

## CHAPTER 1

# ST. PETERSBURG

When I was six years old my mother told me I was a genius.

This revelation came as no surprise to me. Even at that tender age I was aware that my family was a hotbed of geniuses, on both my maternal and paternal branches. Among them were revolutionary poets, literary critics, translators, economists, mathematicians, chess masters, inventors of useless artificial languages, speculative philosophers, and Hebrew scholars. My peculiar genius, however, was to express itself in music.

My mother wanted me to be a boy, and her wish was a command even in obstetrical matters. She was eager to alternate the sexes of her children. The oldest was my brother Alexander, born in 1881, followed by my sister Julia in 1884. After that, there was a succession of stillborn babies, including “three Frenchies,” as my mother described them, a set of triplets miscarried during her stay in France. In order to bring me forth unfragmented, my mother had to stay in bed for a year. The increased term of gestation was my mother’s poetic license for dramatic effect, and she never tired of reminding me what sacrifices she made for my sake.

So precocious was I that even before I was born and before my gender was determined, I was named “Newtonchik,” a diminutive Newton. A circumstantial account of my birth is recorded in my elder brother’s diary, miraculously preserved across the threshold of the century. Here are the minutes (all dates are in the old style Russian calendar):

April 14, 1894: The entire family is in a state of feverish expectation. Our Newton is to arrive during the night. Aunt Lisa came at ten o’clock; Aunt Liuba came at eleven o’clock. Mother had ten labor contractions.

April 15: Joy!! In the morning I was awakened by mother's moans. I heard the voices of the doctor and Aunt Liuba. Suddenly mother cried out in a most agonized voice, followed by a great commotion in the bedroom. Aunt Liuba whispered, "A boy, a boy!!!" I jumped from my bed like a madman. It was five o'clock in the morning. I hurried to wake up my sister. At 5:15 we were summoned by Aunt Liuba to have our first look at Newtonchik, who was lying on the couch in the living room all swathed in blankets, with his little fists in his mouth.

April 16: He sleeps, then screams.

April 17: Today we had the honor of giving Newtonchik a bath. I poured the water and my sister held the towel. We were allowed to repeat the ritual for several days.

April 18: He begins to smile.

There are no further entries in my brother's diary until October 24, 1894; on that date I was already named Kolyenka, a diminutive of my given name, Nikolai. Alexander writes: "Kolyenka sits in my room while I study my Latin syntax (*cum inversum & iterativum*). He's trying to grab the book, but his nurse Olga won't let him. He says Bah, gah, mah, nah!"

Following the Russian literary tradition of celebrating the arrival of a new child in rhymed verse, my brother wrote an ode entitled simply "To a Babe."

When at my daily leisure hours  
I sit with you, my angel dear  
I feel new strength, I feel new powers  
And joyful freedom from all fear.  
I wish for you not only pleasure  
Not only happiness of soul  
For happiness is but a measure  
Of a more lofty human goal.  
I wish that you would gain new wisdom  
I wish that you would find true love  
I wish that you would conquer evil  
And end your days in feasts of joy!

On my sixty-eighth birthday in 1962, when I was already a father and a double grandfather, Alexander wrote to me in Boston from Moscow:

In a little corner of my brain there is still preserved the image of a little boy who about sixty-six years ago demanded for me to stand on a chair to get the *luna* [Russian word for moon] for him. *Kolia nyet pau*, he would say, the last word being baby talk for drop. Where is located the imprint of this scene among the molecules of my brain, since my entire body has changed a number of times since then? Could the central control room in which all these impressions are integrated into a distinct image be what we call the soul? When Pavlov was congratulated by his colleagues for having liquidated the meaningless concept of an immaterial soul, he replied, "Let us not talk about things we cannot understand." But if even Pavlov himself implicitly accepted the possibility of the existence of an entity commonly called the soul, then why should I not believe that, since nothing disappears without leaving a trace, something must survive within an incorporeal soul?

The births of my brother Vladimir in 1895 and Michael in 1897 were recorded but briefly in Alexander's diary. In 1897 Alexander buried in the garden of our summer dacha a box containing a message to posterity to be dug up after a certain number of years. In this message, he set down the year of his own death as 1945. He wrote in 1962: "Seventeen years have elapsed since the appointed date of my death, but I still continue to burden this planet with my presence. We are situated in two different hemispheres, I in Russia, you in America, but our mutual psychology is remarkably alike."

Alexander died in 1964. I, too, survived the projection of my death date; on the back of a photograph taken in 1910, I marked the years of my life as 1894–1967.

