



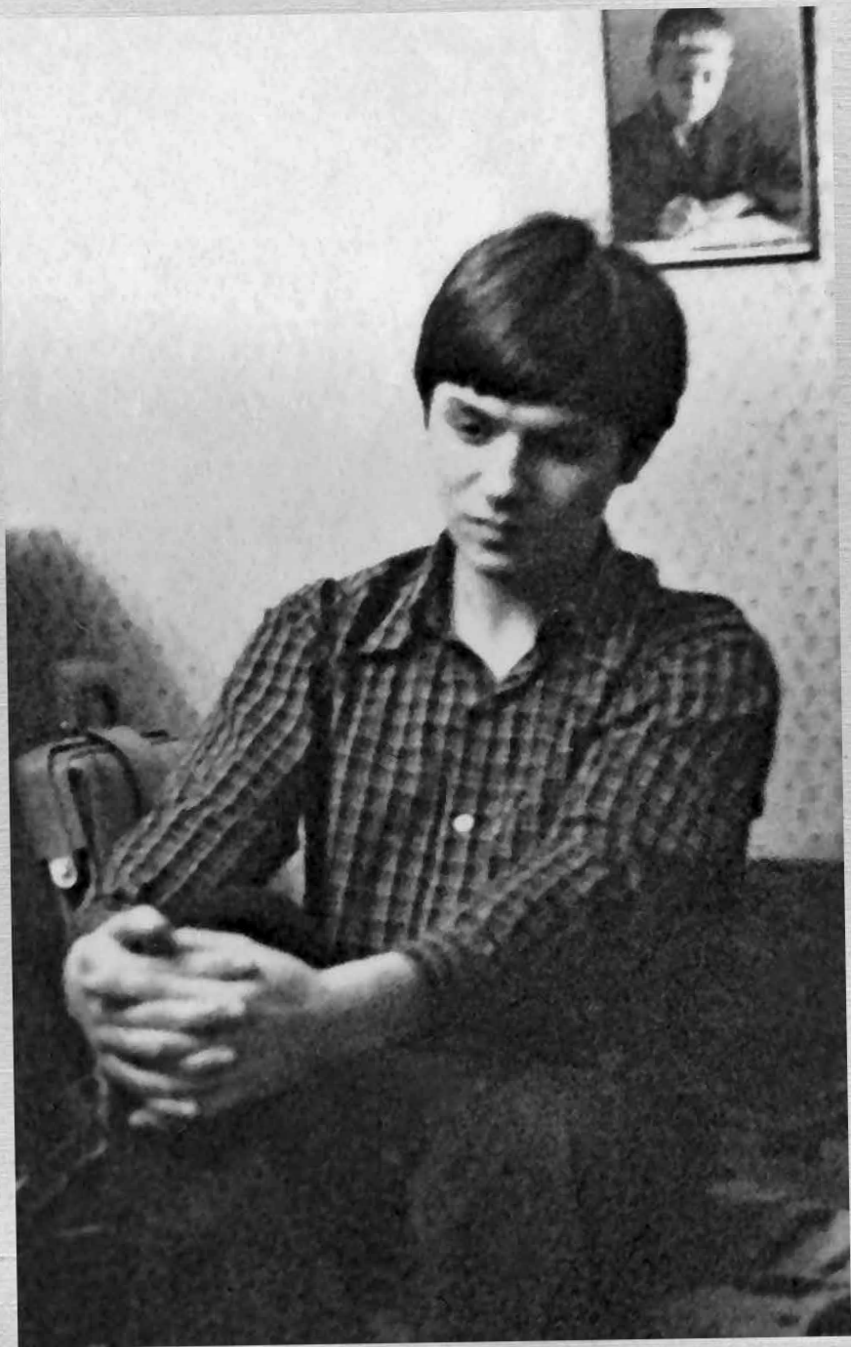
A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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A MOSCOW CHILDHOOD

(1961-1978)

Protopriest Artemy Vladimirov's Russian childhood: the warmth of family relations, awakening to the natural world, first experiences of Soviet society, and his youthful acceptance of God's existence. A remarkable view of a vanished era.

Prelude

My brothers Andrei, Dmitri, and I were particularly close to our mother's family. Our great-grandmother, a goddaughter of Peter Arkadyevich Stolypin¹, was Alexandra Mikhailovna Glebova who had married the half-Swiss Vasily Nikolaevich Sevei. Their daughter, Lyubov Vasilyevna, married Pavel Nikolayevich Barto and gave birth to three daughters, including our mother Marina and our aunts, Anna and Susanna.

Before I speak of my own childhood, though, I must begin with a family event that occurred long before my brothers and I were born, but in the light of which, all that came after was wholly a consequence.

Certainly, during my childhood I did not believe in Our Lord because I had never heard anything about Him. After the death of my grandmother, however, when I was already graduating from school, I found a small palmwood box with shorn curls of hair and two little crosses on a silken cord, saved from the baptism of my twin brother and myself when we were two or three years old. I didn't know it then, but this discovery was the eve of my religious life. Nevertheless, as children we were almost completely ignorant of

1 Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin (1862-1911): A reforming Prime Minister under Tsar Nicholas II who was assassinated by revolutionaries in Kiev in 1911. In a nationwide 2008 Russian poll of "the greatest Russian," Stolypin came in second behind St. Alexander Nevsky.

Opposite: Artemy Vladimirov.

the Church and everything connected with it. The only Christian truth that I was aware of was St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, and of him I knew nothing but his name owing to a family story told by our grandmother.

During the Second World War, Moscow was largely abandoned by its inhabitants, who had fled to the countryside. My grandfather, Pavel Barto, was a military journalist assigned to the north of Russia and as communications broke down, he and my grandmother completely lost touch. He had no means of assisting her.

My grandmother had remained in Moscow because she had a job in a canteen for Soviet military officers that allowed her to take leftover food scraps for her three young daughters. Knowing that she had children, some of the officers would carefully eat around the yellow yolk of their morning egg, as if they had no appetite, so that she would have something nourishing to take home.

But in time she lost this job, and her only relatives still in Moscow were unable to offer anything except their potato peelings. Finally, after selling everything that could bring in money (the flat was now completely empty) the day came when there was nothing left to eat. Anna, the youngest, was still nursing, and the eldest, my mother Marina, was only ten. In great distress, my grandmother went out each day looking for work on an empty stomach, only to return home to children crying from hunger. As a young mother, she could not long endure such anguish, and once their small bodies began to swell from starvation, she despaired.

Certainly, she was taken to church in her early years, but by this time any support for her childish faith had been swept away by the atheist regime. Finding herself in the empty kitchen, her eyes rested on a small family icon of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker that had belonged to her mother. As she stared at it, the blood rushed to her head, and she furiously cried out, "Vladika Nicholas! How can you bear to watch this?" Certainly, it was not a prayer – it was a flood of rage, a furious accusation against God. Rushing out of the flat, she slammed the door, intending never to return. It was perhaps a final suicidal prompting by dark spirits to finish her off.

She ran down the three flights of stairs and out into the street. As she found herself outside the building, a flash of color caught her eye and she looked down to see two banknotes sitting one on top of the other in the form of a red cross at her feet. I don't remember the ruble denomination, but it was a huge sum in those days. Stunned, she looked around her (Russian people of that

generation were very honest) and wondered, “What does this mean?” As the seconds passed, she became convinced that it was the immediate response of St. Nicholas to her. She picked up the money, and with it was able to save her daughters and herself.

She never forgot this, and even as a boy I knew that St. Nicholas was not something abstract. I didn’t think about it often, but in my heart, I knew that he existed. Even now, I feel that he accompanies me, and the first icon I look for upon entering a church is that of St. Nicholas. My life and my priesthood are bound up with such signs of his presence.

