Barely a Breath

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Translated by Iosif M. Gershteyn

A freshly cut cross stands in the country graveyard. It is of sturdy oak, heavy, yet smooth.

Cold wind rings far through the unobstructed distance of gray April days' bare trees—ringing as a porcelain wreath in the breeze —carried to the foot of the memorial cross.

Inlaid in that very cross is a porcelain plate with a portrait of a schoolgirl, a girl with joyful and piercingly vivacious eyes.

This is Olya Mesherskaya.

Among a sea of uniform brown schoolgirl dresses she was unremarkable, one among the number of fortunate, joyous schoolgirls; yet with a touch of daring and insouciance toward the admonishments of her schoolmistress. At fourteen she bloomed, developing daily; slender legs extending from her tight narrow waist, breasts filling out—forming the contours of the entrancing feminine shape that human language has never captured. By fifteen she blossomed as a fully formed beauty. Her friends dedicated themselves valiantly to attaining grace in movement, perfection in comportment, proper coiffing of their hair—yet she, herself, knew no fear! Not ink stains on her blouses, not a rose blush on her cheeks, her hair in disarray—not even knees scraped bare from tripping whilst running gave her bother. Without any effort or worry, she was given that which made her stand out so ardently in those last two years of grade school, stand out from the rest of the school—her vibrance, style, grace, the clear shine of her eyes…. No one danced at the balls like Olya Mesherskaya, no one could skate like her, and no one was more assiduously courted at these same balls. And for some reason, no one loved her more than the pupils of the lower grades. Imperceptibly, she became a young lady, and her schoolhouse fame was now a given. Rumors started circulating that she was airy, and couldn't live without the attention of suitors; that one boy, Shenshin, was desperately in love with her, and she might love him too, but her fickle attitude towards the lad drove him to attempt suicide.

They said in the gymnasium that, during her final winter, Olya Mesherskaya went completely mad with gaiety. It was a snow-filled winter with early sunsets beyond the heights of the fir-groves visible from the gymnasium's quad: unending serenity and luciferous rays, promising a tomorrow filled with frost and sun, walks along Soborniy street, ice-skating in the city park, rose-colored evenings, music, and the crowd of people slipping away in every direction atop the ice, among whom Olya Mesherskaya appeared to be the most carefree, most joyous. On mid-day break, while being chased by blissfully squealing first graders, her whirlwind run through the great hall was disturbed by an unexpected call to visit the headmistress. She interrupted her sprint, allowed herself one deep sigh, and with a quick, practiced, womanly movement, fixed her hair and jerked the edges of her apron towards her shoulders. With beaming eyes she ran up the stairs. The headmistress, though graying, had retained remnants of her youth. Calmly, she sat with her knitting in her hands behind a writing-desk, a portrait of the Tsar above her.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle Mesherskaya," she said in French, not raising her eyes from her knitting. "Unfortunately, this is not the first time I must summon you in regard to your behavior."

"I'm listening, Madam," replied Mesherskaya, walking toward the writing-desk. Watching the headmistress with expressionless, yet clear and seeing, eyes, she sat down in a manner so light and gracious only she alone knew how to do.

"You shall listen poorly, I am, alas, convinced of that," said the headmistress whilst pulling on a thread and sending the ball of yarn on the lacquered floor spinning, which Mesherskaya contemplated with curiosity before lifting her gaze. "I shall not repeat myself. I shall not go on unnecessarily."

Mesherskaya liked this unusually clean and large office-room, so airy on frosty days with the warmth of the brilliant tile stove and

the freshness/scent of the lilies-of-the-valley upon the writing-desk. She looked up at the young Tsar, painted in his full height in some shimmering hall, and then focused on the careful part down the center of the headmistress's milky hair. She waited silently.

"You are no longer a girl," said the headmistress meaningfully, secretly beginning to get annoyed.

"Yes, Madam," answered Mesherskaya forthrightly, almost happily.

"But you are not yet a woman," the headmistress intoned even more meaningfully, and her unperturbed face started to blush. "First off, what is this with your hair-do? It is a full-grown woman's style!"

"It's not my fault, madam, that I have good hair," answered Mesherskaya, and lightly touched her beautiful, neat hair with the tips of her fingers.

"Ah, so it's not your fault!" said the headmistress. "The hair-do isn't your fault, the expensive combs aren't your fault, it's not your fault that you are bankrupting your parents with your shoes worth twenty rubles! I will repeat myself, you completely lose sight of the fact that you are still a schoolgirl…"

At this Mesherskaya, without losing her forthrightness and composure, politely interrupted the headmistress:

"Excuse me, Madam, you are mistaken: I am a woman, and do you know who is at fault? The friend and neighbor of my father, your brother, Alexei Mikhailovich Malyutin. It happened last summer in the country…"

A month after this conversation took place, a Cossak officer, ugly and of a plebeian visage, having nothing to do with the circles in which Olya Meshercheva moved, shot her on the platform of the railway station, among a great crowd of people arriving in the train-cars. Olya Mesherskaya's unlikely confession, which transfixed the headmistress, was then proven true: the officer stated to the court prosecutor that Mesherskaya seduced him and they became intimate; that she swore to become his wife, and on that day at the railway station, the day of the murder, when she was seeing him off to Novocherkassk, she unexpectedly told him that she didn't think she would ever love him, and that all talk of marriage was but a cruel trick she played on him. Then she let him read the page of her diary where she wrote of Malyutin.