In a 1941 letter, my mother offered her own account of my birth. In her detailed recital of my arrival, she wrote in the present tense and third-person singular, as if she were the narrator of the event rather than its central participant:

All of a sudden, a piercing scream is heard: the maid rushes out of the bedroom, crying, "They slaughtered the poor woman!" Your brother and your sister try to enter the bedroom, but are

not allowed to come in. Then suddenly there is another cry: it sounds like a little kitten or a puppy. The door opens, Aunt Liuba comes out and announces triumphantly, "You have a little brother!" "Newtonchik?" "Yes, either Newton or God's fool. Time will tell." But all that your brother and sister can see is a little red face sticking out from a bundle of quickly arranged swaddling clothes. They are cautioned not to make loud noises, and are promised as a reward to be allowed to help bathe the baby. Father tries to help too, testing the temperature of the water, but he is pushed away by Aunt Liuba who is in command. Quite contrary to his usual meek disposition, your father demands attention, "Too much water," he cautions, "You will drown our Newtonchik." Your brother and sister are now allowed to approach the bed on which the tiny red body is being powdered and dressed in a doll-like shirt covering the front of the body with the back remaining exposed. They are fascinated by the novel experience; on previous occasions they never had a chance to see their little brothers; the doctor always carried them away in his satchel, like broken dolls. They admire Newtonchik. "What a beautiful little baby, what pretty little eyes!" Suddenly, Newtonchik's face wrinkles up and he lets go a fearful cry; it seems incredible that such a tiny creature could make such a loud sound. "Give him to me, he's hungry," mother says. Newtonchik is placed at mother's breast, and, after several attempts, manages to latch his little mouth on the nipple; he will not let go until he is completely satisfied with mother's nourishing milk. Thus, to the supreme joy of the Slonimsky family, took place the entrance into life of the future genius of music.

A studio photograph taken of me in my mother's arms a few weeks after my birth shows a great physical resemblance between my mother, then thirty-seven years old, and myself when I was thirty-seven. Once out of my swaddling clothes, I grew fast. Under Alexander's solicitous ministrations, I learned the Russian alphabet almost as soon as I could talk. I became familiar with the world of books, and I proudly identified my father's publications, among them the fine edition of his *Fundamental Problems of Politics* published in St. Petersburg in 1889, with a Latin epigraph from Seneca and a dedication to my mother. As I grew, I became passionately interested in the philosophical problem of individual existence. The question of how I

became a separate individual bothered me. The word “individual” stems from Latin and means “indivisible.” It is the equivalent of the Greek word “atom.” But if I was but an atom among quadrillion-quintillions of other atoms making up the material universe, how could I be sure that I was me?

It was discovered early in my life that I possessed the precious gift of perfect pitch, which enabled me to name immediately and without fail any note played on the piano or other musical instrument. My maternal aunt, Isabelle Vengerova, later to become a famous piano teacher, took me under her wing, and on November 6, 1900, according to the old Russian calendar, gave me my first piano lesson.

I was exhibited to admiring relatives and friends for whose pleasure I rendered the popular tune “Little bird, what did you do? I drank vodka, so did you.” Pretty soon it was discovered that I was not only a piano genius but also a wizard in memorizing meaningless numbers and calendar dates. (I recall distinctly my distress at the realization when the year 1900 came along that the insistence of the Russian church on making it a leap year by intercalating the extra day February 29 had increased the discrepancy between the civilized Western and the backward Julian calendars, adhered to in uncultured Russia, from twelve to thirteen days.)

I have a lovely theory about perfect (or absolute) pitch. My contention, based on numerous observations and experiments, is that perfect pitch is an innate capacity, which cannot be cultivated. Musical children who have it possess an immediate appreciation of pitch. I knew that E-flat was E-flat when struck on the piano when I was a small child, and I knew that it was as different from E-natural as red from pink. Indeed, Isaac Newton drew his spectrum of colors analogously to the musical scale. Singers can often name a note correctly by the tension of their vocal cords necessary to produce a certain note, but this is a secondary or oblique perception of pitch.

When Newton was asked whether he believed in God, he said, “Hypotheses non fingo.” As a mere Newtonchik, I felt free to fictionalize (the past participle of *fungere* is *fictus* in Latin) any hypothesis that came into my head. Ruminating about noumenal matters, I postulated the existence of a subliminal unit of Intellect (with a capital initial letter, naturally), a module of organized vacuum that possesses neither mass nor energy but is capable of operating incorporeally in a putative zero dimension and governing such immensely significant intellectual units as mathematics and music. That such faculties have local centers in the brain does not change their inherent immateriality. The mystery lies in the working hypothesis that incorporeal essences can be transmitted by heredity into new bodies and souls.