Early Memories

One of my earliest memories is the public nursery of the early 1960s – an institution for babies and young children in Soviet Russia whose parents could not care for them during the working week. Our own mother, a young physicist, had to work long hours to support us in our earliest years, when there was no one at home to help. Ours was the so-called “Five-Day Care,” and even now my overriding memory is of the smell of chlorine, which the attendants used to wash the tiled floors. How piercingly lonely my soul felt then but, thank God, my twin brother Dmitri was nearby. Our close communication allowed me not to lose myself amongst the other children, but kept the memory of our sweet home alive through those interminable days.



Marina Pavlovna with Andrei, Artemy, and Dmitri.

I don’t recall that the nursery attendants treated us roughly or were in any way heartless. Everything was just subordinate to the routine of sleep, meals, outdoor games, playtime, sleep again. Our nannies acted according to established rules and instructions, and the babies were consigned to obedience:

anything else was impossible. Of course, as we were still small, unexpected things sometimes still arose involving diapers (in Russian euphemistically known as “baby surprise”), and there was always the tumult of nursery life, but there were also times of happy laughter.

My warmest memory is of the Great Event of the week, as Friday – the fifth day – draws to a close. Most of the little ones have already gone away with their parents and my twin Dmitri (Mityen’ka) and I wait with a breathless expectation that grows stronger with every passing moment. Our bodies are still in the nursery, but our minds are already at home in our familiar and cozy Moscow flat with the children’s room that contains the whole universe.

The waiting is more delightful than tedious because we know that very soon we will be Taken Away! Another half hour... and then, at last, the door opens and at the threshold stands MAMA – young and beautiful beyond measure. Seeing her “little rabbits,” she opens her arms to us and forgetting everything – the all-pervading smell of chlorine, the attendants with their unsophisticated arsenal of words and rustic manners, the quarrels, joys, sorrows, routine – we run as fast as we can to the dearest human being in the world. She kneels down to clasp us tightly to her, enfolding us in her arms, and weeps with us as we burrow our faces into the folds of her dress.

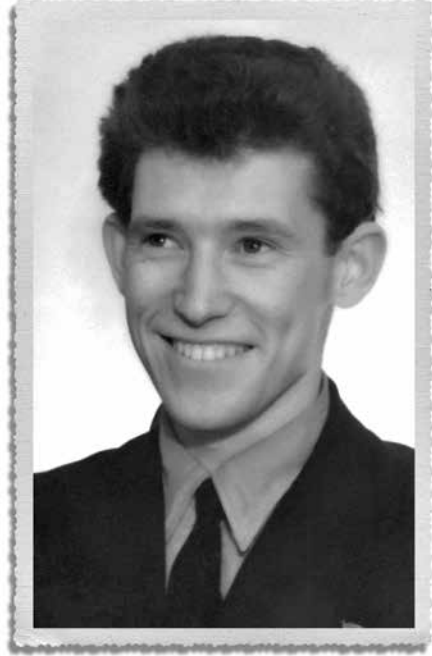
Each Friday afternoon the world regained its fullness and color and our small hearts were filled anew with the joy of living. Now I see the divine presence in these reunions, when our Heavenly Father appeared to us through the most wonderful mother imaginable; as we clung to her warm hands, we also touched His.

Uncle Lyonya

“Uncle Lyonya” was what we called our stepfather, our mother’s second husband who took our father’s place after he misstepped and left the family. With her long lustrous braid, Marina had been wonderfully attractive in her student years, but it wasn’t the eye-catching beauty of a girl who only desires to display her charms. Joyous, cheerful, and persevering, mother attracted the attention and selfless admiration of many of her fellow-students, one of them being Leonid, a modest young man with a surprisingly pleasant smile and shy kind eyes. His father had been killed in World War II and until his mother’s last day, Leonid attended to her needs as if she were a queen. His was a gift of quiet love, giving everything to serve his neighbor.



Mother as a university student.



Uncle Leonid as an undergraduate.

Leonid had been one of mother's closest friends, but once she chose her husband, he never showed his deeper feelings for her in word or deed. He kept to himself as his conscience told him was proper in his relations with the young family, but as time passed, mother, being pure and honest, could not but divorce her husband when she found out about his unfaithfulness.

Mitya and I were four at the time, and unimposingly, with great tactfulness and discretion, Uncle Lyonya came into our lives. It should be mentioned that during one of the most repressive decades of Soviet rule he had been baptized secretly three times, each time at the instigation of a relative unaware of his previous baptisms. In his youth, Soviet young people were brought up in a spirit of materialism and alienation from the Church, yet the moral purity and noble human dignity of this World War II generation who did not yet know Christ was profound.

In my mind, I return to my far-away childhood, to "deep winter," when mother took us out to Neskuchny Sad, a favorite recreation ground for Muscovites. The snow lay far above our knees, and we three boys slid down the steep slopes on our simple skis for hours on end, purposely falling into the

thick white mounds, the air echoing with laughter. Snow filled our *valenki*², mittens, pants, and fur caps, and our red cheeks hardly differed in color from the bullfinches that watched from the nearby branches.

Hours passed until finally it was time to go home. Mother would call us and then climb the slope towards the exit from the park. We followed her, covered with sticky snow from head to foot and falling repeatedly because of the slippery rubber overshoes. Behind us came Uncle Lyonya bent under the weight of three pairs of skis that were even heavier now from the falling snow that stuck to them.

This is how he remains in my memory – mother’s silent companion: infinitely patient, always ready to serve us, who took care of everyone around him without the slightest irritation or displeasure. Such is true love that endures all things, does not seek its own, and never fails.

The Tiff

Amazingly, I don’t remember my mother and stepfather ever quarreling, and it is clear to me now that their calm manner, their peaceful conversations and the loving smiles as they spoke to one another, all created the basis of our happy family life, forming our souls and the way we perceived the world.

I only witnessed one small tiff: a winter Sunday on a family ski trip to Zyuzino, at that time a suburb of Moscow. It was a day of bright winter sun sparkling on snowdrifts and we boys skied until we were tired. As we headed for home, the adults stopped a little ahead of us to rest in a snowy field. Uncle Lyonya, with the backpack on his shoulders, leaned on the skis, while Mother, with her joyful, welcoming smile, waited for us to catch up. They began to discuss our route, but there must have been a disagreement because from across the field we heard slightly raised voices and an arguing intonation. Once they realized we were within earshot, there was silence. That was all, but the episode was imprinted in my memory.

The Visit

Another memory is of Uncle Lyonya and me visiting mother’s relatives when I was about eight. We walked down the street from the metro in silence, as men will (in this case, a big one and a little one) who understand each other

² *Valenki*: Felted Russian wool boots made for walking on dry snow that keep feet warm even when leather boots do not. Often worn with short rubber galoshes to save the sole.

without words. Turning into the courtyard, we saw that it was lined with newly-dug construction trenches, and at our entrance, a ditch that had to be stepped over to reach the metal sheet that made a bridge to the door. I was the first to jump, but when Uncle Lyonya tried to get his footing, he suddenly lost balance. I reached out a hand to steady him, and as he straightened, he gave me a gentle smile. There was nothing more to it, but I remember my mixed emotions of pity and surprise. How could this be? Uncle Lyonechka, the embodiment of strength and agility, had almost found himself on the ground! And he needed my help! And I helped him!

In later years, my old Uncle Lyonya could barely walk; he lay resting most of the time. He would smile quietly when asked about his health and make good-natured gestures meaning that nothing could be done, that age had taken its toll. But I mostly recall him as a young man: willowy, fit, for a moment leaning with trust on my hand, and then the quick smile from a father to his small son.



Wedding of our mother Marina and Leonid.

