

Sergey Andreevsky  
The Book of Death

*Translation from the Russian and Introduction by Yanina Arnold*

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[Andreevsky's] most important work is *The Book of Death*, which was published only posthumously, abroad. It reveals him as a delicate and refined prose writer, a diligent and intelligent pupil of Lermontov, Turgenev, and Flaubert. The first part, written about 1891, is the most remarkable. It is the history of his first experiences of death. It contains passages of singular force and sustained beauty. Such is the wonderful chapter about his elder sister Masha, his morbid affection for her, her strange mental malady and early death. This chapter deserves a high place in Russian literature.

*D. S. Mirsky. A History of Russian Literature*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This translation comes from the fascinating memoir by the late imperial poet, writer, and critic Sergei Andreevsky (1847–1918). Andreevsky began to write his memoir, titled strikingly *The Book of Death*, in the 1890s, and continued to work on it almost until the end of his life. Perhaps because the composition of the book turned into a life-long affair, even the style of Andreevsky's memoir contains the imprint of time. At times, the memoir unfolds as a chronologically unified tale of the author's life experiences, while at other times it transforms into a loosely connected series of deeply personal diaries, seemingly random thoughts, impromptu

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<sup>1</sup> This translation is based on the following edition: Andreevsky, S. A. *Kniga o smerti*. Ed. I. I. Podolskaia. Moskva: Nauka, 2005.

passages, and brief essays about historical events, narrated in a highly fictionalizing manner. *The Book of Death* is undoubtedly the most significant of Andreevsky's literary accomplishments. However, unlike his other writings it did not get published till 1922, four years after Andreevsky's death. During his lifetime, Andreevsky's fame rested on other literary successes. Among his literary milieu he was known as a poet and exceptionally influential literary critic. His collection of literary essays — on Baratynsky, Dostoevsky, Garshin, Nekrasov, Lermontov, and Lev Tolstoy — was published under the title *Literary Sketches* [*Literaturnye ocherki*] in 1891. While these essays are almost forgotten today, many of them were an important literary event at the time of their publication. For instance, Dmitry Mirsky credited Andreevsky with reintroducing Russian readers to the poetry of Baratynsky, and argued that his essay on *The Brothers Karamazov* initiated a serious intellectual turn in the literary study of Dostoevsky's last novel.

Even though Andreevsky had the unshakable reputation as a literary critic, to the absolute majority of ordinary Russians he was known as one of the most eloquent lawyers of the time. Indeed, Andreevsky's defense speeches were consumed by contemporary readers on par with the best fiction of his time. After the legal reform of 1864, which introduced this new profession into Russia's legal life, the lawyer acquired an exceptional cultural significance as a public figure. From within the courtroom, the lawyer talked of such important things as social justice, tolerance, and mercy, previously the designated intellectual and moral realm of Russian literature. The literary masterpieces from the post-reform era carry the imprint of this fascination with lawyers as highly visible public figures. The "famous Saint-Petersburg lawyer" from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or the chatty Fetyukovich from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* are literary examples that immediately spring to mind. Andreevsky was one of the best lawyers of his time, known for the eloquent literariness of his defense speeches. Like many of his colleagues, Andreevsky became a lawyer after a politically motivated resignation: he refused to prosecute Vera Zaslulich during the 1878 trial without telling to the jury about the abuse of power that caused Zaslulich to point a gun at

the Governor-General of Saint-Petersburg. Andreevsky's first defenses turned him almost instantaneously into a celebrity. A telling detail about his success as an author of court speeches is the fact that his collected speeches titled *The Dramas of Life*, first published in 1891, subsequently underwent five editions. His fame as a court speaker was so great that it was rumored that his speeches were frequently plagiarized by provincial lawyers.

Although Andreevsky's memoir was not published until 1922, many of his fellow-writers, including Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius, heard selected chapters from it read by Andreevsky himself. They were also familiar with the author's original concept to write a memoir that would look at his life through the lens of death. What is especially remarkable about this memoir, in addition to its flirtatious attachment to morbid matters, is the manner in which the author relies on literary plots as a way of making sense and telling about the world around him. Andreevsky was known for relying on literary associations in order to gain a favorable verdict for his defendants, likening his murderers and murderesses to Dmitry Karamazov and Sonya Marmeladova, and the same tendency manifested itself in *The Book of Death*. The chapter offered here, one of the best known chapters from the memoir, tells the reader the story of Andreevsky's love for his older sister Masha and her subsequent death. The death of Masha is described from a pre-Freudian perspective, and his narrative is constructed around well known literary plots. His love affair emerges from the mists of romantic literature, which Andreevsky acknowledges, and his depiction of Masha's sickness and death emerges from a medley of the familiar plots by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, which goes unacknowledged. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky's *Zosima* clearly protrudes through Andreevsky's horror at the unsightliness and cruelty of death, which transformed his innocent Masha into a decaying corpse, while his depression and philosophical inquiry into death remind the reader of the relevant ruminations of Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. In addition to its exciting (if dark) content that intertwines love, sexual awakening, and death, this chapter offers a fascinating insight into the role of literature and literary scripts outside of Russia's politic-

al arena and within its most private space: the family and the spiritual and moral universe of one late imperial reader.