George Bernard Shaw, who was not given to religious beliefs, speculated in a fanciful paragraph in the preface to his play *Back to Methuselah* that “a pianist may be born with a specific pianistic aptitude which he can bring out as soon as he can physically control his hands.” He advanced the bold assumption that “acquirements can be assimilated and scored as congenital qualifications.” It is not an idle corollary that a specific intellectual or musical disposition can be similarly imbedded in a non-dimensional space.

The possession of absolute pitch is a certification of a musical predisposition. However, the lack of it does not exclude musical talent, or even genius. Neither Wagner nor Tchaikovsky had absolute pitch, while a legion of mediocre composers possessed it to the highest degree. In our family, only my aunt Isabelle Vengerova, my younger brother, and myself had absolute pitch. My aunt, who often played piano in our house, discovered this precious faculty in us when we were very young. Since I was the older, and also much more aggressive than Vladimir, my ability to name notes on the piano was revealed quite early, and became a prize exhibit for all comers. Such demonstrations were the formative elements of the egocentricity that plagued me throughout my young years.

I learned the notes according to the syllabic notation common in all Latin countries and in Russia: do re me fa so la si do. I experienced some discomfort at modes that could not be classified as major or minor. When Aunt Isabelle let me play a piece by Grieg in E minor, lacking the mandatory leading tone D-sharp, I felt that something was wrong. I felt uncomfortable that the imitation of the subject in the fugue in C minor from the first book of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* dropped a fifth rather than a fourth, as in the exposition.

When I was fourteen my aunt decided to enroll me in her class at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. I was led into the admission room and looked in awe at the director, the famous composer Glazunov, whose corporeal immensity (he weighed over three hundred pounds) matched the contrapuntal solidity of his music. Maximilian Steinberg, professor of theory and orchestration and son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov, played a note on the piano and asked me what it was. Delighted at the opportunity to show off, I told him. Then he played two notes together. I named them. Interested, he played the second inversion of the dominant-seventh chord in the key of C. I felt like a lark ascending and, without a moment’s hesitation, named all the notes. Then Steinberg tried a diminished-seventh chord: C, E-flat, F-sharp, and A. I rattled off the notes with complete assurance. At that point Steinberg went over to Glazunov and whispered in his ear. (I did not have to be told what



1. Isabelle Vengerova, NS's aunt, presided over his early musical education. Isabelle emigrated to the United States in 1923 to join the Curtis School of Music, becoming a fabled teacher and coach of many major pianists. Photo 1930.

it was, and my ego swelled in my adolescent breast.) Glazunov sat at the piano and played a dissonant but easily resolvable chord: F, C, B-flat, E, A, in that order, from bass to treble. It was a very Russian chord, beloved of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Glazunov himself. Glazunov was visibly impressed when I named all the notes without fail. Aunt Isabelle, who was present, said nothing, but her face radiated family pride. To be accepted in her class, I had to play a few well-learned piano pieces by Schumann, a Chopin prelude, and “Melody in F” by Anton Rubinstein.

Half a century later I received from the archivist of the Leningrad Conservatory the transcript of the minutes of my entrance examinations, with the notation by Glazunov: “Despite his youthful years, the boy already has achieved a certain perfection in his playing, along with an attractive and powerful touch at the keyboard.” At the next examination, Glazunov expanded on his first impression: “An excellent musical virtuoso talent. His playing is full of elegance and taste.” He had set down the grade 5 (the

highest in the Russian school system) and, in parenthesis, “talent.” This grade, “5 (talent),” was whispered about by my mother for the benefit of any newcomer, so that I developed a morbid aversion to the phrase.

Not long before her death, my aunt told a friend that of all her students, no one could play German romantic music as poetically as I, and she had some very famous pupils. The sad truth is that I never mastered the full piano technique: bravura passages were beyond my capabilities. I was an unfinished pianist. Yet I elicited praise from critics, particularly in Boston, for my appearance as an assistant artist with violinists or singers. In 1972 I put out a couple of phonograph records playing my own compositions, but by that time I was known mainly as a musicologist, and the good reviews I got must have been prompted by the critics’ surprise that I could play the piano at all.

Was I ever a wunderkind? My mother assured me that I was, and she did her best to protect my delicate fingers from the roughness and toughness of the outside world. When she took me to kindergarten, she made a speech to the boys in the class (schools in Russia were not co-educational): “My son is a pianist,” she warned them, “and you must be careful not to hurt his hands. You must not play rough games with him.” The consequence of such admonitions was predictable. On the very first day of school a boy tripped me and I fell on my face. I rushed to the teacher holding up my right arm: “Geistor tripped me!” I complained, with tears flowing freely. Geistor was reprimanded; I was consoled.