Awakening

Many years later, when I was already a priest in an Orthodox children's camp far from home in Normandy on the shore of the Atlantic, I remember lying in bed with my face to the wall, hiding the tears that suddenly filled my eyes as I prayed for my stepfather. How can it be that such a gentle, caring soul is confined to the prison of not knowing God? How can I, who have always accepted my stepfather's service but never served him myself, know the Merciful Savior and enjoy His grace, while Uncle Lyonechka is afraid to take the Gospels in his hands and unwilling even to reconsider his disbelief? "Lord, enlighten his mind, open his heart, give him the happiness of knowing Your infinite mercy and love," my soul pleaded with tears warmed with

Christ's compassion. I remember being surprised at this prayer that seemed to have come over me by itself like rain watering the earth. The pleading finally ceased, my soul became calm, and with the calm a feeling of lightness and peace.

Uncle Lyonya continued to deny the existence of any kind of spiritual life, although he readily let mother go to church. More than that, he took his granddaughter (and later a great-grandson) to receive Holy Communion and never once spoke to them of his disbelief. Sixteen years had passed since my heartfelt prayer for him, which seemed to have taken flight and vanished into eternity, when, shortly before Uncle Lyonya's repose, there occurred an astounding miracle in the life of our family. He finally agreed to see a priest from my church, and he confessed and received Holy Communion!

"How was it?!" I asked my fellow priest. He told me that Uncle Lyonya had confessed in a very natural way as if he had been doing it all of his life, "with feeling, sense, and clarity."

God's infinite goodness made his servant Leonid a disciple on his deathbed and our uncle went to the other world in joyful astonishment at the Divine light that had dawned for him. The same measure of generous love that he had bestowed upon us as our nursemaid, protector, helper, and servant was surely now applied to him. The Lord himself knows the path by which he leads a soul to eternity.

The Twins

My twin Dmitri and I began and ended every day together. It was very seldom that we were apart, but unlike adults we never grew weary of one another. As we learned to speak, we turned into inexhaustible talkers and keen listeners. Every new impression became the subject of discussion.

One day, resting outside with mother's arms around us, we closely watched a tractor crawling along the country road. Mitya puffed out his cheeks with an air of importance and unabashedly revealed his exceptional knowledge. Pointing his chubby finger at the machine he told me: "It's a tacca." Being pedantic from an early age in everything that involved language, I firmly corrected him: "Not a 'tacca,' but a 'tracca.'"

Another time, I was stung on the face by a wasp, and the sting was so serious that I fainted. The adults sprang into action and fussed around "the poor child," as there really were grounds for worry. Mityen'ka observed



The twins – Artemy and Dmitri.

the commotion for a time and finally burst into loud cries because the attention was centered only on his twin. Granny, who now lived with us, rushed towards him:

- “Mityen’ka, what has happened? A wasp?!”
- “A w-a-a-sp!”
- “Show me quickly where it stung you!”

Now he was good and cornered, but my quick-witted brother found a way:

- “On my ha-a-a-ir!”

As we see, even very young children are not free from such double-thinking, but these manifestations are neither hurtful nor even annoying because the idea of harming anyone is alien to them.

A Declaration of Love

Another evening, I remember Mitya and I going to sleep in our room. While the adults were having tea and a lively discussion in the living-room, we twins began an unusual conversation. We spoke, we thought, in a barely audible whisper because we knew that once granny bid us good-night, breaking the

established order could have unpleasant consequences. Nevertheless, the dialogue commenced: from Mitya's bed in complete darkness came an unexpected and moving declaration:

- “Tyo-o-ma!”
- “What?”
- “I love you!”

It did not take me long to reply:

- “Mi-i-tya!”
- “What?”
- “I love you very much!”

Within a few seconds the revelations began to escalate out of control:

- “Tyoma, I love you very, very much!”
- “And I love you very, very, very much.”

No one knows how long this moving competition (requiring elementary arithmetic and a good memory) would have gone on had we not been interrupted by the strict voice of Aunt Susanna in the doorway.

- “What is this? Who isn't asleep and still talking? Now, the Boogie Man will come with his sack for bad boys, so which one shall we give away to him?”

In the silence that followed, a thin voice quivered from the blanket under which I cowered:

- “Mi-i-i-tyen'ka!”

This extraordinary conversation became part of our family chronicles.

Dmitri and the Peacock

Once, at a very tender age we were invited by Olga Igorevna Alekseyeva-Stanislavskaya (her mother was a Tolstoy) to visit her in her Moscow apartment. The occasion was a family event, but because she had three sons of exactly our age, we were invited along with some other children. By the time we arrived the celebration was just beginning, and while Azerbaijani pilaf simmered in the oven (her husband was from Central Asia), we little ones

were taken to the children's room where we were seated on small chairs to watch a rare slide show about a peacock.

The beginning did not forebode any drama: the story presented a portly peacock with a magnificent fan-shaped tail as the focus of attention at an evening get-together. But gradually, the other "feathered folk" wearing more modest "attire" began to think that the peacock with his beautiful tail was too conspicuous amidst the rest of the company. It should be noted that in the 1960s, Soviet morality was aimed at bringing people up in a "spirit of collectivism," that would make them reluctant to stand out among the masses of other honest working people. Everyone was to be like everyone else – from opinions and beliefs to the size of his small plot of dacha land with its modest house.

But now, unusual in a children's film,³ the peacock's situation took a sinister turn, for, although he had not done anything wrong – he was certainly not to blame for his marvelous blue and green tail – the birds decided to hold an impromptu court to pass sentence on the proud individualist. Each bird was to show its contempt for the peacock by tearing one feather out of his tail. This was accomplished without delay and the last slides showed the peacock as a plucked *poularde*, shivering with cold and humiliation.

The idea was to rejoice in the fact that Soviet justice had prevailed; the culprit had been punished and the feathered comrades went home with a deep sense of moral satisfaction, each carrying a blue-eyed peacock's feather in its beak in memory of the worthy event.

As the film ended and the children got up from their chairs, a heart-rending scream pierced the room. My fair-haired, round-cheeked brother Mityen'ka had burst into violent tears that streamed down his little face like rivers. The kind adults came running from the kitchen.

- "What has happened? Have you pinched your finger with the chair?"
- "No-o-o!"
- "Did you bite your tongue?"
- "No-o-o!"
- "Do you have a stomach-ache?"

³ Ed. Note: This socialist portrayal was unusual because Soviet era children's cartoons such as *The Golden Antelope*, *The Snow-Queen*, and even Pushkin's *Tsar-Sultana* were always mild in spirit, teaching valor, compassion, and courtesy, which is why this divergent cartoon elicited such a passionate response. Even today, western-style cartoons with animal characters beating and humiliating one another are considered unsuitable for children.

- “No-o-o!”
- “But what is wrong?”
- “I’m sorry for the pe-e-a-co-o- ock!”

No one could have anticipated this ... How would they suspect that a children’s slide show would cause such indignant cries in a small boy who had followed the plot too closely? Nothing would calm the sobbing unsocialist Mitya.

- “The peacock will soon grow a better tail, the best in the world!”
- “But why did they pluck this one?” replied Mityen’ka, as he pitifully but reasonably continued to wail.

Finally, the hostess joyfully announced that the pilaf was ready. My brother drew a deep sobbing breath and looked at me questioningly. Within a moment we were seated at the children’s table eating the tasty pilaf in complete silence. Mityen’ka’s face began to flush as the elastic band in his shorts cut tighter and tighter into his waist, but handling his fork like a trencherman, he repeatedly accepted the offers of “More meat? More carrots?” and chewed his way to peace.

The New Year Cones

It is good to be able to resist sin, to know how to drive away evil thoughts and desires with prayer, but when temptation approaches the young and inexperienced, we often hospitably open the door to it.