## Volume I, Part I, Chapter II<sup>2</sup>

My sister Masha was two years older than me. At the age of nine I was brought from the village back to my family. After a complete solitude I found myself in the company of three brothers and a sister. They all seemed interesting to me, strange, and at the same time somehow closely related. But I viewed them a little bit as an outsider. My sister Masha had her own room. It felt like she was entirely special. She had Kalmyk eyes, pitch-black hair, and unusually white, soft skin. Isolated from us, she was growing up in detached reverie. She loved mythology, and when she had a chance to join our games, she suggested playing “gods.” Covering her head with her warm wadded dressing gown, she ran from room to room, saying that she was “floating in a cloud”... We had to wait for her to choose which one of us she would descend upon. And when she would descend upon me and on a chair completely cover me with her dressing gown, in the darkness next to her I felt the uncontrollable beating of my heart.

At the age of fourteen I devoted myself fully to the reading of poetry; everywhere I encountered love as the most deep and powerful phenomenon of life. Woman was transformed into something inexpressibly attractive. When I studied history, I could not comprehend how there could be such cruelty against women: it seemed to me that all of them bore within themselves unexplainable beauty and happiness. In the books with which I was absorbed, love was always spoken of as something profound, deciding the fate of one’s entire life. I thought that I would be insignificant until I experienced love. But who will rouse love in me? Who will infuse my life with the sense of something sacred, deep and significant? Who will make me experience this great feeling?

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Adam Kolkman from the University of Michigan for his help with editing this chapter.

Recollecting those peculiar sensations which took over me in Masha's proximity, I decided that I had already, though unaware of it, loved her for a long time. This thought occurred to me suddenly one day, when after reading something I laid down onto my bed in the big room of the mezzanine, which was for us, the four boys, a study room and sleeping-quarters. In order to test myself, I decided to go downstairs and see Masha. I found her in the living room, with a book, clothed in a dark-blue quilted long dress. It was in winter. She did not notice me. I sat down and began to observe her. Her face was not interesting at that moment: she was absorbed by the book, and her features were elongated. She was completely grown up; from her looks one could easily take her for about twenty years of age. Her bust looked entirely woman-like. "And I love her", I repeated to myself, "and she does not know this!" And from that moment an absolutely special feeling for Masha finally took hold of me. I began to view myself as deeply suffering and misunderstood by everyone. My thoughts constantly returned to Masha. It felt strange to look at her and realize that she did not at all suspect what was happening to me. For some reason I enjoyed keeping away from her as much as possible. It seemed to me that someday she would at last realize how much I was filled with her, and without knowing it she would miss my presence more and more. Imitating Byron and Lermontov, I found a special happiness in this misunderstood, proud, withdrawn and bitter love. My behavior with Masha, though I did not notice, changed dramatically. I took pains to talk to others in her presence as if not paying any attention to her, and tried to utter funny, witty, and original things. I "flirted insidiously"; I sensed that I wanted to intrigue her, and I was achieving my goal. Masha laughed, took interest in my jokes and—I saw this—found pleasure in my company. Then I doubled the hours of my absence. Masha fell in love with my opinions, my power of observation. During walks and games she preferred my company to that of other brothers. As much as I could, I avoided being her companion, and in such a way that tormented myself and her. At the same time, every tender word that came from her was to me like gold. I started a diary (because only now my life appeared worthwhile

to me) and recorded in it every “mon cher,” that she used with me. She said “mon cher” to me far less frequently and completely differently than to other brothers, somehow quieter, as if furtively. I rejoiced that little by little she acquired a certain awkwardness in her behavior toward me, and the more I stayed away from her, the more I isolated myself so as not to somehow give away my “fatal” secret. I wanted her to fall in love with me and yet, at the same time, see how distant and unobtainable I was for her. A poem by Pushkin stuck in my head: “The less we love a woman / the easier 'tis to be liked by her...”<sup>3</sup> Lermontov’s cruelty toward women as a recipe for winning them over also encouraged my artificial coldness. My adoration grew with my contrived indifference. I dreamt about the impossible moment when Masha would suddenly hear my confession. And I reveled in the very impossibility of such a scene... I wrote poems in my diary. I recollect two painful lines:

Law, mutual attraction—everything revolted  
Against you being mine!

It was clear to me that this love was born under the insuperable hindrances of life.

Masha took English lessons from the only English woman in town, a small, red-faced old maid, with a parting in her hair and red curls, shaped like sausages, all around her head. Coming to the lesson, she glistened from perspiration and comically shook her curls. A thin golden chain with a watch-pendant adorned her chest. She tutored Masha for an hour in a separate room. Masha had some English books; she copied lines of English poems into a notebook. Her handwriting was fine, clean, elegant, and impeccably regular. She ran around with the folios of Byron and learned by heart his poems, “Farewell” and “A Tear” — her favorites. Very soon she mastered the language and lost herself in English literature. Her English teacher was not needed anymore. For some reason it was decided that Masha had to teach me English. In the evenings I came to her quiet quarters, consisting of two small rooms, a dressing room and a bedroom. There I recited my lessons to her, then started reading aloud, and she corrected me when

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<sup>3</sup> The lines from Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (chapter IV, stanza VII). I use Nabokov’s translation [note of the translator].

