

11-11-1904

Wise Stark,



I have made my move, the one thing I should have dared to do back when I first spoke of love and the game began. She is waiting for me.

I trade this letter with your horse, for the cold is unforgiving and you've always had a better eye for beasts than me. And not just for beasts, you would probably say.

But this time, I cannot stay and listen to you. I will run to her, to Petersburg. I still lack the confidence to call it Piter like you do, esteemed professor.

We will find shelter in the inn where we celebrated your tenure at the University, but only for one night. Send your answer there, if you are ready to bet that the courier can outrun me on these icy roads. A last toast to the days gone by and then we'll be off to who knows where, like Hussars in the wind.

Do not follow me. Accept my thanks. I have no third request for you.

I would have loaded you still sleeping on my saddle, if I could.

I would have welcomed a last dose of your common sense as a farewell gift, if I could.

A wise man once told me that life is well ordered, like a jewellery case, but not all of us can find our place in it; the same man added that life likes to pit us against each other and laugh.

I carry the words of that man with me, since I cannot demand his company.

And I pray that he will keep close the love of a young brother that could not give up the game, like one does with a botched painting, hanging it over the mantelpiece when it has no place there but for the enthusiasm that was put into it. Though that brother knows he may be headed for a checkmate. There, I found my third request.

If you can honour it, and I know you will, then I welcome my exile from our beloved home, or even from the Empire. Bratishka's crazed compass will find its North one day.

But not today. Today I depart alone. To chase a woman whose tender shoulders have only known the weight of love's shadow. Away from a brother that could support the whole of Russia.

It really is true that anyone can become delirious, anyone that lives seriously at least.

I walk towards delirium on this same night.

Bratishka

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01 LETTERE NON D'AMORE LETTERS NOT ABOUT LOVE

11-19-1904

Merciful Starik,



I am not home. I am not in Petersburg. I am not with her, either.

It appears that Father frost was waiting for me out of the door, as early as a pedantic accountant, with a blizzard as a gift. I found shelter in what they insist is an inn, right in the empty middle of nowhere. The innkeeper says he will dispatch this letter tomorrow: we shall see if he can make promises better than his borscht.

I will get back on the road as soon as I stop feeling bad for your horse, come Hell or high weather.

In the meantime I wait, with a pile of old books which I can read and don't read, a balalaika which I can play and don't play, and the hosts to whom I can talk and don't talk. Instead I write to you, and not just because I have nothing better to do.

Suddenly, the idea of seeing her again fills me with worry.

Long have I thought that she needed only to feel the sweetness and the scent of love's flowers...

How can I imagine her weathering this very storm, and come out of it not maimed like the trees, but with her heart set to go even further?

I know, such a bleak disposition will do me no good. And these lamentations of mine will surely remind you of the little boy who loathed to be exiled to our uncle's dwelling for vacations, in Tver'.

Yes, seeing her again will be like getting the first glimpse of our home, at the end of summer.

It will set everything right.

Do not be too harsh with judgement, it doesn't suit you. Your students know it well, I better than anyone. I wish you well for your Revolution, so do the same with my own, which dares not begin with a capital letter. Perhaps we'll choose Paris or even Rome for our elopement, but I know that no matter how far I am, I will hear the echoes of history speak with Russian words. And every Russian will have my brother's face.

Once I arrive in Piter, when I finally get to an inn worthy of its name,  
I hope to find not one, but at least two missives from you.

I look to the bright side of this setback like one looks to the sugary bottom of a cup of bitter coffee.

Bratishka

11-18-1907

My brother,



I am in Piter. At the inn, the one I believed to be mine. Ours. Instead the host received me without joy and without consternation, as if I was a passenger and the room I asked for a railroad car.

Perhaps I complain too much, but I fell off the horse: I tried to force the storm's hand. Yet how can I call that a long shot, if I found your letters here, waiting for me? Did you have an angel deliver them? Forgive me, it's the fever talking. My leg is injured. Do not fear: your horse is well, the sabbones only came for me. Though I suspect he had more practice with injured beasts than men, seeing how little he could do for the pain.

Confined to this bed, I found myself on the verge of despair. I felt as if life had slammed the door to love shut on my fingers. I could no longer believe that history would break on my knee. All of my thoughts went to the tremendous delay I was accoring... for how many days would she wait for me at the station, before surrendering to the idea I wouldn't come and setting off without me?

Then, to tear me away from my deplorable delirium which surely hurt his business, the host gave me your letters. I asked for pen and paper to reply straight away. This is the only trace of me you will find here, because I will already be gone.