Once on our way home from school, my seven-year-old twin brother Mitya and I decided to visit a shop for household goods that, rarely for that time, were not kept behind the shop counter and taken down for inspection upon request, but arranged in aisles and displayed openly. In those Soviet years, the great civic and family celebration was not Christmas, which was celebrated quietly by believers on the seventh of January, but New Year’s.⁴ And here in this store, before our enchanted eyes, just a few weeks before the great day, was a bountiful display of New Year tree toys: balls and stars, streamers and silver tinsel, Father Frosts and Snow Maidens of all kinds and sizes!

Particularly attractive was a display of small glass cones with their painted gold and raspberry-red tops. Covered with white powder like snow-dust,

4 Russia celebrates Christmas on the Old-Style Church calendar: December 25 is the civil January 7, so in Soviet era civil celebrations, New Year’s Day on January 1st preceded Christmas.

they seem to have been plucked from a fairy-tale fir tree. We could not tear our eyes off of them, so cozy they lay, each in its separate holder, tantalizing us with their fragile elegance.

I don't remember now which of us ran the show in carrying out the criminal intent; perhaps we had even come to the shop repeatedly before the idea of cone-stealing found its way into our inexperienced hearts. Finally one day we waited for the salesgirl to look away, and then Mityen'ka and I each snatched a cone and hastened from the scene. Only one stop separated us from our home in Krasikov Street, and on the way we silently clenched our cones – mine with purple and Mitya's with a golden top. We no longer dared to look into one another's eyes and the joy of possessing the longed-for objects were increasingly overshadowed by the uncomfortable realization that we were now accomplices in crime. But here was the familiar door, the lift, our floor, and the flat, #45.

We rang the bell, and to our surprise, mother opened the door, her cheeks slightly flushed. She had come home early and was cooking lunch for us. We took off our overcoats, still clenching the cones, and proceeded to the kitchen with expressions of contrived nonchalance on our faces. I may even have hummed a tune to convey a state of lightheartedness and content. A moment of silence began, then I forced myself to speak.

- Mum, we have a present for you...
- A present? What present?
- Cones...
- What cones? Show me! Where are they from?
- We have f-found them ...

With these words we unclenched our fists, damp with sweat, and the cones came to light, somehow much less fascinating than they had seemed in the shop.



Marina Pavlovna.

I still remember mother's face. Her eyes became righteous and as dark as the depth of the sea in stormy weather. Her usual light joyful expression was now strict, calm, and estranged.

"And you are *my* children?!" she gasped, as if unable to recognize the two little thieves and liars. We burst out sobbing and the cones fell out of our paralyzed hands, breaking into dozens of pieces at our feet.

– Mama, Mumm-y-y!

We rushed into mother's arms wailing, somehow knowing that in her embrace our terror-stricken souls would come back to life, and that the shards of sin penetrating our hearts could be melted by tears. Unlike the woman in the famous story "The Cucumbers" by Nikolay Nosov, who made her son return the stolen vegetables to the old watchman who guarded the garden with a gun, our mother didn't push us away. Instead, she wept with us. Mother held the two sinful little human beings tight, as if protecting us from the evil that had offended our young hearts. In her arms, the sin of stealing just crumbled to dust and non-existence along with the shattered tree-cones.

Since then, I've always looked away from what belongs to other people, and the very memory of the cones scorched my soul for years after. How did mother do it? What was the secret of her absolute success in dealing with us? I don't know. I just remember an eternal truth shining through her eyes that vanquished vice and chastened us who had fallen under its power. I can still feel the warmth of her life-giving embrace as she opened her arms to draw in her wailing, repentant children.

I'll conclude by saying that the first item in my first confession, made during my university years, was the sin of theft:

– "I once stole a New Year's tree decoration, a cone, in a self-service shop at the age of seven."

– "God forgive you," the priest replied.

I said nothing of the cone that Mityen'ka had stolen; I already knew that one should only confess the sins that he himself commits.

Discovering Music

Few people are blessed with a truly unique inborn talent. My twin brother Mitya was one of such children; for him, music became his life.

His gift was discovered by pure chance. Even before we learned to walk, as we crawled over the floor we would come across household items placed within our reach, and one day Mitya got hold of a saucepan cover and a wooden spoon. He began to bang them together and the sound that the iron cover produced filled the year-old baby with amazement. Wide-eyed, he produced the deep metallic tone again and again, listening intently with his ear as close to the cover as he could get.

A couple of years later, after an outing with granny, we found ourselves locked out of our flat. Granny asked our upstairs neighbor to let us stay with her for a while, and it was here that three-year-old Mityen'ka first saw a piano.

He opened the lid and from that moment was inseparable from the instrument. Fortunately, our neighbor was an exceptional music teacher and she quickly understood that he was a prodigy.

That visit determined the rest of his life. Running ahead of the story, only let me say that four years later he was already a mature pianist whose performances affected adult listeners. Because of this talent, Mityen'ka was granted special privileges at our kindergarten. When the children were outdoors, the same neighbor, now our music teacher, took him home for individual classes. I remember him coming back to kindergarten once, his face flushed with inspiration and excitement, to impart a "revelation." "Tyomka, can you imagine? There is a note called "sol"! (The major G on the solfege scale: in Russian the name is the same as our word for "salt.")

A miniature hill of kitchen salt appeared before my mind's eye and next to it a similar hill of sugar. I cut Mityen'ka short in a tone that did not allow any objection: "What are you saying, you liar?!" The harshness was because



Artemy and Dmitri at a school concert.



Dmitri practicing.

something personal had come into my brother's life that I was not a part of. It was envy, perhaps, bound up with a child's hurt ego.

Granny, who always watched us closely, saw this and pleaded with Irina Nikolayevna for permission to bring the other twin to her wonderful classes. Although I was not to become a "servant of the Muses," that first class remains in my memory.

– "Tyomochka, will you press that key, please? Listen to what it says to you..."

I pressed the key with obedience and trepidation. Our neighbor continued:

– "Can you hear? Don't you feel the sound coming from under your hand, and then rising up over the piano like a bird to circle around and fly out the window? Do you see it caught by the wind, soaring over the flower bed and into the lane?"

I gazed with all my strength out of the half-opened window, searching our courtyard for these winged notes.

– "See, the sound rises higher and higher, then flies beyond the far-away mountains and valleys to fade away in the woods by the blue sea ..."

Having got an idea of the surprising way of sounds, I now needed to muster the discipline to learn the pieces of music that Mityen'ka grasped in a single flash. The distance separating us grew rapidly, but, unlike Salieri, I did not try to catch up with my Mozart brother. As my twin steadily ascended the ladder of proficiency, I remained on the bottom rung, unable to overcome the inertia that settled over me every time I sat down at the instrument.

The apotheosis of my sufferings came when Mitya was sent, for the first time in his life, to the unknown city of Tbilisi to participate in a competition for young talent. Granny and I went with him to the airport and watched as he, freckled and fair-haired, shining with happiness, waved his hand to us as he stepped over the line separating the passengers from their relatives and friends.

How my little boy's heart ached! Unable to control the storm of feelings that tormented me, I burst into loud tears. For the first time in our lives we were being separated – twins for whom the world had always been shared in two equal parts. Burying my face in Granny's overcoat, I sobbed disconsolately, bemoaning Mitya's talent as it carried him off on its wings to sunny Georgia...

Soon afterwards Granny and my parents “married me off” to the violin, on which I became rather adept, and later also, the flute. Teenage years, however, brought a passion for soccer, and the sound of the leather ball vanquished any remnants of musical harmony.