I could not pronounce some word. Our heads touched under the lamp; our hands lay close on the page when we together followed the lines. One evening, when her white hand, pressed into a fist, with thin blue veins and a black enamel ring, lay on the book just before my lips, I suddenly felt as if I had run out of breath and, hardly aware of myself, as in a dream, in an unperceivable instant my lips touched her hand; just as instantly and, most importantly, at the exact same second Masha, as I remember, very hotly and just as quickly kissed my hand. Between us nothing was said, not a single word, the lesson ended as usual without a break, and I suffered for the whole night and the following day over whether it happened or not. An unprecedented fire burned in me, and I kept concentrating my whole memory on that strange, dream-like moment. It seemed to me that now, more than ever before, it was necessary not to show that this could have happened. As if by a silent agreement, Masha carried herself in the same manner. During the next lessons, not a single word was said about what had happened. It seemed as if we agreed to prove to each other that it could not have happened. But the strangeness of our mutual feelings increased.

During spring and summer months of that year I was more than ever in love. In the words of Pushkin, the “power of unfledged passion”, was burning in me.<sup>4</sup> My imagination was pure and innocent. I was drawn to Masha because she was a kindred spirit, because she thought like me, because she knew my mind and my nature. We never broke silence about the main question.

In the evening, we, the kids, were brought a four-seat carriage, and were allowed to ride about the streets of town. Masha sat with three other brothers inside the carriage, and I climbed the coach-box: there I was further from the rest of the company and therefore appeared more interesting. From there, I turned from time to time to the rest of our company and declared something unexpected and original from my random thoughts, and then soon congealed in my solitude next to the coachman. The boulevards of cottonwoods flew by; the earth ran under the wheels: the bell towers of churches rose to the quiet evening sky at the different edges of

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<sup>4</sup> From “Egyptian Nights,” at the end of chapter III.

the town. I flirted and suffered ... and rejoiced. Upon our return, I saw that Masha returned to her rooms unwillingly and sadly.

Both Masha and I were religious. I had in my heart faith in the Christian God, whose Son had suffered on the cross and for whom the cathedrals were erected. I loved the Pontifical Service; I went to the mass as if for a conversation with heaven; the regal glitter of pontifical dress reminded me of God Almighty depicted in icons. From the very beginning I was truthful and trusting: I never understood the purpose of any deceit and therefore always believed. The cathedral on the mountain with the velvet throne of the bishop in the middle, and the bishop's house in the garden in the valley behind the mountain: all of this appeared to me marvelous, magical, divine. I happened to visit the bishop's garden together with Masha and one of our brothers. The sun was setting, and the bushes shone gold. Masha walked the paths, the sky above was dark blue... I memorized her every move, every turn, every word.

One evening she sat on the windowsill of the open window. She wore a pale yellow muslin dress with slitted Greek sleeves. A big open book of Byron lay on her lap. Her bare arms, covered with black wide bracelets made of jet which only recently started becoming fashionable, lay on the book. Light fluff set off the whiteness of these adolescent and graceful maiden arms. It was a quiet summer evening; the dust was hanging in the hot and golden air; weary and grayed cottonwoods were motionless. I don't remember ever seeing Masha more adorable before or after that evening. Her pitch-black hair, braided into two tight festoons reached below ears and connected at the back of her head with wide black bows. I was standing next to her with an absent-minded look on my face and was gazing mindlessly outside. And next to this beautiful and feminine creature I could feel my heart beating with unimaginable happiness...

The minutes spent with Masha at the window, as well as the moment when I kissed her hand during the English lesson, remained indelibly in my memory. From that distant time and for the remainder of my life I preserved a special fascination with the beauty of a female hand.



The summer was going by filled with those same indescribable feelings of joy and suffering. I admired Masha, and did not know what I desired for myself, but I knew that she would never hear my confession and that she was destined to be with somebody else. I did not know jealousy and bowed to my destiny. There was one thing; it seemed to me that nobody else would be able to experience my happiness because no one would discover in Masha those joys that I had discovered. It was a happy, indefinite, and dull sadness. The time passed in vague dreams. And truly, I barely recollect any distinct thoughts from those dreamy days. I remember, though, for instance, one Sunday morning. Masha had moved from one of her two rooms overlooking the yard to the green room in the corner of the house where she had a writing desk, a dressing table, and a bed behind a screen (her two rooms had been given to our mother who had just given a birth to the twins). I remember that Masha was leafing through a keepsake with female portraits from Walter Scott. She was dressed beautifully and looked cheerful and fresh, and I was saying something amusing to her about each of the portraits. Her room was bright, cheerful, and fragrant... The door was barely ajar. Warm wind blew softly through the window. Suddenly ear-splitting thunder came from the sunny skies. We closed the window, the air grew dark, and I left the room. And that morning remained for some reason in my memory. It felt so good to be next to the clever, fresh, and charming Masha.