As a small child I was deeply jealous of competitors. No one could possibly match my talents, my mother assured me, and no one should try. I was therefore shocked when a Spanish boy pianist named Pepito Arriola gave a recital in St. Petersburg in a program of pieces I regarded as my specialty, including Schumann’s *Scenes from Childhood*. His picture appeared in the papers, an honor I had not yet achieved. He was chubby in a healthy Spanish way; I was skinny in a neurotic Russian way. He wore a crown of curly hair; I could never grow a curvilinear chevelure. He was dressed in short velvet pants of cerulean blue; I had to be content with plain cotton. But above all, he was Spanish! Being Spanish was the height of heart’s desire for Russian boys and girls.

Half a century later, James Francis Cooke, editor of *The Étude* magazine, to which I contributed an article on child prodigies, asked me if I knew the name of the Spanish pianist José Arriola, known as “Pepito.” Pepito Arriola! That magic name! The boy in short velvet pants with curly hair! Cooke was trying to raise funds for Arriola, who was very ill, living in poverty in



Barcelona. Would I help by word or deed? Of course I would. The only reference work in which I could find Arriola's name was a Spanish music dictionary, published in 1931.

When I was young, my very old maternal grandmother used to tell me about a marvelous Jewish boy violinist named Roman Friedman who played for the czar. (All Jewish violinists seem to have played for the czar, even though he headed the most anti-Semitic government before Hitler.) So wonderful was little Roman that he was taken across the ocean to America, where he became a famous violinist. "Practice hard and perhaps you, too, will become famous and go to America," my grandmother used to say with a sigh.

In 1932 I conducted a pair of concerts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. My program included *En Saga* by Sibelius, which had a passage for a quartet of solo violins. One of the four violinists, a middle-aged, baldish man named Roman, played uncomfortably out of tune. Not wishing to offend him by singling him out as a dissonant member in four-part harmony, I let it go. He came to see me afterward and, speaking Russian, told me that he once played at my grandmother's house in Minsk. "I dropped my last name since," he remarked, "and adopted my first name Roman as my legal identity." Roman! He was the "great violinist" who played for the czar, became famous, and went to America.

I was a typical product of the Russian intelligentsia. What saved me from total disorientation was the purgative factor of the revolution, which left little room for egocentric exploration of one's intellectual viscera; struggle for survival in the most elementary form became the prime necessity. Eventually, I made my way to the most equilibrated and sane part of the world—the United States of America. I married a brilliantly endowed but amazingly normal American girl; we had a marvelously rational and self-reliant daughter and two completely American, finely calibrated grandchildren, a boy and a girl. Still I retain an intimation of Russian mentality, and I can read Dostoyevsky's horrifying portrayal of the Russian intellectuals of a hundred years ago with a full understanding of their irrational behavior. What is disagreeably left in me from my Russian past is an unappetizing sediment of a Russian accent, painfully obvious to me each time I hear rebroadcasts of my radio talks.

"Intelligentsia" is a Russian word, taken from the Latin noun meaning intelligence. In Russian usage, it denotes a social stratum of Russian intellectuals—impractical, egocentric, incapable of coping with everyday problems, and given to mystical speculations about millennial eschatology

viewed through an egocentric prism. Political and social revolution was an article of faith, yet few of these verbal rebels even learned how to use a gun. Their homemade bombs, which they occasionally hurled at czars or Russian government officials, often hit the wrong people. When a terrorist threw a bomb at Alexander II in 1881, he killed the coachman and a horse; it took another terrorist with another homemade bomb to cut down the unfortunate czar, who had courageously gotten out of his carriage to see if the coachman was badly hurt. (The Russian czars were rather casual about their personal protection.) The five young people involved in the conspiracy were duly hanged, but not until they were tried by a jury. The story of the five who were hanged was the subject of many articles and books in Russia. The woman among them, an idealistic college student named Sofia Perovskaya, was glorified in a Soviet movie with music by Shostakovich.

There were no terrorists in my own family; the rebellious spirit residing in my relatives was mainly verbal. None of them ever handled a gun. Still, there were deep and tragic involvements of members of my family in the Russian revolutionary movement. My first cousin Vsevolod Vengerov was briefly exiled by the czarist regime to a remote province for participating in a student demonstration. Ironically, he lost his life in one of Stalin's recurrent purges, shot as a counterrevolutionary. He was rehabilitated posthumously after Stalin's death, but it was a small consolation for his widow and daughter.

In a way, Russian Marxism is intertwined with my family history, for it was my father who, in 1890, published the first book on Karl Marx in the Russian language, entitled *The Economic Doctrine of Karl Marx*. The book was soon translated into German, indicative of its importance in political and sociological circles. Lenin, who was twenty years old at the time of the original publication, must have read it. My cousin, the Polish poet Antoni Slonimski, remarked half-facetiously that my family was directly responsible for the Bolshevik upheaval, for it was from my father's book that Lenin became acquainted with Marx's doctrine of a proletarian revolution. But Lenin's own writings do not support this entertaining notion. In his political pamphlet, published in the underground Russian press in 1894 under the sarcastic title "Who Are These Friends of the People, and How Do They Fight Against the Social Democrats." Lenin has some nasty words to say about my father: "Mr. Slonimsky clearly, and unambiguously, formulates his standpoint as an ordinary liberal, utterly incapable of understanding contemporary bourgeois society. His propaganda in favor of small peasant ownership reveals the entire reactionary utopianism of his outlook."

