

Ark 2

Seattle Central Community College
Literary Magazine

Spring 1970



IN THE MEMORY OF ALYOSHA

Alyosha died not eight months after his christening. His little body wrenched and spit its life's blood down the front of the nurse's apron. And as I sit here rocking in my chair and mumbling long forgotten childhood tunes, Alyosha comes into my mind. He is pure. He lies sleeping in his crib beneath sweet sunbeams, harsh in those summer months. Yet they come softly into this room and bathe him in their muted warmth. God sends them to his future angel and they enter his room as only they can enter the room of an angel. They light him as only an angel may be illuminated. And he is unaware.

There is a doctor in Simbrisk. In deed, he is a magician we have been told. For the angel has gone to be with his God, and the mother of the angel has been struck down by her grief. The magician is the only hope, we are told, amid the clicking tongues and shaking heads. He has been known to affect cures where other doctors have thrown up their hands. This type of case is a specialty of his, they say. Her soul is dying. And my sister shrieks for her mother's soul and cries because of this talk of magicians. "They will cast a spell on her soul!" she sobs into my father's chest. "No, my dearest, he is a doctor, a man of science, or medicine, there will be no spells."

My mother would spend many long nights wandering through the house with a lonely candle in her hand. And for hours she would kneel before the icon praying for Alyosha's infant soul, and weeping quietly. The candle would begin to flicker and a grey dawn light would sneak in sending my mother back to her room only to come out in the night and pray and weep before the icon.

My father would get furious and there would be much heated talk behind their door. My mother would say nothing that could be heard from the other side of the door, but she would say something or perhaps say nothing, and my father would respond with harsh words about neglect of the living souls that are also of her womb. The doctors would only shake their heads and talk of Simbrisk, but my father did not believe that hope lay only in Simbrisk. She must be made to take part in the lives of her living children.

And in the early morning of a day near summer's end, I stand in the garden with my mother, holding her hand and pointing to the wonders of a smaller world than our own. A spider web hangs low beneath the limb of a bush and sparkles with the silver of the dew left behind by the night as it hurried to gather up its silver riches before the sun should rise and melt them all. And running off to another part of the world to count its silver, the night spilled some here beneath this bush and it is still

as clean and bright under the leafy protection as it had been in the small hours of the morning. The spider begins to spin his own silver in shining strings and my mother's eyes show she is thinking about Alyosha. Off in some beautiful eternity she sees him playing with little stars and angels' fabric. And she runs to be with him. I hold her hand tighter and try, with my eyes, to speak to her. Words have no place here. There are strange and frantic emotions welling inside of me and all reflect themselves in my eyes. She begins to weep and kisses my hands and face before running into the house.

My sister cries some very large and plentiful tears, and I too cry in the solitary night of my room. Recovery in Ufa seems impossible so my father makes haste to begin our journey to Simbrisk. We shall stay at the house of Fedor Serge Voronstov, a very old friend of my father. A letter is sent ahead and we depart for Simbrisk.

In my youth I was blessed with a particular fondness for the pebbles and odd pieces of wood that filled the banks of rivers. And on each of the two previous trips I had made to Simbrisk with my father, I would return with a handsome collection of pebbles and wood pieces. He had been engaged for some time in a lawsuit over disputed property lines and would frequently travel to Simbrisk to consult with his lawyer and meet with officials of various influence. We would leave perhaps a week before it was needed to, in order that we might travel leisurely and have time to pause at the streams and rivulets to angle, our favourite sport. Our servant and companion, Grigori, would accompany us and never ceased to amuse us with his antics and enthusiasms. He became more excited over plunking a line into a stream than any man I have seen before or since.

He was a great one for digging bait also. All the while we would be digging through a big pile of pig dung, he would talk to himself and to the worms. He would be gouging through the fermenting dung toward the deep rich bottom of the pile where it became one and the same with the rich black soil it had been heaped upon and come upon a fat earthworm. Plucking it up, he would hold the fellow high and exclaim "Ah such a fat one you are. A meal for three fish!" Every time he would come upon a worm, he would hold it high into the air and heap praise upon it thicker than the dung it had been pulled from. "Come, come, there are hundreds of you beauties in there, come out to where you may serve some purpose. Ah, what a beauty you are, my pet! Oh, such swollen pink grandeur cannot be found in another dung heap in all of Russia! Come my lovely, you will entice a pike for me with such lively action. Beauty, beauty, beauty, so rich and plump, pink and beautiful!" And then he would enter into his favourite speech.