Then there is also another memory. One day I was sitting alone on the small balcony of our mezzanine with a book, it was either Hoffmann's fairytales or Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*. My mind was idle; printed letters lay like a thin net in front of my eyes under the strong and relaxing light of a summer sun. I kept unconsciously pulling away from the book and looked either down, into the empty and dusty street, or at the sparse grating of our balcony with two nails sticking at its edges to scare off the birds. Another empty chair was standing next to my chair. There was nobody upstairs; the door to the rooms was open. For some reason, Masha came running to the balcony, either with a question or suggestion for me. I clearly see her wearing a gray dress made of light wool

with a low-cut bodice, covered by a pretty pelerine made of the same fabric, and with a narrow frill. The wind or her fast movement flung the pelerine open—I can not tell, but her shoulders or the upper part of the breasts suddenly were exposed; I remember a tiny pink spot on her milky white skin; I remember that she put my hands onto her shoulders, and I, out of breath, kissed her under the pelerine, into her hot neck, and heard the throbs of her heart...And it seems to me that that moment was even shorter, even more dream-like than the one when my lips touched her hand. But my memory stubbornly insists that all this undoubtedly happened. I was my last “delirious” kiss.

These unintended, though intense, feelings started gradually transforming into something excessively hopeless and wearisome. By the fall Masha grew into adulthood completely. Next “season” she had to enter society. Our mother, loving her only daughter dearly, resolved to make her absolute perfection. Masha was clever, educated, and was brought up loving order; in her beautiful handwriting, she kept an account of the household expenses in ruled notebooks. She was neat, orderly, gracious, ideal; books enriched her imagination; she was prepared to become a charming “wife.” More and more she took on a look of a young woman, and gradually my adolescent heart began to view her as one of the adults. In winter she participated in amateur-plays, pageants, acquainted herself with the suitors from the best society of the province at that time, and people began to talk about her interest in a certain middle-aged gentleman from among those wealthy and respectable landowners, whose style was reminiscent of that of English lords. Another young gentleman from a respected family, with which our household had a longstanding friendly relationship, took an interest in her. And with an indistinct weariness I began to “submit to my destiny.” Besides, Masha began to look different, not worse, but she spoiled herself by beginning to take excessive care of her appearance. Her previously simple hairdo was replaced by complicated curls on the forehead. Masha began to groom her hands a lot, and for that reason, when there weren’t any guests, went about in gloves. She resorted to face powder and lipstick. And despite this, I saw that Masha, while maturing into

a grown woman, was losing her previous loveliness. My passion for Masha, constantly suppressed through the painful alienation from her, now began to leave a bitter residue in my heart. Now it began to be easy to estrange myself from Masha, and our relationship began to take on the features of a quarrel, unexplainable to others. We stopped talking with each other completely. And once, during one midday meal, when it became known to father and mother that Masha and I had not exchanged a single word for two months, father smiled, thinking it, of course, to be a trifle. But most importantly, neither I nor Masha were embarrassed: we both felt that there wasn't any abruptness, suffering, or awkwardness in our breakup, and that everything happened naturally, by itself. The entire winter passed this way.

During Lent an obvious opportunity presented itself to break this forced silence. We fasted. Before the confession I had to come up to Masha and ask her for forgiveness. It was a bright evening in March. I approached Masha calmly, with an awareness of my duty. She was at that moment in the hall, dressed in a light chintz blouse with a train. She met me as I walked in. I crossed in her path, found myself face to face with her, and muttered quietly: "Forgive me, Masha"... She pressed a sisterly kiss onto my lips and said plainly and kind-heartedly: "God will forgive." My heart skipped a beat; this was the first and the last kiss on the lips. I breathed in the scent of the powder from her face, and I felt the warmth of this still tender kiss. A friendly and gentle relationship with a touch of a cherished and inexpressible feeling established itself between us, a feeling which was reminiscent of joy after recovery from a mutual disease. There was tenderness in it, and magnanimity, and mutual politeness, without discord and agitation.

In June my brothers fell sick from whooping cough. I had it at an earlier age, when I still lived in the village, and I alone was spared. Masha was the last one to get sick. At her age (she turned seventeen in the middle of the summer) it could be a difficult and dangerous disease. The weather was very hot. The doctor ordered the sick to be in the open air as much as possible. Almost the whole day Masha sat on the porch, overlooking the yard, or, dur-