Tolstoy read my father's book, too, and made extensive comments in the margin of his copy, which was lent to my father after Tolstoy's death.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to find out whether a copy of my father's book on Marx was kept in Lenin's personal library; it is not included even in the most complete Soviet bibliographies of Marx, undoubtedly because of my father's unorthodox view on Marx's economic theories. But the German translation of the book is duly listed in old German reference works.

My father was the foreign affairs editor for the Russian liberal monthly *The Messenger of Europe* (the very title of the magazine expressed its Western orientation). Besides his comments on foreign affairs, he also wrote on general social problems. When he published an article on suicide, I was disappointed that it failed to mention some suicides among my own friends.

My mother always pictured my father as an unworldly intellectual who read Tacitus in the original Latin before going to bed, so that his mind was far away from the daily concerns of domestic life. (His signed and dated copy of Tacitus is still a cherished keepsake for me, even though I read Latin with difficulty.) She liked to compare my father with Simeon Stylites, the medieval monk who spent most of his life sitting atop a column, surveying the bustling life below with philosophical equanimity.



2. NS's mother, Faina, and father, Leonid, photographed during a summer vacation in Finland in 1910.

I remember my father as an idealist. His only human fault was his tardiness in delivering his monthly magazine articles, written in a fine calligraphic hand, to the printer. He often worked all night long to meet the deadline. “I will probably be late even for my funeral,” he once remarked. He died in January 1918, just before the publication of the last issue of *The Messenger of Europe*, which was swept away by the revolution. This last issue carried a black-bordered obituary, beginning with the words “To all who hold Russian culture dear, the name of Leonid Slonimsky will remain forever memorable.”

My father did not take part in any overt activities during the revolutionary turmoil of the year 1905. Even so, the dark cloud of reaction that hovered over Russia in those years touched him with its ominous shadow. The czarist censors took umbrage at my father’s edition of the czar’s own constitution, which the government nullified shortly after its promulgation in 1905 by inserting a number of carefully worded codicils. A frightening scene stands out in my memory: three husky Russian policemen, with faces resembling bare buttocks, invading our apartment in search of subversive books. Without saying a word, one of them pulled from the bookshelf a dozen copies of my father’s edition of the constitution and threw them in the burlap sack he had brought along. This act alone was enough to make a revolutionary out of a boy of eleven with an almost religious respect for public print.

Another vivid memory: during the “liberal” years in Russia that followed the abortive revolution of 1905, my father undertook the publication of a political encyclopedia. Only a single volume was published. The next volume was to include an article on the Russian prime minister, Count Witte. One morning a uniformed messenger appeared in our apartment bearing a letter from the prime minister himself, in which he asked my father to grant him an interview in order to discuss the contents of the future article on him. My brothers and I were greatly impressed by this unusual token of official appreciation of my father’s work, but my father declined the suggestion. “Much esteemed Sergei Yulievich,” he wrote in a letter that he handed to the messenger, “I am greatly honored by your desire to hold a colloquy and to exchange views regarding your policies. I fear, however, that such a meeting might create the impression of a preliminary arrangement as to the content of the article, so that I would appear as your semi-official spokesman. I must therefore respectfully decline the invitation.”

While I knew little about my father’s youth and education, except that he graduated in law from the University of Kiev, I certainly knew a

lot about my mother's early years. To be sure, her autobiographical effusions were colored by a desire to present herself in the best possible light, first as an idealistic young woman in the 1870s, then as a loyal wife after her marriage in 1880, and finally as a devoted mother who sacrificed the pleasures of life for her children. From objective sources and from her voluminous correspondence, it appears that as a young woman she indeed entertained radical beliefs. The outward indication of her radicalism was that she wore her hair short, which was regarded as a sign of "nihilism." She enrolled in the class for medicine at the newly opened college for women in St. Petersburg and managed to pass her examination in anatomy (for years afterward she used to recite the Latin names for parts of the brain), but when a cadaver was brought in for scrutiny, she promptly fainted. This episode marked the end of her career as a medical student, and it was also in all probability the first instance of epilepsy, the grand mal from which she suffered for the rest of her life.