“I swear, we have hit upon the royal family of all Russian earthworms. And you, you Goliath, you must be the Tsar himself. Such nobility to be carried on the face of a worm, my world! Why he has more stature and elegance than half the men in Russia. A king among men and worms truly the undisputed monarch of every dung pile in the country. And you, my lovely, must be his queen. Mitka, we have been lucky enough to be granted the company of the king and queen of all the earthworms. But they will soon part our company. It seems they have some important matters of state to attend to at the next river. Heh, heh, heh.” And he would say such things each time we dug for worms. I declare, there were more worm kings and nobility in those dung heaps than ever graced the history of man’s own civilization.

But on this trip we paused only long enough for food and rest. The Volga was reached without any thought to angling or collecting pebbles.

There is a sky full of great grey and black clouds coming toward the Volga from behind Simbrisk. My family rides in a big boat with huge dark men pulling at the oars. And the captain of the ferryboat men is himself at the big oar. He stands against the sky like a huge iron statue and pulls with all his might against the current of the mighty river. Our carriage and belongings are left to be ferried across in the morning after the storm has passed. Grigori and the other servants except for the nurse will stay with our belongings and sooth the horses when the storm begins to blow in its madness.

Upon stopping in front of the house of Fedor Voronstov we climb down from the borrowed carriage provided us by the captain of the ferryboat men. He himself drove us up to Simbrisk, and we wish him a safe journey back down the hill to the bank of the Volga for its is already beginning to rain and the hill is as ice when muddied over. He just laughs and cracks his whip over the heads of the horses and bolts away with a loud hyaaaaaa! I should have enjoyed riding down the hill with him.

As we begin to climb the steps to the house we started as the door flew open and we were in the presence of Fedor Serge Voronstov. Even here, standing outside as a storm begins to rage and the leaves of Autumn trees swirl about and rain spears begin to shoot from the clouds, grey and rolling in a turbulent flexing of nature’s muscles, even here the presence of Fedor Voronstov is shaking. He is a great hulk of a man with a big black beard. He has a huge nose and drooping ears, fierce eyebrows, and long curly black hair. He seems as if he could match the show of the storm with one huge blow or could even inhale the entire tempest into those huge round nostrils and send it rushing out between those full red lips at twice its present

force. Or he could stifle the whole thing in his big chest and let it out calm as an evening breeze in Summer with no more ferocity than a whisp of cigarette smoke.

This was Voronstov, and as he embraced my mother she became lost in his hideous dark bulk and he could have very easily have snapped her in half without being aware of it, in fact while thinking he was giving her a tender greeting. But she emerged from somewhere beneath that long black beard apparently unscathed though a trifle mussed. The he proceeded to attack my father with a bone crushing embrace, and my little sister began to shriek in absolute terror of the two storms she was standing between. Thus I was spared the test of my stamina, for we were quickly ushered inside.

My mother, father and sister were given a room just across from the parlour and I was given a small room of my own near the kitchen. There was a small window with a cracked pane in this room and it looked out over Voronstov's English garden. I fell asleep shortly and dreamed the whole night long of a raging storm that I had been caught in the middle of, helpless before it and doomed to a lonely miserable death millions of miles from a familiar face. And I should have died there, beaten into submission by the unending blows of nature had I not awakened, just when it was becoming most severe, to a bright morning of sun splashing against my little window and ricochetting off in an opposite angle thanks to the deep layer of dust on the inside of the window. My little window glowed from the sun rather than benignly let it pass through as if it were not there at all. And that is why I refused to let the servants clean the window except for a little spot in the corner where I liked to peak out at the garden when my mother and father would walk a bit before the snow came.

When the news of my little eccentricity reached Voronstov, he laughed so hard that my little window shook. And he gave orders that his window, too, should not be cleaned for he said that there was some poetic depth to a window that would stand up to the sun.

Voronstov would often entertain his guests with readings of poetry, some of which he had written himself. He prided himself on his 'poetic soul'. But he would recite a love poem as if he were gorging himself on a pheasant. The words would be very nice indeed, but his voice was harsh and his emotions more animal than softly poetic. The words seemed false as he spit them out, almost with contempt, it seemed for their frailty.

Treatment was initiated by the physician we had come to Simbrisk to see and soon my mother's condition ceased to worsen. But her recovery was very slow and not without relapses. She was to take strolls in the garden as long as weather permitted

and was to become involved in the daily lives of those around her so that there would be little time for her to fall into deep remorse over poor little Alyosha. And the old villain was of no help but a hinderance to her health, for his gruffness and haughty mannerisms were quite distasteful to her. Because of this she would often keep herself locked up in her room with her children when she felt she had not the strength to put up with him. But these times were not as often as they could have been, for Voronstov and my father began to spend much time hunting during those Autumn days before the bad weather came. She was thankful for this little blessing but yet it was at the expense of the company of her husband when she would like his gentle strength near.