Autumn

Mitya and I always went to school together – a single subway stop to Metro Akademicheskaya and then down Garibaldi Street to our specialized English-language School # 45 with Mr. Milgram, a Russian Jew, as its dedicated principal. Studies were pure joy to us, and we sped from the metro to school, trying to outrun each other on the way.

On this particular morning we had left home early; the crisp autumn air washing over our faces under a blue sky. Without knowing why, we lingered among the golden maple-trees lining the alley, as their red and yellow leaves performed a farewell dance. We walked side-by-side, Mitya at first balancing on the curb, then back to the path to stir the rustling leaves with his feet. Adults passed by, busy with their own thoughts.

I find it difficult now to convey the extraordinary atmosphere that morning. In one way, everything was as usual, but somehow our had souls been captured by the beauty of the Russian autumn. Looking over at my brother as he burrowed his way through the leafy carpet, I asked: "Mitya, where is God?" He was not in the least surprised. He looked back at me and answered seriously: "Everywhere." No questions or comments followed, but as we walked now in silence, the space around us filled with a light that seemed to make our bodies as weightless as the leaves themselves.

One can have another opinion of what happened that day, but I still remember my brother's: "Everywhere... God is everywhere!" when the Creator of the visible and invisible worlds uttered His word from the mouth of a second-grade Soviet schoolboy.

Neither of us ever brought up such "theological" ideas in our childish conversations again. In no way different from thousands of our peers, we were, in fact, incapable of discussing such topics. Instead, our thoughts revolved around the small artless events of our lives that consumed our time and energy.

Andrei, the First-Born

It is time now to pay tribute to Andrei, the first-born, five years older than the twins. They say that while an only child may face a life-long struggle against egotism and selfishness, and that two experience competition and jealousy, three children feel a mystical fullness in their "holy alliance," the diversity of life itself. Andrei, the elder brother, towered above us like an immense tree under whose wide-spreading branches we young ones could shelter. Andrei was always the trail-blazer on the path of life and as he made his way into his teen years, he shared his impressions with us, the uninitiated, who learned through his mistakes and successes.

I also remember, as if it were yesterday, an early scene with us small boys on either side of our eight-year-old brother, who sat holding a box of sweets that granny had brought from the bakery. He ate them with melancholy concentration, in splendid solitude, while Mitya and I looked on, neither grudging nor discontent. Like faithful viziers of an Eastern despot, we were content to simply sit in his presence, not knowing if we were destined to share the wealth. The outcome was never revealed, however, as the scene was disrupted by mother's sudden appearance: "Andrei! What are you doing?! Are you not ashamed?!"



Artemy, Andrei, and Dmitri.

Ah, this life of ours! The wheel of fortune turns rapidly, forcing yesterday's child of fortune to face the severe truth of existence. But Andrei was quick-witted; his moral sense gained momentum as he grew and he never fell into the same trap again.

His ministry as protector of the insulted and injured began as a teenager. It was winter, and on a frozen outdoor skating rink, a black rubber puck was the focus of greedy attention by opposing hockey teams. The rattle of our simple hockey sticks, the boys' shouts and cries, the triumphant smiles of victory and bitter tears of defeat all heralded the tournament's inevitable finale – a fight.

From our earliest years, Mitya and I were always licked in these matches. One day, an older boy sporting the strange nickname of Macaca,⁵ suddenly rushed at us and smashed our noses. We dragged ourselves home bleeding and sobbing indignantly because we did not yet know that honest soccer plays are often paid for in the pure coin of hurt and sorrow. Andrusha had just come home from school and met us at the door in his grey senior school-boy's uniform. When we told him what had happened, he threw on his coat and ordered us to take him to the site of the ice battle. The match was still

⁵ Macaca: a genus of monkey inhabiting Africa and Asia; also, macaque.

going on, and striding into the middle of the rink like a stern referee, Andrei called out:

- “Who here is Macaca?”
- “I’m Macaca!”

So responded the defiant initiator of the turmoil. Inferior to Andrei in age and strength, his audacity was due to close ties with older and stronger fellows.

- If you are Macaca, then take this!

Our short-spoken brother knocked the bully down with a classic right-hander...

“Every action has an equal and opposite reaction,” as Isaac Newton expressed the unalterable law of life, and the revenge taken for our twosome spawned its inevitable consequences. I can still see my dear elder brother sitting dejectedly on the low railings at the door of our block of flats, where several “hawks” from no-one-knew-where had suddenly appeared and punched his face with successive blows of their big fists. Hanging his head, he gathered strength to go home and lick the wounds honorably received in battle. Mitya and I lacked words to comfort our protector, but the tears of fury in our eyes at seeing him like this witnessed to our intent.

Our elder brother’s name is no longer Andrei nor has it been for a long time, for, tired of life’s “battles and tribulations,” God gave him a monk’s name and he lives in the quiet of an old Russian monastery feeding his soul on church music and prayer. The first-born has risen from his boyhood heroic deeds of administering justice and taken on the protection of immortal souls.

Disbelief

On one hand, the twentieth-century Soviet era protected our childhood by strictly censoring twisted and perverse displays of moral corruption, but on the other, it persistently estranged us from Christ’s light, and all of us were offshoots of the “Young Pioneer underworld.”⁶

⁶ Young Pioneers: The second stage in the hierarchy of Communist Party youth organizations for children. Following the *Oktyabryonok* [Little Octobrists] for seven to nine year-olds was the *Young Pioneers* for children from ten to fourteen, and *Komsomol*, for those from fifteen to twenty-eight. In the Soviet era, all children were expected to participate unless they were excluded by low grades, having served terms in juvenile prison, or having parents who were known Christian believers.

Although our families were afraid to speak to us about faith, doctrinaire strangers did not hesitate to corrupt us with disbelief. How easily, then and now, are children trapped in such deception sanctioned by authorities outside of the home.

In the seventh grade they announced that someone named Chertkov was coming to give a talk at our school.⁷ He had found fame in the 1960s when, as a student of the Moscow Ecclesiastical Academy at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, he publicly denied the faith. There were many of these young “apostates,” who were actually *Komsomol* agents⁸ planted in Moscow Patriarchate seminaries for provocative purposes. We schoolchildren knew nothing of all this, of course – only that our seventh-grade class was to prepare the school hall for an honored guest, and I diligently helped to bring in an armchair for this hunter of childish souls.



The speaker, a middle-aged man, began his talk by naming some exotic subjects (from homiletics to hermeneutics) studied in the academy, and our awe of him grew as he enumerated the theological themes he had mastered. Then he began to confess his atheism and the incompatibility of faith with real life. I cannot say that I remember his arguments, but my heart trustfully soaked up the sophisticated reasoning. Impressed by the extraordinary talk, I ran home after school to find Granny lying in bed reading her beloved Dickens, her thick-rimmed glasses balanced on the tip of her nose.

⁷ The name Chertkov is ironic here, as it derives from the word *chert*, meaning “the devil”.

⁸ *Komsomol* agent: As the Communist Party organization for youth and young adults, *Komsomol* members were frequently used to denigrate and intimidate believers.

“Bulya, Bulya,⁹ can you imagine, there was such an interesting man at school today! He knows a lot, he studied at the seminary and he knows Latin and Greek!” I rambled on, “And after he was educated, he denied God. Can you imagine?!”

Granny looked at me with sorrow and said quietly, “Tyoma, I don’t think that he can be a good man.” Her answer infuriated me. I don’t remember how I disputed it, but I must have said things that were brash and blasphemous. She didn’t say a word in response and I left the room.

Sometime later, she decided to take me to the Church of Prophet Elijah, “Built in One Day,”¹⁰ near our home: Granny ascended the stairs holding my hand, and although we had not yet entered the narthex, I could already smell incense and see the church lamps flickering in the darkness. Suddenly a strange fear seized me. I tore my hand away and rushed back down the steps as if pursued by my worst enemy. Blood throbbed in my temples, my heart beat madly, and Granny stood sadly in the doorway as I ran away. It wasn’t yet my time.