Yes, as always your words have given me strength. I will be faster than you, faster than her impatience, faster than pain and Hell itself if need be.

Do not let the tear stains on the paper fool you.

It's the fever - no, it's the city. Yes, my dear Starik, it's Piter.

Here I limp, my steps fall heavily. At home I was strong, while here I began to weep. I burst into tears not out of sentimentality, but the way windows weep in a room heated for the first time in many weeks. This pain is my life and I embrace it.

In the same way I thrust my arms around the neck of delirium. Gentle, it shows me the opening door and your face peering from the threshold. Frowning, as you speak to the host, yes. I see you and I write in a frenzy, for I must finish before you draw near.

I must depart. I must

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11-23-1904



Dear Startik,

I write as if I was still the doctor of your youth, when you and your brother ran to the closet to hide from my visits at your parents' house. Now those times feel as far away as the woods I see from my window, here in my home in Čudovo, but it is imperative I find the bluntness I had back then. The bluntness I could not demonstrate in the fittest after I visited your brother.

He fools himself if he thinks the pain is a necessary part of the body's self-preservation, like suffering is to the preservation of the soul. That leg needs prolonged rest and constant care. Not misplaced courage and morphine.

Your brother's health has always been a concern to me. I pride myself on being a conscientious, attentive physician, but I never could feel tranquil around the boy. It is no simple matter of constitution, and God knows how fragile he is, but also of that excessive generosity that forbids him to spare his efforts, consuming him more and more.

I remember his impatience when I prescribed him a few days of rest. Your mother used to tell me of how closely he watched you play, itching to join you. I curse myself for my inability to do better, not now, nor then.

Thus I turn to you, wiser and better suited to make him listen.

You must protect your brother: this is not a race against time, but against himself and I cannot in good conscience say that it can last for much longer. Keep him away from bad company, like that retired Ensign, a loafer who only cares about filling his purse with coin and can certainly harbour no good will towards an injured, lovesick man.

Your brother's life cannot be this absurd, this cruel.

Why risk death, and a painful one at that?

Be his keeper.

Your doctor

11-22-1904



Comrade Starik,

your missive in Cudovo left me speechless, I must admit. Yet, as per your instructions, I address my reply to Vysnij Volochik with the hope that it may reach you in time.

Yes, time. The greatest gift we have. The general we must never disobey. I cannot count the mornings in Peter when we made it the centre of our plans as we waited our harrowing meetings.

The time hasn't come yet, we said, the time will come, we hoped.

Well, the time has finally come. The People are ready, and History awaits.

Everything is ready, the only one missing is you. I wonder what you are doing in those places, where life looks like a painting. You belong here, not outside of time.

We need you, someone able to speak in public and convince those who are still on the fence. I understood little of the reasons behind your departure. I have little desire to understand more. There is only one imperative: be in the place you are meant to be. You are the flesh and blood of Peter. She is yours and you are hers. You cannot have doubts about this.

I wish you would come, as cutting as an "here I am!".

We must lead the way towards the redemption of this suffering humanity.

You have more than one brother to look after, you have many. They number in the millions, and contrary to your mother's other son, they do not kill themselves for love but are killed every day. I remember your brother, young, sceptical, with a cruelty born of his love of abstractions.

I have no compunctions about speaking freely, such is my worry. I know your good heart and I know that you would never give up, not for your sake, not for your well-being, not to save your life. But for a loved one, for a dear brother, some would even suppress their own sense of morality; and freedom, tranquillity, even conscience. Everything, everything would crumble to dust.

They would let their life be ruined to see their ward happy.

Remember all the years you waited for this moment to come. So think of me what you will, but hurry over here and make the blue eyes of Revolution shine with the cruelty they need.

One of your comrades, one of your brothers

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12-12-1904



Starik,

Though no good blood runs between us, my duty to my family has spread open the doors of my home before you, and now that same duty commands me to write this letter. With no pleasure, I assure you. Who could have known that living your life inside this or that train would make you grow so wild? Seeing the two of you was enough to comprehend my sister's - your mother's - suffering at your tomfoolery. Do not listen to me, but to the woman who brought you to life and raised you with love, now forced to ask the whole of Russia for news about her sons. Disprove, professor, what is said about man: that he can be wise, clever and sensible about all things concerning everyone but himself.

I trust that at your return, if there ever is one, you will be so thoughtful as to avoid knocking on my door again. Here in Tver' I lead a respectable, orderly life, a young daughter still prey of her naivete, and there is no place for despondent relatives used to spending their nights between benches and train seats. I know the value of family. For this reason I wear your contempt like a medal and return it in full.