ing the hottest part of the day—on the bench somewhere in the garden. Her neck was always wrapped in a linen kerchief; her wailing cough occurred in ear-splitting bouts. She did not dress up and did not change her gray chintz blouse. In the evenings, still with the same kerchief around her neck and a black shawl over her shoulders, she would go out for a carriage ride with someone, usually with mother. Her face was swollen and yellow; her unusually apathetic eyes did not change their expression: the appearance of a sick boredom did not leave them. She scarcely spoke and during the day often slept in various corners of the house, with an expression of extreme boredom on her swollen face, with tightly closed eyes and drawn out lips. Upon awakening, she did not look refreshed and wandered lazily from one place to another, as if estranged from everyone. She always had with her some holy book: either a small prayer-book in a faded silk binding, or the Lives of the Saints, or (especially often) a book with the pictures and descriptions of all the miracle-working icons of the Holy Virgin: in the text of this book one would always come across pages divided into many squares, with all sorts of icons of the Holy Virgin printed in them, with the baby Jesus either on one arm or in the middle of the chest, with a cross in the background, with raised or folded arms, the images of the icons “Our Lady of the Three Hands” and “Our Lady of the Burning Bush” etc.<sup>5</sup> Hot yellow sun shone on these black prints of religious art; and an open book lay on the lap of slouching Masha. She either looked around apathetically, or lost herself in the book with monotonous tedium, without any thought shown in the features of her bloated face; or suddenly she would start coughing, her whole body convulsively shaking and tears welling up in her eyes, undergoing the whole bout with a meekness she had by now acquired, as if she was fated to be like this forever, and it would never be otherwise. Already four weeks passed, but her coughing bouts did not lighten up or shorten, as happened to the brothers during their recovery. However, there wasn’t any concern for Masha’s health: she was on her feet and went out for rides; the weather continued to

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<sup>5</sup> In Russian: “Troeruchitsa” and “Neopalimaya Kupina.” Note of the translator.

be summery, and the whooping cough, as is known, is cured by itself in the fresh air. But her state of mind left a displeasing and unusual impression. It felt as if there was something not easily remediable in this new Masha, who annoyingly persisted in being from now on unlike the former Masha. It seemed that it was possible to cough and have a yellow face, but one should not have been so silent, and one should not have this expression, which seemed to forbid associating with Masha in the usual way and allowed no hope of making her interested in any ordinary conversation or our everyday concerns. It seemed that it was easy for Masha to do, all the more so because she could move around, go out for walks, read the books, etc. And still it felt impossible.

Once upon returning from a carriage ride to the country, mother had a conversation with father, and—as I overheard—she paced behind the half-shut door, discussing something and arguing that “Masha is strange,” that likely she read too many books and lapsed into a gloomy state of mind. I took this disturbing conversation with a fair degree of indifference, although I thought that now it will be difficult to change Masha and that events had already taken their course.

The next day, when all of us had long since risen, the shutters in Masha’s bedroom were still unopened. It was already eleven o’clock. I ran around in the garden and in the yard, and finally went inside through the back door. Upon entering the house, I heard a commotion, and somebody told to me that “Masha has lost her mind and imagines herself to be the Holy Virgin, and now she’s scaring mother by announcing to her that she is not her daughter and that she is a Saint.” I saw worry in everyone’s face, but I didn’t understand anything, and didn’t believe these words. I looked in fear at the partially shut door to Masha’s dark green room. I put myself in her place and could not imagine her madness, and I was even more afraid of what was said about it. I did not dare to step over the threshold of her bedroom, convinced that something incomprehensible was happening, something that made my head spin and my legs give way under me. I thought that in that dark room with a partially shut door there surely was a supernatural force that took hold of Masha and did not allow

her to understand everything that we understood. I was afraid to fall under the spell of that same force because in my heart I felt that Masha and I were kindred spirits, and I could not concede that such an abyss had grown between us. It seemed to me that Masha could be reasoned with, despite the unnaturalness of her thoughts, but if it was impossible, then this was something mysterious and horrible. One of my brothers brought me to the door and said: "Listen". Masha's hurried voice was heard from there: you could distinguish some words, but it was impossible to understand them. I haven't yet heard such a combination of meaningless words before. "This is the intervention from on high," — I thought, — "This is God, this comes from Heaven, from the world not understandable to us." I imagined the miracle in all of its terrifying grandeur. Masha's madness, as it was called in our house, began from her hatred of our mother: she could not bear the sight of her and drove her away. Mother was in despair and did not dare to go into her room. I tried to somehow explain this hatred to myself; is it possible that the meek and kind Masha was getting even with mother for demanding perfection from her, blurring her mind with unachievable ideals, and clouding her imagination with religiosity and romanticism? I wanted to find some sensible explanation for this catastrophic change. I told myself that Masha could, for the time being, imagine herself the Mother of God, considering that all sorts of holy pictures of the Mother of God were constantly flashing before her eyes in the course of her disease. I thought that it would pass. From the sounds of Masha's speech reaching me I was able to distinguish one shrill exclamation: "Shudder-shudder, Vera-a." She repeated this absurd exclamation with a drawling ending, as if she especially liked it or as if it somehow expressed her thought well. And because "Vera" was our mother's name<sup>6</sup>, I tried to find some meaning in this incomprehensible whim of her language. I heard in it Masha's reproach to mother for her unachievable demands for perfection. However, this exclamation was repeated so randomly, and was often said in such a dull voice that my ears and my heart did not cease to suffer.

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<sup>6</sup> "In Russian, vera also means faith." Note of translator.

The doctor diagnosed fever. It was our family doctor, the inspector on the medical board, a smart and experienced Ukrainian, in a clean uniform, with the thin features of a pock-marked face, shaved lips, short-haired and with salt and pepper sideburns. He slouched slightly, had calm manners and a humorous smile (when he was in good spirits), this doctor knew each of us to the bone and seemed to me to be a mysteriously deep person. He always rode his narrow droshky with the raised top, pulled by a white horse, and wore a Pushkin-styled overcoat, with a cape and a velvet collar. From the very first day of Masha's sickness, the doctor's droshky with the white horse would stand in our yard, at the front door, two or three times during the day. The condition of the patient obviously became dangerous.