"I read those words and instantly shot her, on the platform where she was walking and waiting for me to finish reading," said the officer "The diary, here it is, take a look at what is written on July 10th of last year,"

In the diary the following was written: "Now it is the second hour after midnight. I fell asleep soundly, yet awoke instantly… I have just become a woman! Papa, Mama, and Tolya have all left to go to the city, and I stayed behind alone. I was so happy that I was alone! In the morning I walked in the garden, the field, went to the forest, and I felt as if I was alone in the whole wide world, and I thought; 'how grand!', how in my life, it has never ever been so. Later, I had lunch alone, and after I played piano for an entire hour, under the spell of the music I felt as if I would go on living forever, and be so happy, as no one has been before. Then I fell asleep in papa's office, and at four o'clock I was awakened by Katya, who told me that Alexey Mikhailovich had arrived. I was so happy to see him, it was so nice to take him in and entertain him. He arrived with a pair of his horses, very beautiful ones, and they spent the entire time at the doorstep. He stayed, since it had started raining, and he wanted to wait for it to dry up a bit—toward evening. He regretted that he had missed seeing papa, yet was very lively and acted like a young courtier, joking that he had long been in love with me. When we walked in the garden before tea the weather was lovely. Sun shone throughout the whole wet garden though it was very chilly. He led me by the arm and told me that he was Faust and I was Margarita. He is fifty six years old, yet he is still very handsome and always well-dressed. I didn't like that he arrived wearing only a Krylatka[1] smelling of English perfume. His eyes are youthful, black, and his beard is gracefully parted into two long sections, both completely silver. During tea we sat in the glass veranda. I felt unwell and lay down on the ottoman, he smoked his pipe and then sat next to me, and again started speaking pleasantries, and then looked closely at me and kissed my hand. I covered my face with a silk scarf, and he kissed me upon the lips several times through the scarf… I don't remember how it happened, I lost my mind, I never thought that I was like this! Now I have but one escape. I feel such great disgust for him that I cannot survive it!"

During these April days, the town had been washed clean and the dry stones whitened, and it was easy and comfortable to walk upon them. Every Sunday, along Sborniy Street which leads to the exit from the town, after lunch a small woman dresses herself in mourning, black calfskin gloves, and an umbrella made of black wood. She crosses the highway and the dirty square, where there are many smoke-blackened forges, and the fresh air blows in from the fields; and further away, between the monastery and the wooden fence, the luminous white clouds tilt meeting the gray spring field. After crossing through the puddles under the monastery walls, she turns left to find a somewhat large low garden, encircled by a white fence. Above the entrance gate is a painting of the Assumption of the Holy Mother. The small woman crosses herself with small movements and walks down the main alley with a familiarity born of regularity. Upon arriving at the bench facing the oak cross, she sits in the wind and spring-time cold for an hour or two, until her feet are completely chilled through her light boots and hands in kid-skin gloves.

Listening to the happy birds, sweetly singing even in the cold, listening to the ringing of the wind in the porcelain wreath, she thinks sometimes that she would give up half her life if only that deathly porcelain wreath in front of her eyes didn't exist: the wreath, the mound of earth, the oak cross! How is it possible, that under all that, the girl painted on the bulging porcelain medallion upon the cross with her eyes shining and immortal, that that pure vision is now inexorably linked to the horrible tale and

the name Olya Meshercheva. Yet, in the depths of her soul, the little woman is happy, as are all people who are dedicated to a passionate dream inside.

This woman is the head governess of Olya Meshercheva's class. She is not young, and has long been living in a dream that takes the place of her real life. At first this dream was about her brother, a poor and undistinguished ensign—to whom, and whose future, she consigned her entire soul, and who, for some reason, she imagined to be brilliant. When he was killed at Mukden, she convinced herself that she should dedicate herself to another ideal. The death of Olya Meshercheva now captured her new focus of attention. Olya Meshercheva is now the subject of her constant ideation and emotions. She goes to her grave every holiday and stares for hours at the oak cross, recalling the pale face of Olga Meshercheva in her grave among the flowers and what she once overheard Olya say. Once, during the general recess, strolling through the gymnasium garden, Olya Meshercheva spoke quickly with her closest friend Subbotina, rapidly telling her, stately, tall, and confidant:

"I read in one of papa's books—he has many strange and entertaining books—I read what kind of beauty a woman should have…. There was so much you see, that it's impossible to memorize; well, of course, black eyes boiling with tree-sap, by God yes, that was how it was written: boiling sap! Eyelashes black as night, gently playing against rosy cheeks, a tight waist, and arms longer than expected—you see, longer than normal! A small foot, tastefully large breasts, properly rounded calves, knees the color of seashells, rounded shoulders—I memorized most of it, it's so true! Yet you know what is the most important? Gentle breathing!

And you know, that's what I have! Listen to how I breathe—isn't it true, barely a breath?"

Now that gentle breath has dissipated into the world again, into the cloudy sky, into the cold autumn wind.

Note

1. Mcfarlane, a type of coat.

Original: 1916, Ivan Bunin

Translation: 2022, Iosif M. Gershteyn