In her student years, my mother lodged with a roommate in a modest room in St. Petersburg. One day, when she arrived at her residence from the railroad station in a horse-driven carriage, she generously gave *na chai* (a Russian locution, meaning "for tea") to the coachman for helping her unload her baggage, but the man declined the offering. Still, he hesitated to leave. "What are you waiting for?" she asked. "If I may speak up," the coachman said, "would your ladyship let me have a few kopecks for a drink of vodka?" The mention of the intoxicating beverage made it impossible for my mother to comply with his request, for she was firmly convinced that alcohol was the devil's brew. Her landlady intervened and sternly ordered the man away, but my mother would not abandon the argument without solving its moral problem. "Isn't that house across the street where Dostoyevsky lives? I will ask him what to do," my mother declared. "Who is he, a priest?" the landlady inquired. "Much more than a priest. He is a saint who can judge good and evil. What he declares is our moral law."

Dostoyevsky's house was indeed on Basin Street, where my mother had her lodgings. She ran over and found Dostoyevsky's name on the door of an apartment whose entrance was from the back yard. She pulled the cord of the doorbell; a woman wearing a plain blouse opened the door. "I want to see Fyodor Mikhailovich," my mother said. The woman called out: "There is a young lady to see you." A voice answered: "Let her in." Dostoyevsky was working at a table, holding a metal pen in his right hand. My mother recognized him at once from his photographs, but she was taken aback by his shabby attire—an old discolored pea jacket, and trousers with grease

spots on them. She was also surprised by the shoddy appearance of the room itself, which was small, with a low ceiling. The furniture consisted of a writing desk and a couch with two pillows covered by pieces of motley fabric. Dostoyevsky always lived on the brink of poverty. “What is it that you wish to speak to me about?” Dostoyevsky asked. After my mother overcame her initial embarrassment, she related to him her dilemma with the coachman. Dostoyevsky said, “Your action was correct, but before making any judgment, I want to know what you do for a living.” My mother explained that she was a medical student. “All right,” Dostoyevsky continued. “Now consider the following situation: If you, as a medical doctor, were to call on a patient who was to pay you a certain fee, would you ask for an additional payment?” “Of course not,” my mother replied. “Then why do you consider it proper to give a tip to a simple peasant? Do you regard him as inferior to you? Undoubtedly he had the feeling of condescension on your part; plain people are conscious of inequality, and they resent it. This is the core of your problem.”

I was born thirteen years after Dostoyevsky died, but in the spring of 1917, by an extraordinary chance, I spent an evening with his widow. I had dinner at the house of the parents of one of my female piano pupils. An energetic middle-aged woman, lively and talkative, was also a guest. She kept referring to one Fyodor Mikhailovich, and after a while I ventured to ask who he was. “My husband, Dostoyevsky!” she replied with a smile. The name struck me with an electric force, and I pressed her for stories about Dostoyevsky, which she was perfectly willing to relate. When it came time to depart, we went out together; she hailed a horse-driven carriage, while I took a streetcar to my place on Grand Greenery Street, across the branch of the Neva River, and kept repeating in my mind our conversation during dinner. She died a couple of months later, and I wrote a page of reminiscences of our meeting for an afternoon Petrograd newspaper.

In her photographs from the 1870s and early 1880s, my mother appears as a rather attractive woman, without a trace of the nervous condition that made almost her entire life a series of *scandales*. Her photographs from 1894, with me as an infant in her arms, show her figure as slender, but in subsequent years she put on weight until she almost lost the power of locomotion. She had difficulty going up the stairs in our apartment, and my two younger brothers and I were regularly mobilized for the task of pushing her up the steps. These extraordinary actions appeared normal to an unreasoning child, and I was surprised to learn that none of my classmates had to push their mothers up the stairs. My mother’s periodic epileptic fits,



3. Faina as a young woman in the 1870s.

provoked by minor domestic altercations, were a frightening sight: her body became rigid and her face was distorted by hideous convulsions, while her muscular strength increased prodigiously, so that it required the help of several people to move her. Sometimes a whole bucket of water was poured on her without effect. To me, it was a rehearsal of death.

Each summer in the country was marked by packing and unpacking and packing up again my mother's dresses, corsets with whalebones falling out of the bodices, shoes and *pantoufles*, including a pair my mother said she wore at her wedding in 1880. I came to hate women's clothes, especially those ugly corsets that Olga had to tighten up on my mother's body, lacing them from top to bottom. I would certainly have become misogynous in my adolescence were it not for the gradual decline and disappearance of these unseemly appurtenances.

My mother had an obsession about people stealing things. Whenever she missed an object, an alarm clock or a piece of silverware, she turned upon the

servants, not excluding even our sainted nurse Olga, and instituted a search of their miserable belongings. To my younger brothers and me, these scenes, accompanied by my mother's virtuoso display of shouted invectives and the weeping of the accused, remained the most horrible of childhood memories. But when mother pointed the finger of suspicion at our mathematics tutor, a student named Nikolai Nikiforovich, he refused to remain in our employ and left after delivering an eloquent speech on human rights.