Much later at university, I learned that after his “denial,” Chertkov had attended the Institute of Marxism and Leninism and then spent decades traveling around the country with this one single lecture. Schoolchildren and university students were especially assembled to hear him. Once, while lecturing at the Polytechnic Institute in Moscow, students from many faculties were urged to attend, yet the topic was still the same – his “enlightenment,” denial of faith, and the importance of “scientific atheism.” When he finished, the audience was called upon to ask questions. A hand rose in the middle of the hall and then a young girl rose from her seat, her question ringing in the air: “Can you please tell us, did you deny Christ as Peter or as Judas?”

Chertkov froze and could not find a word in response.

Disbelief, or an inexplicable resistance to Truth, is healed by the Lord himself. I am not speaking of the corrupt atheism of the Soviet-era Chertkovs but of the ignorance of simple people forcibly estranged from God by the darkening of their minds. Life is undoubtedly a wise teacher and time heals both bodily injuries and the wounds of the soul. It also elucidates the mind and if one is capable of reflecting upon his mistakes, falsehood eventually disperses. However, I think that time’s healing property has an even deeper

⁹ *Bulya*: A shortened version of *babushka* (grandmother).

¹⁰ Church of the Prophet Elijah on Obydensky Pereulok. It is said that this temple was built in one day, in thanksgiving for the victory over the Tatars that occurred here on July 20, 1476.

cause – the unseen and unknown prayer in the hearts of those who love us and pray for our awakening. Enlightenment does come, and very often after the repose of the one who prayed for us so diligently.

The Dacha

For us city boys the word “dacha” contained everything desirable and needed for a youngster whose life was mostly spent far from nature. In our childhood, the picturesque bends of the Moscow river near our dacha (a simple wooden summer house without electricity or running water) seemed rapid and wide, lined with their green banks and narrow footpaths rising and falling to the river. Backwaters filled with sedge-grass teemed with life, their shores hosting the small wooden piers so favored by young fishermen.



Grandmother Lyubov with Andrei (13) and Artemy (7) at the dacha.

Standing on the bank with my pants rolled up to the knees, I remember holding a fishing-rod made of nut-tree wood as I watched the current urge my goose-feather float through the sedge stems. In the clear water my eyes followed a school of baby roach fish, fussing at the bread pellets we used for bait. Avoiding the hook, they still managed to rob our lines of bread. As the float quivered, my heart strained with the effort of willing them to bite. Once,

I remember whispering: “Help me, Lord! Let the fish take the bait now! Please, Lord!” But who in those years had taught me to turn to the Creator of heaven and earth? How had I put this first prayer of my life into words?

Sometimes, my soul focused on ordinary images and I sensed the uniqueness of everyday moments. Here is my brother and I walking toward the river. We stop to drink from an iron water-pipe, held up horizontally with straps to pour out fresh spring water for the dacha dwellers. From behind, I can see Mitya, a slim, tan boy with sun-faded blond hair, bend over the pipe to quench his thirst. Alder trees with their lush summer foliage hang over the spring and the bright midday sun filters through the leaves to capture my brother at the center of the picture. Why my heart prompted me to preserve that particular impression, I never knew, but even then, I sensed that everything on earth was passing. Love for my brother flooded my eight-year-old heart, along with a vague anxiety about his future. Indeed, the Lord would



Dmitri and Artemy at the dacha.

summon Dmitri at thirty, in the very prime of his creative life, when a sudden serious illness caused him to pass from this life trusting in God’s Providence.

But on that day, we weren’t looking ahead. We ran from the spring to the river forgetting both lunch and granny, who waited for us with a jar of fresh milk and warm white bread on the veranda overlooking the little hills that lined the river-bank.

Bored with ordinary swimming, we decided to dive under the iron pier that butted out from the water-tower. Mityen’ka, with his usual bravado, didn’t give me time to think and immediately performed the dangerous stunt,

rising easily to the surface on the other side. And what about me? Although not sure I could do it, I immediately followed suit and came up short, hitting my head painfully against the iron bottom of the pier. Flailing in total darkness, my head spinning, I knew that in a few seconds I would be inhaling water instead of air – but just as panic set in, I unaccountably found myself out in the open water, freed. I emerged gasping, my first sight the blazing blue sky overhead. It was God’s providence that I had escaped, and neither my parents nor granny ever knew of our perilous escapade.

In those years, we didn’t wear our small baptismal crosses with the words “Save and Protect” inscribed on them. No one made the sign of the cross over us as we left home, and no one ever said, “May God protect you!” yet the Lord’s angel had undoubtedly saved me from death.

The Lord’s Pascha

We were baptized as children and, of course, we knew something about Pascha. Granny was brought up in the old ways and she always baked kulich for Pascha. Oh, those kulich! People nowadays think that they should be light and weightless like sponge cake, but ours were heavy and dense. Granny baked them using an amber-colored dough so full of butter, vanilla, cardamom, lemon zest, and almonds that one became full just from inhaling the fragrance of such wonder-kulich. Although we were not yet churchgoers, her three grandsons recognized the approach of Pascha by its scent!

Even with the beautiful new packaged dyes to dip eggs in, I’m quite sure that nothing can be better than the humble God-given onion skin. Just boil a pot of dry onion skins and dip one boiled egg after another into the dark rich liquid. How miraculous they look; the living deep-red color that our ancestors have admired for centuries.

Granny had a friend, Nikolay Vasilyevich Matveyev, a well-known Moscow choir director who worked at the Church of the Transfiguration on Bolshaya Ordynka, famous for its miracle-working icon of the Mother of God, “Joy of All Who Sorrow.” I did not know anything about the icon or the Most Pure Virgin herself, but Granny took us to church there each year on Pascha.

I remember such visits because in those years it was easier for the argonauts to find the golden fleece than for a child to attend a functioning church on Pascha. One had to pass through the labyrinth of the minotaur, that is, the obstacles set up by *Komsomol* militia patrols – young people sent with the single purpose of not allowing schoolchildren or teenagers to enter the

church. My twin brother and I were not even eight years old at the time, and had it not been for the mysterious Nikolay Vasilyevich these lines of guards would never have given way. However, as we approached he would utter a nearly inaudible word, so powerful that the path suddenly opened. It was then that I understood that the Soviet power was not omnipotent and far from everlasting.

I recall an incident around this time (probably 1968) involving the place where we stood during the Pascha service, a cozy spot that was close to the choir directed by my grandmother's friend. People with bright, cheerful faces prayed around us, the choir glorified Christ's resurrection as if they were but one voice, yet I stood there fearful. It seemed to me that some of



Main altar of the Church of the Transfiguration on Bolshaya Ordynka Street.

the men nearby had been sent to spy on us and report. An unchildish anxiety tortured my soul that had yet to experience God with living faith.

Calm only descended upon my heart in the great apartment of our relatives who lived on Bolshaya Molchanovka near the Arbat, a flat with an enormous hallway lined with original paintings by the famous Russian artist Valentin Serov. Even in those times, Russian people knew how to celebrate Christ's Resurrection at home: the provoking militia patrols and *Komsomol* activists were left behind, and now there were only the faces of beloved relatives and friends. A fragrant cheese pascha was put on the table, a pyramid with doves and the Russian letters XB – Christos

Voskrece! (Christ is Risen!) imprinted on its sides. The kulich were cut and passed around, and everyone began to "break the fast," although our family had not begun to fast then. Our real church life came later.