I remember the first three days especially well.

Masha talked ceaselessly. During the first evening, as in the morning, the same harried and uncontrollable speech was heard from the room. Now and again the exclamation "Shudder-shudder, Vera" was repeated, although in a more apathetic and weary voice. It felt as if that day drove me mad also. I could not eat my lunch, and others also ate at a different hour, reluctantly and not in the dining room, but in a different room, further away from Masha. At the usual hour I tried to go to bed, but I did not want to undress. I fell asleep for an hour or so and woke very quickly, and got up immediately. It was dark everywhere, everybody was asleep. I felt my way toward the stairs, went down and saw the dim light of a candle in the dining room which was adjoining Masha's room. Directing my steps toward this light and not hearing any sounds, I hoped that Masha had finally fallen silent, and that after sleep, she would recover tomorrow. Everything was quiet. I had already entered the dining room and nothing could be heard; I was almost ready to go back, to undress and fall asleep, when in this silence I heard clearly Masha's talking, still the same and not ceasing even for a moment. It was even more terrifying now when nobody was listening to it anymore. In a moment a loud exclamation resounded: "Shudder-shudder, Vera-a-a." A minute later another loud phrase escaped from this lonely and incredibly tiring whispering, one of the three or four favorite and

equally meaningless ones, which Masha screamed especially clearly. I was standing in front of a flickering candle, with a downcast head and with my heart growing cold. I did not dare to come up to the sick Masha, I did not know how to help her, and dreamed, as about an impossible happiness, that these painful sounds would sometime finally cease. Upon returning upstairs, I again laid down, without undressing, my body grew cold, and I thought about Masha intensely, and at times slipped into light, restless sleep.

Shortly before daybreak, I apparently fell asleep as deeply as all the rest. At least, my open eyes already made out the gray daylight, and all my brothers were already dressed. Because I was also dressed, I did not fall behind the others. All of us went downstairs.

My heart already had stopped hoping. A dull sense of grief settled in it. When walking downstairs I followed the brothers, their backs, heads, the sounds of their steps, the proximity of these healthy bodies gave me power; my head felt heavy, a sort of frozen agitation chilled my chest, but after the break, in the company of brothers, I was starting the day with the involuntary feeling of adaptation to what already had happened and what would happen next. We came to the dining room; the cups were on the table, in the usual places, for each of us at the right end of the table. We sat down. Masha's talking, still the same, continued to be heard from her bedroom...These sounds brought an already familiar chill into my heart. I noticed that the others also were upset about what I had known from last night, that is, that Masha's condition remained the same, and that the misery of yesterday had not changed in the least.

During the third day Masha finally fell silent. It was a warm and gloomy day; the sky was covered with gray clouds. For some reason everybody felt a little bit better. A medical "concilium" was scheduled for the evening. I heard this word for the first time and expected something extraordinary from this rite. In the afternoon our doctor brought one more doctor with him. Both of them entered Masha's room and asked her questions about something, but I couldn't hear her answers. And I rejoiced already for



a simple reason that Masha, thanks to God, did not intend to talk any longer. At dusk, under the candlelight, some device which looked like a coffee maker was brought to the dining room by the doctors. Regular water was boiled in it, and from it the white steam was coming out through a thin pipe. They said that Masha was to breathe in this steam. It seemed to me that it was extraordinarily important that precisely now Masha needed her incredibly tired chest soothed, and that this device, never seen by me before, had already been invented for such terrible cases long ago, and that, thanks to God, they finally thought to bring this device to us in order to lighten up our hopelessly exhausted hearts. And, I believe, that this was the first night of relatively peaceful sleep for all of us.

During the next few days (I do not remember for how many) a different trouble appeared. Although Masha fell silent, she did not regain consciousness. She did not eat anything; the cough returned, but not like the whooping cough, but different: with the fits shorter in length. The doctors found that she developed inflammation of the lung. We weren't allowed into her room from the very beginning of her disease. Regular life disappeared completely from our disorderly, silent, and gloomy house. The rooms were standing empty; the family did not gather together; everybody was hiding from each other. The involuntary center of all our thoughts became Masha's bedroom, with its perpetually shut, painted-brown door, behind which, on her bed, at the wall, lay Masha.

A warm fall arrived. The majority of the time I was walking the alleys of our deserted garden in order to tire myself out. It ended with a wooden fence at the bottom of the mountain, which adjoined a cemetery. The sun rose up from behind this mountain; on this mountain, or so I thought, was concealed the crossing into future life: there the dead were called up to God. I did not believe in Masha's death; I could not recall experiencing a single death. But it seemed to me as if Jesus Christ, with his long curly hair and his sad, deep, and loving eyes, was somewhere tremendously close to Masha and that the influence of His miraculous power touched our house. I thought that He alone knew what actually was hap-

pening at our house, but that He, in a way inconceivable to me, was pleased with what was happening, and that more and more He was getting a hold of Masha. And for some reason I was still very sad and frightened for Masha.