Your uncle

My beloved children,

I know that time has stripped me of any right to your lives. The laughter of childhood has yet to leave your eyes and already you are different people, bathed in a different light.

I raised you and adored you, and a mother's love fears no deceit. Something is wrong and I can feel it, no matter how far away you are. You may laugh, but I know. There is no need to straighten your back, clear your throat and comfort your poor mother. I know every inflection, every fold of your souls. And mine as well, I always have, and the soul has its mysteries: though a lost man may have strayed from the righteous path, if you pit him against himself, against the qualities he appears to have forgotten, his whole self will be moved by the encounter.

Look inside yourselves, having you back is the only hope that guides me. If that were not the case, I would never have been bold enough to take up the pen and beg every friend and relative for news about your well-being, you know me. Come back. We shall never speak of this incident again. We will simply sit together before the boiling samovar. Me and my boys.

Mamushka

12-20-1904



Gracious Starik,

Perhaps you think I addressed this letter to the wrong brother, but surprise guides my hand. Surprise at learning that your steps follow mine, as if to hunt me.

I heard of your pursuit from a vile soldier in Gudovo, striving to enter my good graces through a treacherous missive after he failed to enter my bed during my stay. I know how much you care about Bratishka, he spoke of you many times and from him I understood the measure of your bond. Thus I imagine you to be as astonished as I was, turning this message in your hands, impatient to get to the heart of a letter delivered by a stranger (for me, a discreet friend) in Klen's station.

Well, what I have to say is simple: I am not your fearsome enemy, I am not the knife that will cut through your union. I could never, ever be. Because, although I once told him I prefer friendship and mountains over love, the truth is that nothing sounds as sweet as your brother's name as I drift to sleep. Even after I got it in my mind that he had given up on eloping with me.

Why not wait for you then? A woman, dear Starik, has no easy life in this world, nor in the world you revolutionaries plan to bring about. We are prey. Your brother hunts for me, going above and beyond himself as he does, and I shall welcome him. Who better than you knows his extraordinary capacity for love? He makes no difference between a book and a person, a sunset, a painting: everything he loves, he loves with the same heart.

So I flee and hope to be caught, and all the while I pick up the pace.

I know your brother would upturn Heaven and Earth to get to me. What about you? We are not adversaries, you and I, we are the two fires between which he must move. We are adverse allies. We are the only ones to have seen him for what he is.

We are the borders of a world where the last man lives. The last man to remember. The only one who can swear an oath and keep it as well. In spite of everything.

Even in spite of me. His love for me is great, but it is not joyous.

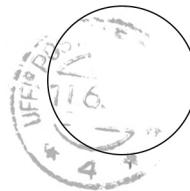
It is cumbersome, unfashionable, and dusty. It is wonderful.

Will you accompany him? Will I wait for him? Will we be able to go all the way?

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# ТЕЛЕГРАММА

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НОМЕР	КВАЛИФИКАЦИЯ	НАЗНАЧЕНИЯ	ИМЯ ОТПРАВИТЕЛЯ
7690		Saint Petersburg	Bratishka

*The time of love is over. The brothers of my brother suffer, the time has come to embrace them.*

*We return to a red dawn to redeem a damned bloody Sunday.*

*Night will stop biting and gobbling, like a Judas selling the sky again for a handful of treachery-spattered stars. Beauty only lives in the gravest of matters.*

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01 LETTERE NON D'AMORE LETTERS NOT ABOUT LOVE

"///"  
Neither letter nor dream arrive on command. You dream and you write not when you want to, but when it wants to: the letter, to be written; the dream, to appear before us.

Too many times I began to write the wrong letters to you, while the true ones never saw paper. And the stark certainty that you would never receive them was never any solace, because what else could have kept you away, if not the sudden realisation that the dream of eloping with me was false and wrong?

I thought you had thrown it away, waiting for a more authentic apparition. For weeks I told myself that life is a train station and soon I would depart... For where, I do not know.

Until a vile man wrote to me about you and sweet Starik on the way.

Winter thaws, everything is frozen but the soul, love is no longer banished. I feel it in the train's whistle, as it rocks the railroad and echoes in my bones. Standing in wait under the great clock of the station, here in Moscow, it would have consumed me, so I taught a gentle soul to recognise you to put this letter, the true letter, in your hands.

I live for the thought of our next stop, together.

Bratishka,

Let us meet at the border between you and me.

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