time, but Lena, the woman he was to meet, had not yet arrived. *All I've seen of her is that one picture on the Internet: blond, comely, blue eyes, five feet four. I'm sure I'll recognize her. Will she do justice to her photograph?*

As usual, the place was swarming with tourists, taking pictures of Tsar Peter on his horse. Brides and grooms pulled up in festive white limousines, huge interlacing wedding rings mounted on top, with flowers (carnations, forget-me-nots) arranged on their hoods. Up next to the hood ornament a bride doll and a groom doll stood side by side, cogitating in their plastic brains on the institution of holy matrimony. They climbed out of the cars, the couples in the spotlight, tense with the emotion of the day; they walked, the newly wedded, hand in hand, white dress and black suit, grinning uneasily, up to the railing, while hired professional photographers snapped and snapped away.

Benson read the inscription (in Latin and Russian) on the mammoth rock serving as the base of the statue: "To Peter I from Catherine II." He looked up at the rider on the rearing horse, at the snake that writhed beneath the frightened hooves, and he could not help thinking what he had often thought before: why am I the only one bothered by the way Peter the Great is mounted in the saddle, holding one arm out and trying to get his balance, about to be bucked off the most famous horse in all of Russian statuary?

He looked at his watch again. Two-thirty. *She's late. Wonder if she's coming at all?* The thought that he might be stood up bothered Benson not in the least. The Internet was vast, and beautiful Russian women were flooding it with their sex appeal, bent on making marriages with Western men who, or at least so the women thought, made far superior husbands to the heavy-drinking, wife-beating males of their homeland.

Benson decided that he would open his book at random, as Fyodor Dostoevsky used to open his Bible, searching for a sign. He did this not in a spirit of reverence and gravity, as Dostoevsky had done. He did it in a spirit of levity. After all, he, an American, had none of that Russian propensity for doom and gloom, none of that hard-shell reliance on premonitions. Let's just laughingly take a look at what Chekhov has to say about the present state of affairs. He flipped open the pages and found himself in the first act of The Cherry Orchard, at the place where Lyubov Andreevna looks at Fierce, a manservant aged 87, and says, "I'm so glad you're still alive," and poor deaf Fierce replies, "Позавчера (The day before yesterday)."

Looking up from the page he saw her coming. Towheaded, blue-eyed, lovely Lena was tripping along at a half trot, trekking the green grass that lay between Peter the Great and St. Isaac's, the gait (his thoughts of present day looked back at that scene and recalled how she had moved), he would come to so love that gait, the way you would be looking for something, would ask her about it and her face would light up, her cerulean eyes would gleam, and she'd hurry off in that little run of hers, off to the kitchen, or upstairs, wherever it was, scampering away joyfully to find it for you.

She had already recognized him from a distance, Lenchka, she waved a hand and shouted something ("I'm late"), and for the first time he heard that childlike, birdy little voice,

the same voice that for years would repeat over and over in future times, “yellow blue tibia” (I love you), would repeat it even when he was angry with her, would go on repeating it, even writing it mirror image, the way her scrambled brain wrote inside-out with its left hand, so that you’d have to hold it up to a mirror to read it, but there it was, Я люблю тебя in the mirror, and for years she said it over and over, until finally, when she came to the (somehow inevitable) conclusion that he, Carl Benson, her husband and only close friend on earth, was in league with the demons who howled inside her head, finally she wasn’t saying it any more,

муравьед-трубкозуб the anteater and the anti-anteater, eater of anteaters, and the ants who crawled around in her brain, speaking in tongues, then there would be the times when she obsessed over Nikolai Gogol all day long, grieved on account of his too-long nose or his missing head, or the days when she stood on tiptoes, up in Benson’s face, cursing him matom (using the grossest of Russian what-you-can-do-or-I-just-did-to-your-mother obscenities), screeching in her unnatural, strident voice, and that graded into another future scene (now a scene from the past), she was riding a bicycle up a hill on Caddis Bend in Madison, Wisconsin, struggling with the pedals, and you, Benson, approached from behind in the car, not expecting to see her, driving that 1997 green Nissan Altima, and you noticed pedaling Lenchka and a warm glow came rushing through you, and by then the times were bad, bad, the ritual gestures were out of control (the way she had to finger and check every can of tomatoes on the shelf before picking one, the way she turned three times withershins by the door of the car before getting in), but you pulled off the road in front of her and you were smiling and she was smiling, and you thought, Yes, there she is, and she’s still, despite it all, she’s still my wife, and you step out of the car and say to her, “Я рад тебе, я всегда рад тебе (I’m happy to see you; I’m always happy to see you),” and she smiles,

the same way she's smiling now, trekking across the grass toward you, the smile that so annoyed her fellow countrymen, even when she was a little girl, her mother saying, "Stop showing your teeth like an idiot!" that un-Russian way she insisted on smiling, what was, in fact, an American smile, and sometimes she would smile with only her eyes (mouth closed and lips compressed), the way she did, he recalled from the future (looking back on that first day and on many more subsequent days), as she stood beneath the meager stream of a waterfall in North Carolina, standing there in sunshine, letting the quicksilver drip on her head, and her face had that endearing something that reminded you of a small animal, like a sort of dachshund look, and the time the cat ran off in the woods behind our house and she was out there for hours, calling and calling in that birdie voice, "Kison'ya, Kitty, Kison'ya,"

the kitty-cat call still resounding in the ears of his future self and here she comes, running, smiling, the image of her sitting in front of a mirror, blond hair back-lit, and drawing her elbows behind her to adjust a necklace, how her bare shoulder blades came together like folding wings, or her shadow is sitting with the shadow of a book in July, out on the back deck, and there's comfort, equanimity in that dearly beloved shadow, and here she comes in the resplendent May of way back when in Petersburg, smiling and running,

running right out of a novel by Dostoevsky and into a future scene in some dismal back alleyway in Southwest Ohio, with the wind of November blowing, and the black leafless skeletons of hedge apple trees, and the stars blinking tears and everything, everything soiled and torn, dead, running into what is to be, for Benson and her, one more long, complicated, frenetic Dostoevskian novel,

and all the drugs that didn't work, Seroquel, Risperdal, Zyprexa, and now she's almost up to where Benson stands, at the railing of the ever-unbalanced Bronze Horseman, whose right

hand points over toward a small rain cloud on the horizon, and the alabaster fingers in his mind (all but the index and the missing thumb) are pointing her out, saying, “Yes, this is the one, yes!” and he looked back at her face from twelve years into the new millennium and he thought, *So there she was, running to me, and pointing and smiling--my Позавчера, my beautiful Day Before Yesterday.*