No one besides me visited the garden. The first dry leaves fell from the trees. The day light was quiet and thoughtful; dead branches crunched frequently under my feet. I continued to think about Masha and felt that my thought did not reach her and would never be able to reach her in mere words because she did not understand and did not want to know anything of our world.

Nevertheless, one day news came that Masha was significantly better and that we were allowed to enter her room. I waited until everybody else visited her, and, seeing their calm faces, finally at midday I entered Masha's room myself.

Upon crossing the threshold, I noticed our old nanny tying something to the body of the sick girl, under her robe. The blanket was thrown to the side; something pale flashed before my eyes... I halted and cast my eyes down...Masha moaned weakly and somehow mechanically. The nanny asked: "Alright now?" Masha said, "Alright," and I immediately felt tears well in my eyes from this simple and intelligent response. The nanny called me: "Come here, please." The room, which always remained behind closed shutters, was now lighted; the screen was almost completely moved from the bed and folded; the blanket, tucked in under the mattress, flatly and neatly covered Masha to her chest. At first glance her face did not seem to have changed much; but Masha looked upwards and did not turn to me. I sat down onto the bed, feeling the right to speak with Masha in my old way. When our eyes met, I saw in her eyes an emptiness I had never seen before, a glassy transparency, which stung my heart. I nevertheless began to speak in a calm and tender voice about something that gladdened me, that is, about her fast recovery, about how now she would begin to recover, and after her illness was over she would be pretty again and all of us would cheer up.

I was amazed that Masha had little interest in all this. True, she answered the questions logically, she did not say anything incom-

prehensible, but everything that I observed in her, and everything that I heard from her, seemed painfully strange. To my predictions about the prompt recovery she responded absentmindedly: "Yes, yes, I feel fine," and immediately said that she was going to marry and would have a church wedding soon. And because she spoke about this in connected sentences, I got confused and did not object. But my heart sank; I had to smile in a kindly way at her words, but did not know decidedly what to do, whether to agree with her or to say that this was news to me and that we didn't know anything about her upcoming wedding. But recalling that everybody found comfort in Masha's improvement, I also hesitantly took comfort in the fact that Masha began to talk, even about such things as this, i. e. that at least her fantasies had acquired a certain coherence and had stopped being expressed in a completely unintelligible collection of words. But it tormented me that Masha's soul and mind remained inaccessible to me. She constantly looked somewhere past me, and during her conversation her flat voice did not remind me of that lively expressiveness, which alone could have conveyed her live answers to my live questions... No! The earlier abyss remained. After the stories about the marriage and wedding, Masha fell silent for a while and then said indifferently: "Do you know? I will die, I know it ..." At this point the nanny interfered and began to soft-heartedly calm the sick. Of course, I said something cheerful to Masha also, with the same gentle smile, which was glued to my face like a grimace through the whole duration of the visit; but these horrifying and tranquil words killed my last hope for Masha's recovery. "She is now completely different and won't be back to her old self," my heart told me. I saw clearly that there was no reason for me to stay in the room. I said: "Well, Mashenka, you need rest after your sickness. I will leave. I am glad. You will get well." I got up from the bed and left. And Masha did not say anything to me as I was leaving.

The next day it was revealed that Masha's recovery was impossible. On the contrary, the doctors warned that Masha's condition had become extremely dangerous, and at that point everyone in the house began to talk openly about the possibility of Masha's

death. This death might occur any day, at any given time. All of us were overtaken by weariness, involuntary passivity, and fear, which did not disappear from our hearts even for a moment. Father almost did not leave his study. Mother was stricken by a fit of hysteria-induced madness: she could not talk; her lips were clamped together in a spasm, and it seemed that there was no force that could have unlocked her jaw. Her eyes looked fearful and inconsolable. She was not capable of staying in the house any longer and moved to the guesthouse, to the landlady, where she sat all day long in some room, quietly and helplessly. If she needed anything, she would write it on a piece of paper. Mostly these were inquiries about Masha's condition.

Two days passed in such a manner. We did not hope anymore, but only asked: "Nothing happened yet?" And we waited. I could not imagine for myself what might and must happen at the moment of Masha's death. I expected something extraordinary. I kept wondering about who would enter our house and how he would take Masha's soul from her body. Would an angel descend? Would Christ enter? Would we all feel this presence connecting us to the other world?

But Masha's room remained quiet. Only sometimes would the sound of a single cough or a faint moan reach us. The nanny sitting next to her would almost always say the same thing: "She is asleep."