My heart rejoiced as I listened to the adults' lively conversations and took in the paschal joy with its festive food, the happiness of a family gathering, and the wonder of not being sleepy although we'd stayed up all night. Still,

my soul did not understand why the church choir ceaselessly sang, “Christ is Risen,” and why the relatives kissed each other three times saying over and over the same words. And what was the response that I so faithfully repeated, but did not yet know the meaning of: “In truth He is risen!”

Granny’s Behest

They say that a last wish is sacred and that the words of a person leaving this life have an inviolable and prophetic force. Not any words, of course, but only those spoken with import for those who remain behind, words that arise out of sacrificial love. If the dying person and his heirs are united by such love, this last word can become a dynamic force in their lives.

Our granny became ill just as we twins were finishing secondary school. As far as I remember, she had always smoked and it was only her terminal lung cancer that rid her of the habit. As a child I had protested, going so far as to hide her favorite Kazbek cigarettes, but my attempts to interfere were unsuccessful. Very seldom do people we love and honor avoid this or that moral infirmity during earthly life. To err is human.

Granny returned to a grace-filled church life shortly before her repose. She had never given up the faith, but like the majority of her generation she had lost her connection with the Church and its sacraments during the terrifying



Our grandmother, Lyubov Vasilievna, after the war. decades permeated with the spirit of disbelief. She never denied Christ, but neither did she attempt to introduce her grandchildren to the faith except for our brief visits on Pascha. Only one other time did Granny dare to take me to church, and that story I have already told.

However, once she returned to church, our grandmother would sometimes share her impressions of the Divine Liturgy with us. "I've been to church today and received Holy Communion. How good and glad at heart I feel!" she would say with an embarrassed smile, as if to impart the joy that had set her soul aflame towards the end of her life. None of us boys attended to her words; we simply didn't hear them, and our hearts were as if hermetically sealed. I remember my own frowning resentment when Granny said such things, her eyes shining with an inner happiness that we could not comprehend.

But finally the end came. The adults tried to guard us teenagers from the tragic news: we only knew that grandmother had been taken to the hospital. A week later they told us that she wanted to see us. I remember our awkward silence as we entered the ward, but when she greeted us with the miraculous smile that always lit up her thin pain-worn face at the sight of her grandsons, our seeming indifference was wiped away. We again felt ourselves her loving and beloved children. As I learned later, one of the nurses told mother that she had never seen such a patient. Granny was reluctant to bother the staff with her requests and thanked the nurses for even their small routine duties.

Granny was so thin that it seemed only her eyes were still there, but what an abundance of life poured out through them! These were not the eyes of a sick elderly woman but of a celestial being who knew neither fear nor death. Their light flowed into our frightened young souls, illumining paths of earthly life yet unknown as she said quite clearly: "My children, I want you to become good people."

We wept; then Granny kissed us and we left. That was thirty years ago, but her behest, as short as it was, still binds me with a golden cord of love that cannot be broken. No force can overthrow hope brought into being by such love.

Her Repose

The news of granny's repose found us, her grandsons, in front of the television set. The World Cup Soccer game engulfed me so passionately that not even the awful news of my beloved grandmother's death could drag me out of my schoolboy captivity. Certainly, my immature soul was focused on itself and its own feelings, but I was also unprepared to come face to face with the emptiness of loss.

When the match ended and the television was shut off, along with the high emotions of the victors, this new reality seized all three of us. The door

of eternity, formerly an impenetrable wall, was suddenly and unavoidably thrust open. I withdrew to my room and fell face down on the bed, as if to drown my sorrow in forgetfulness and sleep.

But there was no sleep. Blood thumped in my temples, my heart beat as after a long, fast walk, and my mind worked frantically: “What is this? What has happened? Perhaps there has been a mistake and none of this is real.” But my soul sensed the mysterious holiness of granny’s passing and brushed aside such easy answers.

Never before had we boys experienced real grief. Life had caressed us like waves rolling over our feet at the seashore. Certainly, troubles and misfortunes had occurred and we had known physical pain, but our loving adults had always brushed away these trials with their wise words and soothing smiles.

That was my first night without sleep. Of course, one cannot put down on paper everything that crowds a fifteen-year-old school-boy’s mind and heart, but as I watched the day dawn and cried out the remnants of my hardness of heart towards my grandmother, she



Granny in her last years.

somehow seemed closer and even more my own: “I don’t believe she no longer lives because this love I have for her cannot be poured into nonexistence. I feel her love uniting us and this means that granny hasn’t died. If she’s not here, she is somewhere.”

That night spent in wrestling with such thoughts changed my life – not through logic but out of love for this infinitely dear person. Although imprisoned in my physical senses like a chick in its shell, my rational self pecked its way from the visible world into an altogether unfamiliar spiritual realm. Granny had once failed to draw me over the threshold of the church, but now

with her own soul entering eternity, she was leading me to faith. A period of searching lay ahead, but it was lit with hope.

The Search

Granny's passing brought about a radical change in the hearts of her grandsons and acted as a catalyst in our search for the meaning of life. I often tried to recall her features, especially her thoughtful eyes, and when no one was around I would take out the big wooden box of family photos and examine them intently, as if here I could meet her loving gaze. It was then that I understood the carelessness with which we children had accepted her care and attention, and how many times we had distressed her with our whims and feuds. Dear Granny! How mildly she punished us, always trusting our sincere promises to be good, her noble demeanor shining against the background of our childish transgressions.

It was this acute longing to restore our communication that made me compose my first poems. As an undergraduate in the Philological Faculty of Moscow State University, I was intrigued by the idea that art could influence and transfigure the world, and it was then that I first wrote the word "God" in an awkward yet sincere attempt



Our great-grandmother, Alexandra Mikhailovna Glebova-Servei, with her daughters, Elizabeth, Lyubov, and Marianna.

to touch the otherworld through poetic imagery. None of these poems survive, but I still remember the spiritual excitement they were born out of.

It was at this time that I found (in a wooden box that I had never dared open when granny was alive) a pre-revolutionary copy of the Gospels, its pages yellowed with age. The book had belonged to my great-grandmother,

Alexandra Mikhailovna Servei (née Glebova), a goddaughter of Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin.

I also found the two small tin crosses with pink and blue ribbons that I mentioned earlier – indisputable proof of my brother’s and my baptism at the age of three in a church outside of Moscow. It came as a revelation, and with the crosses were two locks of fair hair that had been cut off by the priest and carefully saved by granny. They had a subtle sweet fragrance of the past, and of the innocent and childish souls that had become vessels of Christ’s grace.

But the most important item in the box was an icon of the Saviour holding the Bread and Chalice in his hands: Christ establishing the New Covenant with sinful humanity. The Lord’s face, gentle and bright, gazed back at me with meek majesty, as only God can look into the eyes of His creatures. This icon is now in the altar of the Church of All Saints in the Krasnoye Selo district of Moscow, and I look at it every time I approach the altar with “fear and trembling” to serve Holy Communion.

At the bottom of the box was a portrait of my great-grandmother Alexandra Mikhailovna in a long old-fashioned dress. Her face is thin and worn by life’s trials, and her deep prophetic eyes speak of those early decades: joy at the birth of three daughters, including my Granny Lyubov, and sorrow for the untimely death of the youngest, Marianna. It was Marianna’s repose that turned Alexandra Mikhailovna towards the faith which became her light and mainstay.

I can also read in her eyes the tragic devastation of the Russian land under a yoke much worse than that of the Tatars, Poles, French and Germans all together. Through the years of hardship, I see her, as if in a mirror, enfolding her three daughters and three granddaughters in her embrace, sealing this tiny women’s union with her courage, prayer, and strict kindness. There is more in her eyes as well: love as strong as death for her church-wed husband, an officer in the tsar’s navy who himself plunged into the revolution until it crushed him physically and morally and then cast him aside. He was brought back to life by his God-given wife who forgave him everything and led him to faith, little by little restoring his hope in God’s mercy. I never saw my great-grandmother, but I feel quite sure that she guides me invisibly and is our family’s lodestar.