And when she could not avoid the old devil out of good manners, it would take all the strength she had managed to store during her more restful moments to endure a day or an evening in the man's company.

At first I would accompany my father and Voronstov, Grigori and another servant named Anton when they went to hunt the game birds outside of Simbrisk, but Voronstov put me off and kept referring to Grigori as Grishka. So soon I began to spend my days in the garden with my mother or, when she was too weak to leave her bed, I would play with my sister, or even go exploring the garden on my own.

I would climb into the trees or run with feet kicking high to stir up all of the fallen leaves that lay thick on the garden floor. I would go down to where a little stream trickled lightly over small rocks and sit for many hours just watching the water; here white and frothy there clear and almost a foot deep, now rushing in the way a child rushes looking very speedy but actually rather slow, now resting in a little pool beneath an overhanging bush. Endless as eternity yet fragile as a fawn.

My mother would get pleasingly angry with me when I would return from the little stream with a muddy wetness on the seat of my trousers.

One day as I was dragging my feet through the leaves of the garden, I spied a princess, as beautiful as any described to me in the fairy tales of my childhood, strolling down the path with a tall man in a very smart uniform. Before they had noticed me, I climbed into a tree to watch them walking about the garden. There seemed to be a halo of of sift yellow light all about her which did not hide, but rather clarified, her beauty. Indeed, could it be otherwise? A princess from a fairy tale must be beautiful. And am I not borne out by the presence of the tall man in uniform, a man who could be no other than a captain, a man of flashing swords and gentle speech, walking at her side and pointing into trees at various birds and making clever remarks, for she laughs.

Please don't point to my tree, I prayed. Her laughter would cut deep if he were to say to her; "Hello, and what have we here? Why it is a species quite common to this garden though in other parts of Russia it would be quite a find indeed. A perching boy, not of the common variety mind you, for this one can be distinguished by large brown eyes propped as if watching a forest fire, and a mouth that is never closed but hangs loosely on the hinges at all hours of the day." And then she would have laughed, for she could do no other at such cleverness from her handsome captain. But then she would stop and smile as only a princess may and heal in one single glance the great wound made by the captain's flashing sword. But I was lucky and they did not notice, but kept walking toward the little stream.

I climbed down after they had passed and rushed off to the house to inquire about the princess I had seen walking in Voronstov's English garden.

But when I reached the house it all seemed as if a dream I had had upon falling off to sleep while perched in a tree."No," my mother assured, "she is quite real." Her name was Valentina Nikolaevna Petrovna and the captain was lieutenant Alexis Steponovich Yakovelevich. And they too were to be the house guests of Voronstov.

It was that night, as Voronstov was about to begin his poetry readings to the assembled guests and visitors, who were always in numbers at Voronstov's house, that Valentina Nikolaevna entered into the parlour and seated herself next to me on the sofa. Her sweet smell and tender presence almost made me swoon as I stared at her through the corner of my eyes while pretending to be interested in every word of Voronstov's recital. He was bellowing passages of battle, brave and honorable, when she whispered to me. "It is not quite proper to hide in trees and spy on people as they walk through a beautiful garden." She had seen me. I was cut deep for I remembered what had gone through my mind as I hid and watched. But this time she did not smile to heal my wounds. Her eyes looked straight ahead.

"You seem to know the garden very well," she said to me just before I was sent off to my little room. "Would you walk through with me tomorrow and show me what you have found to be the best places?"

I nodded my head for I could not swallow the knot in my throat in my throat long enough to manage a simple word. I was so happy. And when she let go of my hands they seemed to grow very heavy without her light touch. And her voice, her touch, the fragrance about her, all accompanied me to my room. And there, with her beside me and her in every space of the room, with her hovering about me and her sweet smell and soft touch still on my hands, I gave her my soul. I pronounced my love to the heaven and to the devil. And every throb of my body was a shout of love complete and total.

I dreamed of her in the Spring and a new born garden with the fresh green smell all about her. Then a storm came and she ran from it. I tried to run to her but the the storm with wild winds and sheets of rain blew Autumn leaves up and against her forcing me to run from her and her to run away from me. The storm was between us and it sent me running for shelter and it lifted her into its black and churning clouds. She was lost in them and I began to cry. Just then the clouds parted ever so slightly and a golden shaft of sunlight came through and made a rainbow that I could touch. And above the clouds, she rose and walked the path of the rainbow into heaven. I smiled under my tree as the storm went away and Spring returned to the garden.

I woke early and had tea and breakfast with my mother and father. My sister slept late. And after breakfast I anxiously waited for Valentina Nikolaevna to come after me. She ordered breakfast at eleven and I almost split with happiness for she soon would be coming to fetch me and we would be together once more.