Among the vital advantages I acquired in my childhood, and for which I owe gratitude to my mother, is a total imperviousness to noise. She filled the house with rantings against the servants and seamstresses who seemed to occupy every available corner in our St. Petersburg apartment, sewing, stitching, and repairing dresses, shirts, and even corsets (my mother wore corsets well into her fifties). As a result, I became conditioned to a world of clangorous sounds. All my life I could exclude loud noise by figuratively closing the flaps of my ears the way ordinary people exclude bright light by closing their eyelids.

One day a young medical doctor, versed in the modern ways of sexual psychology, put a blunt question to my mother: What did she do to enlighten her growing sons about sex? "Sex!" she exclaimed in horror. "My dear fellow, this is a literary family!"

Perhaps, but there were paintings that produced great turmoil in my adolescent imagination. I was particularly moved by one of Repin, "Ivan the Terrible and His Bride," showing the lecherous czar looking at an ample-bosomed Russian woman sleeping fully dressed on the bed. Oh, how I wished to be Ivan the Terrible! I knew that my thoughts of women were sinful. Sometimes I felt like St. Benedict, who threw himself into a thicket of prickly plants to mortify his flesh when a sudden onrush of concupiscent overcame him at the sight of a plump peasant woman crossing his path in the wilderness. I was also well aware of Tolstoy's moralistic crusade against sexuality in his old age, after he had sired sixteen children outside marriage. A drastic recipe for suppressing sexual desire was given in his novella *Father Sergius*. It dealt with a profligate voluptuary who turned to religion, left sinful city life, and became a hermit who lived in a cave. City people flocked to him to seek remission of their own sins, among them a woman who felt an irresistible carnal attraction for him. As she lowered the shoulder of her dress, Father Sergius excused himself for a moment, went to his workshop, took an ax, and chopped off the thumb of his left hand. He bandaged the wound and returned to the woman. "Now I can speak to you," he said.



It seems strange that my mother, who had attended medical classes and actually learned a lot about bones and muscles, should have believed in folk medicine. As a child, I overheard her admonish my sister to be careful not to take a bath in a tub in a hotel room previously occupied by a gentleman, because such an action may make her pregnant.

As for the younger children—my two and brothers myself—my mother preferred to adopt the stork theory of procreation, citing as her authorities the fanciful illustrations in children's books depicting long-legged and stout-beaked birds delivering babies wrapped in swaddling clothes down chimneys. I was puzzled, however, at the age of four or five, as to how the recipient of a baby delivery by aviary transport can be determined in a household where there are several women. My mother explained that a baby is brought only to a married couple, and that in my case there was no difficulty in deciding that she was the one to receive me.



4. Nurse Olga was present at NS's birth and was a maternal presence throughout his youth. Later, in the famine of 1918, she brought food to the family from the countryside to which she had moved. Photo 1900.

But then something happened that I could not figure out. My nurse Olga began gaining weight visibly around the stomach and then had to go to the hospital. A week later she returned with a little baby, and the bulge around her stomach was gone. She was not married, so why did the stork bring her a baby? The question was unresolved until a gent, wearing a cap and a workman's jacket, appeared in the kitchen and asked to see the baby. My mother was extremely shocked by this apparition, but she allowed the baby, Margarita, to stay with us. Alas, the little girl died when she was about seven or eight. Olga bought some tinsel and paper flowers to put on her dress in the coffin, and she cried a great deal. My brother Michael described the child's death in one of his novels, even retaining the name Margarita. During the famine of 1918, which decimated the population of Petrograd, Olga proved to be the savior of the remnants of our family by bringing food into the city from the country where she had moved. Later, she joined Michael's family, and became the nurse for my nephew, Sergei. I saw her in 1935 when I visited Russia. It was an emotional reunion, for in my subconscious she remained the symbol of protection from danger. Even now, whenever I sink into the deepest recesses of a nightmare, I cry out not for my mother but for Olga.

As I grew, I found so many contradictions in the stork theory that I began to search for a more rational explanation. We used to spend summers on a farm in the country where there were lots of animals. A sow brought forth a litter of piglets, but there were no storks around to bring them down. Besides, according to my mother's mythology, storks served only people. There was also a female cat that grew very fat but then suddenly lost weight, and simultaneously began carrying around four blind kittens, hiding them in dark corners. I never saw storks around to perform their obstetrical missions. It did not take me long to conclude that babies, human and animal, came out of the stomachs of their mothers. But how could they breathe there? And how did they eat? It was all very confusing.