The Chalice

I was unable to restore the thread of communication that had connected granny and myself through keepsakes, photos, or by addressing her through the intense inner effort of poetry. That such communication exists was a certainty I felt with every fiber of my being, but there was nothing left to do but wait.

One morning, instead of attending a first-year lecture on the history of the Communist Party at Moscow State University, I had a sudden urge to

go to Obydensky Pereulok with its Church of Prophet Elijah, where I now willingly entered the door that granny had tried to bring me through so long before. Year after year, we grandsons had heard the church bells inviting us, but it was our hearts that were closed, not our ears.

Granny's repose had opened the other world to me, and now my heart craved for more. It was a weekday morning and, not understanding anything about the service, I watched three elderly women singing



Church of St. Elijah the Prophet.

the Gospel beatitudes in sweet low voices: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy; blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

Here was what I had been searching for! As the words sank in, my mind and heart began to open. As if a son, many years separated from his father, suddenly glimpses the beloved face and runs to greet him, I forgot the outer world and became oblivious to the priest, the people, and the icons. Nor did I need to understand the service because my heart was now captive to a kingdom of peace, truth and love.

I have no idea how much time passed, but when I became conscious of my surroundings, the priest, with a chalice in his hands, was saying something

in Church Slavonic. Without taking in his words, I suddenly felt, or rather heard in the depths of my heart, “This is for you; this is yours.” Of course, I did not know *what* was in the chalice or why it had been brought out, but my soul was drawn to the gilded silver vessel as if I could not live without it. Seeing other people cross their arms over their chest I did the same and slowly approached the priest. He raised his eyes to look at me and asked: “My dear, have you been to confession?” I thank the Lord for having put such kind words into his mouth, words that were in tune with the feeling that had settled in my heart.

– “No, I haven’t. And what is it?”

– “Please stay after the service, I will hear your confession.”

I stepped away from the chalice without receiving Holy Communion. I was not at all hurt by the priest’s words, but without knowing why I left the church and set out for the university. There were tears on my face, yet as I walked, I felt lighter and lighter, as if something oppressive that had accumulated for years was now leaving my soul. When I entered the metro, I was again confronted with the commotion of earthly life, but my heart was warm and free and I had an indescribable feeling of joy.

Even in the Soviet era, a seventeen-year-old philology student was not so naïve as to be ignorant of the word “confession,” but on that day I was not quite prepared to open my conscience and reveal the sins that had stung my heart since childhood. A few more months were needed to take this step towards Christ, but God’s grace was already at work.

Unburdened

As you remember, the old parish priest had invited me to confession, but I did not go at once. Instead, I kept turning the subject over in my mind, and as I understood later, changes were going on in my soul that I was hardly aware of.

One day, not long after the priest offered to confess me, I went to the university library on Mokhovaya Street to order the philological texts I needed for my assignments.¹¹ Ready for a studious afternoon, I settled down with my

¹¹ Most institutional and university libraries in Russia follow the European system of not having open stacks, but of ordering titles from a librarian at each visit, to be read in the reading room of the library. Only a few general items, such as textbooks, can be checked out.



University library on Mokhovaya Street.

books at one of the wooden library tables, when my attention was drawn to a small volume with the strange title: *Blessed Theodora's Journey Through the Aerial Toll-Houses*.¹² I opened it and, leafing through the pages, I saw that it dealt with human sin and God's righteous judgment after death. University librarians are quite precise in filling book orders, and as religious texts were all but impossible to obtain, no one knew how the book came to be on the table.

Setting aside my volumes of philology, I began making notes of the book's contents, my cheeks flushed with excitement. These pages, I felt, related directly to me. Only the sound of the final bell signaling the library's closing tore me away from copying the sins that were listed according to the major passions and inclinations. The roof of the university library seemed to have opened wide as my guardian angel watched over my attempt to prepare myself for my first confession.

¹² *Blessed Theodora's Journey Through the Aerial Toll-Houses*: A text found in the hagiography of St. Basil the New, in which his reposed spiritual daughter Theodora appears in a vision and tells of her journey after death through a series of twenty toll houses, each representing a major vice and populated by demons who weigh the soul's unrepented sins and weaknesses in an attempt to drag it down to hell. Angels are also present to help the soul, as they did Blessed Theodora. The examination of the soul after death is a standard patristic theme in Orthodoxy, but its exact form is a mystery.

How hard it was to walk towards the church the following morning with an uninvited dialogue playing itself out in my mind.

- “Where are you going, Artemy? Think of how the priest will receive you, and what he will say as soon as you begin confessing such awful sins.”
- “No, go without doubt (another voice objected). You are not the first nor the last who comes to confess the sins committed from childhood, calling every misdeed by its proper name.”
- “Alright, but put it off until a better time. You have lived without confession for so long, and now here you are in a senseless hurry.”
- “Now or never! Delay can be tantamount to death. Remember, ‘a fault confessed is half redressed.’”

With this ongoing struggle, I entered the church and approached the peaceful spot in the right aisle that I remembered from my first visit. This time there was another priest (Fr. Peter, as I found out later) hearing confessions near the window. Two other parishioners were waiting near the icon of the Mother of God and I joined them, desperately wishing to flee as my turn drew near, although at the same time I wanted it with all my heart.

The passing minutes seemed like eternity. At last the priest made a sign for me to come. He gave me an attentive look from under his thick horn-rimmed glasses. To my surprise, as soon as I took my place by his side, fixing my gaze on the cross and the Gospel, the contradictory voices that had driven me to exhaustion quieted down, and I felt a warm wind at my back as I ascended the solea.

“What is your name? Artyomushka? Don’t be embarrassed, just say whatever burdens your soul...” How true it is that a priest’s first words to a newcomer who has timidly stepped over the church threshold cannot be underestimated. A kind word inspires and encourages the soul to open itself without fear, but a harsh word can result in a forty-year-long journey through the wilderness of the world. A frightened soul may never again draw near.

Batiushka’s encouraging look and his words allowed me to pour out the sins that had burdened my heart. The priest listened patiently, nodding his head and repeating contritely: “May God forgive you, child...” Having emptied the store of my conscience I finally dared to look at him, in that moment the judge and arbiter of my miserable fate:

- “Is this all?” he asked.

– “Yes, this is all,” I replied.

– “Now I’m going to read a prayer of absolution over you.”

I went down on my knees as he covered me with his epitrachelion. He held my head in his hands, reading the prayer aloud in a voice that filled the whole church: ‘May Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, forgive you, my child, all of your transgressions known and unknown, committed in word, deed or thought. And I, the unworthy priest Peter, through the power given me by Him, forgive and absolve you of all your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’”

My dear friends, even now I find it difficult to convey what happened to me as the prayer of absolution was read. I became as light as a feather, and not only was my soul cleansed, but my entire body. All of its particles and joints, muscles and bones, wordlessly began to give glory to God. I kissed the cross and the Gospel, batiushka blessed me, and overwhelmed with feelings, I walked out into the fresh air of the churchyard, where an unforgettably bright world opened to me!

Everything was new; even the sun seemed different as its beams poured down from above the dome with its golden cross. Birds sang among the unfolding leaves of the poplars and the street puddles reflected small high clouds. The immense, unfathomable blue of the sky seemed as if it could almost be touched, so close was my newly-born faith to the mystery of creation.

With this ends the memories of my childhood and youth. Ahead are the student years at university, my work as a teacher, and the priesthood. ✦



Side altar. Church of Prophet Elijah, Moscow.