Just then the lieutenant, Alexis Steponovich, began to howl from the top of the stairwell. His words were heated and so loud that only a few came clear to me. He screamed about a hairy animal and a filthy devil, a mistress and pain. And he ran out of the house. A moment later Voronstov came running down the stairs looking like a huge and angry bear just stirred rudely out of sleep. And he flew after the lieutenant spitting names after him and vowing to box his green ears and twist his head from that 'ostrich neck'.

Needless to say, there was quite a commotion in the house after all of this and before I was really aware of it, Valentina Nikolaevna had taken my arm and led me out through the kitchen into the bare beauty of Voronstov's English garden. "They are both little children, my Mitka, as all men are. But you are not a man as yet and therefore not a child."

When she said Mitka, I nearly let out a squeal of joy but managed to suppress it somehow. I didn't understand what she had said, but it sounded very nice indeed. And we walked hand in hand as I had seen my mother and father walking so many times during her treatment.

"Valentina," I said, as we stood by the little stream that would soon be choking from ice. "I had a dream last night. We were walking together like this and then a storm came upon us and we were separated. You were taken from me and forced to enter the clouds. They were very black and fierce looking."

"Mitka, we must all be caught in storms. There is no way to avoid them, for that is nature."

“But it was fierce and it took you away.”

“Perhaps I wanted to go,” she said, looking suddenly toward the house.

“No,” I said. “You were forced,” I pleaded.

“Perhaps I was,” she said, looking at me tenderly. And she kissed away a tear that had formed in the corner of my eye and had begun to run down my cheek. “Let us return to the house now.”

And we walked back to the house, very slowly, hand in hand.

Much had happened while we were in the garden. It seems that Voronstov had failed to catch his prey and returned fuming. And that not more than twenty minutes had passed before the lieutenant had burst through the door with a pistol in his hand to shoot Voronstov. He had fired three shots before Grigori had disarmed him, but all three of them had missed their mark due to the absolute frenzy of the marksman. Voronstov promptly fell to the floor clutching himself where he imagined he had been pierced and it took about ten minutes for the visitors at his house to convince him that not one bullet had entered him. And on the advice of the visitors, he was now upstairs resting. The lieutenant had been hauled off to the magistrates office.

This I had gotten later from Grigori, for when we got back, Valentina had rushed up the stairs and my mother and father quickly deposited me in my little room. I was told not to come out before morning for there may be some more excitement that I was not to get involved in. Supper was served me in there and I spent most of the sleepless night looking out into the garden as the first snow began to cover all within the scope of my little window. I relived that afternoon in the garden many times before falling off to sleep.

The next day Voronstov announced to the assembled group of visitors that he would wed Valentina Nikolaevna in Moscow.

When the announcement reached my ears I flew at Voronstov and began flailing at him with all my might. “No! No!”, I screamed. “She does not love you!”

He grabbed me about the chest pinning my arms against my body and whispered “That may be, my little poet. But it is a father’s duty to give his child his name.”

He let go of me and I fell to the floor crying. This could not be. “No!” I sobbed through my tears. “It’s not yours. It’s mine. It’s mine.”

“Yours, my little poet?”

“Your claim can be no greater than mine,” I whimpered.

“You are a wise little man, my dear Dimitri. But you are a child as yet and I dare say that is the settling factor. Here now, she has given me a letter for you. Take it.” And Voronstov put the letter in my hand and carried me to my bed.

I cried for hours and hours until it became quite dark in my little room. When I finally ceased my sobbing, I struck a match to light the lamp and held the flame to the letter also. It caught flame reluctantly at first and then began to burn with greater intensity until I could no longer hold it and stamped it out on the floor. All that remained was a blackened spot of the floor and hundreds of ashes that flew into all dark corners when I stamped my foot down.

We remained at Voronstov’s house that Winter. My mother thought it improper to remain in a man’s house as his guest while he was all the way in Moscow. But she was still in convalescence so we had no other choice. But as soon as the thaw had come and gone and the roads were hard although rutted from the rains and melting snow, we packed our belongings and made ready for the trip back to Ufa. My mother’s recovery quickened after our host had left in his sled that early Winter morning and the house grew considerably less noisy as the visitors trickled away. And so it was in good health that she climbed into the carriage.

As we sat in the long boat that carried us across the Volga, still swollen from the rains and dwindled snow, I watched the spray that occasionally flew up from the oars. And the little rainbow that appeared among the tiny droplets would last only a moment before vanishing into the brisk clear air.

ARK 2

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*"The earth also was corrupt before God and the earth was filled
with violence*

... Genesis 6:11

"Art is an act of violence which connotes being."

... hegel