Apart from my mother's homemade mythology, a lot of confusing information about the origin of life came to me from the Bible. Mary's word to Elizabeth, "And the child stirred within my belly," baffled me. I could not imagine little Jesus actually playing inside Mary. Needless to say, I had never seen a naked woman, but exposed female forms appeared to me in my dreams. I felt that there was something ineffably delectable in the bodily contact with girls.

One summer day in 1908 I was romping with our governess, and she playfully threw herself down on the couch, giggling and squirming. I

went after her and found myself on top of her. Then something monstrous happened in my body; an excrescence protruded from it, forming a protuberance, expanding into a promontory. Bewildered by this deformation, I jumped off the couch; the governess gave me a quizzical look. Did she notice that I had become a dragon? There are horrors that one does not talk about, sins that no act of contrition could expiate. Should I go on living with the consciousness of something inexpressibly hideous? Or should I kill my sin by destroying my own sinful body?

I decided to write to Tolstoy, who was the ultimate arbiter of moral values in literary circles of the times.

Greatly esteemed and revered Lev Nikolayevich [I would begin]. Something unspeakably horrible has happened to me of which I can judge neither cause nor effect. I was playing around with my governess and unintentionally I came in contact with her body. I know that bodies are sinful. I am not allowed to read your great novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*, but my older brother tells me that it deals with a violinist who played Beethoven with a woman pianist. Carried away by the tempestuous finale, he put his violin aside and fell into her arms. I play the piano myself, but the *Kreutzer Sonata* is too hard for me. Anyway, if it were within my technical means I would still not play it with a person of the opposite gender knowing to what dreadful consequences Beethoven's music can lead. But even without Beethoven's sinful enticement, I am already guilty of carnal contact with a governess. Should I kill myself? Please, let me have the benefit of your great soul, and tell me what to do. I am fourteen years old.

I knew Tolstoy's address: His Luminosity (the proper honorific for titled men) Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Yasnaya Polyana, Government of Tula. An out-of-town stamp cost only three kopecks, and I had a fairly good stamp collection. Would it not be absolutely breathtaking if I had received an answer! I would get my name and my picture in the newspaper, with a caption, "Lev Tolstoy Answers Letter From Young Schoolboy Contemplating Suicide." Even my mother would be proud of it! But would I dare disclose the true reason for intending to kill myself? I was not even sure that what happened to me was technically a sin, and I had no idea it was connected with that dreadful Russian monosyllable *pol*, which means "sex."

I never mailed that letter. I never even wrote it, except in my imagination. Tolstoy died two years later. The papers said he died in a railroad station; he decided to leave his home after receiving a letter from a student reproaching him for leading a life full of luxury while urging others to imitate the simple life of workingmen. What if I had been in correspondence with Tolstoy, and what if he had asked me whether he should leave his home and die, and I would have written to him not to, and he would have remained in Yasnaya Polyana! My imagination ran wild, and in it I played the role of a hero saving the most valuable life in the whole world.

To supplement my father's meager earnings, my mother borrowed money and in 1909 acquired a small movie theater called Sympathy, conveniently located on the corner of our block in St. Petersburg. Her business prospered, and she would bring home a sackful of silver change each day the theater was open for business. It was in her theater that I received my second taste of adumbrative sex. I used to help count receipts, sitting in close proximity to the cashier, a girl of fifteen whose name I remember to this day—Katia Ivanova. One day she absented herself for a few minutes, and when she came back I felt (oh, ecstasy ineffable!) her moist lips touch the nape of my neck. To say that I was transfixed with untold delight would be using ordinary language to describe a state of heavenly bliss. I did not dare tell Katia Ivanova how much I enjoyed that kiss, but after she sat down next to me, I took her deliciously exposed left forearm in my hand and began to play the mouth harmonica on it, sliding back and forth with my lips from the warm inside of the palm of her hand to the mysterious hollow of the inside of her elbow.

Back home, I wrote down an emotional account of Katia's kiss in my diary. I put it down on my table with my schoolbooks. By week's end everyone in the family, except my father, was reading it. Her reading done, my mother asked me whether I knew anything about syphilis. I was startled by this question. Yes, I knew that a German professor named Ehrlich discovered a cure for syphilis, called Salvarsan. It was all over the newspapers. Well, my mother continued, "if you let Katia kiss you again, you will get syphilis and your brain will become soft like jelly." Katia was promptly fired from her job as cashier in my mother's cinema. A few days later, the telephone rang. "Kolya?" a girl's voice asked. "This is Katia." I said nothing and hung up in fear. I learned some time afterward that Katia was seduced by the movie electrician. His name was Valerian Leontievich.

Concealing the facts of life was not the only concern in my mother's educational program. There was a deeper secret, of direct relevance to our