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, on the Day of the Assumption of the Virgin, there was a service in one of the three big churches of our town. A bishop was performing the service. The morning was sunny. All of us boys went to the day service<sup>7</sup>. In the past we always would go to church during church holidays, and we went this time, especially because none of us had any other important business than to pray. A pleasant and truly festive bell ringing was heard from the direction of the church of the Assumption. We walked in the streets drying from the night rain. On the dark-blue morning sky there were occasional, ragged-looking, and cheerfully white clouds. We came up to the fence, behind which small groups of colorfully dressed common people were sitting on the

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian word *obednya* was used in the original text. Note of translator.

grass. The steps in front of the church were covered with praying people; the crowd thickened into a wall of people at the open door of the cathedral, gaping at us with its dark hole. As gentry children, we were allowed to get closer, but it was impossible to push our way through the crowd to the very front. And after we entered the church, we had to immediately turn to the left. We situated ourselves in front of the new and bright icon of the Baptism of Christ, hanging on one of the inside columns. We were standing next to each other, pressed against a cast-iron grating surrounding the base of the icon. We could not see the service itself; we only heard from a distance the words of the priest and the prayers sung by the choir. The dense mass of people unaware of our sorrow invoked in me a painful feeling of an inability to understand their healthy contentedness and tranquility. Only one thing remained: to stand surrounded by sultry air, to tolerate being surrounded by all these impossibly happy praying people, and to look at the icon of the Baptism in front of me. This icon burnt into my memory forever; I remember its golden frame, rounded on the top and decorated with grapes and grape leaves; I see the red oil-lamp on the black iron hook and, in front of the grating, the large silver candelabrum, with many thin wax candles burning around the thick wax core and covering the paper with the ornately cut edge underneath with cooled off wax drops. I listened to the crackling of the wicks, and watched how all these thin candles became entangled after bending toward each other, dripped in the skewed flames, and melted down; I inhaled this heat and gazed at the big icon. The brown legs of the Savior, submerged in blue water, were surrounded at the calves by a white rim of ripples. John the Baptist, his even darker body covered in a sheep skin, was standing next to the Savior, holding a long cross made of plain sticks. From the bright-blue sky, a white dove radiated wide beams of light upon the baptized. I was preoccupied with the single question: "What will come out of this whole thing for our poor Masha?"

When the day service was over, and we went into the fresh air, we felt a momentary relief, and then, cheerful and unconcerned, headed back home. It seemed that we were now ready to hear any

horrible news. However, upon returning home, we learned that nothing new had happened.

In the same way passed this and the next day, during which our communal forlornness and gloom increased because the doctors did not come to us any longer. On the morning of August 17<sup>th</sup>, Masha's room became strangely accessible to everyone. The news spread that Masha was departing. The house remained empty, as if everybody had run away from it. Nobody approached Masha's door, even though there weren't any prohibitions in effect any longer. It seemed that no amount of care would help or was needed by Masha anymore. And I went there, without any quivering, resigned to the general mood; I went to look in there, as I would have gone to any other empty place. The room indeed looked empty. The strong scent of musk poured over me; all the rugs were removed; the painted floor glistened; in the corner, on the shelf under the icon, an oil-lamp shined like a big star; the bed seemed empty, with sickly Masha lying in it exceptionally low and flat. Only the even, hoarse seething, as if coming from boiling water and not from a human chest, was heard from there. I approached. Masha's face was buried deep in the pillows, covered by a sheer kerchief, with a silver cross in the middle and a silver hem. This face appeared drained of blood, especially with its eyes closed and lips open still, from which this terrible, steady rattling came forth. I instinctively crossed myself and left. In the door I ran into nanny, who was returning to her vigil and did not say a single word to me.

During the day I involuntarily came up to Masha's door several times. At times I would arrive to a complete silence. Then the same steady, terrible, and lifeless rattling would resume. I already began to think that all of this would stretch out for Masha for a couple of days as had happened before with all of the other turns of her disease. And I thought suddenly that this was simply deep sleep, that this was precisely that "crisis," about which I had heard from the doctors and for which we had been waiting for so long, but apparently hopelessly and to no purpose.

All of us remained in a mess as before. The days already began to shorten at this time, and evening arrived earlier. I paced in the yard till it became completely dark. The first stars already began to

flicker in the dark and cloudless sky, when suddenly a frantic cry came from the gallery of the house that overlooked the yard: "Come! . . . Come! . . . She's passed away! . . ."

I came rushing into the rooms. In the darkness crying was heard everywhere. Something incredible was transpiring in my heart. The nanny was steeped in bitter tears, and everybody (because all of us suddenly gathered) echoed her words. Crying away, she spoke hurriedly: "Now... right this minute ... She happened to fall silent completely... I lighted the oil-lamp... Suddenly I hear: she raised herself ... I ... went quickly to her, and she!..." And again she gave out a loud cry and sobbed, so that she could not even finish her speech...

And I sobbed without restraint, with screams, moans, and squeals, without knowing for myself which sounds, words, exclamations could express whatever was happening to me. Any attempt to say a word expressing a thought would lapse into bellowing and intense screaming, which would leave me breathless and coughing, and the new torrents of bitter and unstoppable tears came pouring out of my eyes. In a few seconds my eyes became swollen. And remarkably, during the whole time of my frantic weeping I felt that Masha was looking through my closed and wet eyes directly into my soul, and although I did not hear her words, I did not doubt that she saw through the whole of me. I imagined her now light, airy, omnipresent, and all-seeing.

After I had cried until I was exhausted and my chest ached, I ran outside.

There was a bright half-moon in the clear sky, and a small star shone next to it. I knew that Masha had flown somewhere into the sky, and I was puzzled as to where she could have been at that moment. I understood that, like our thought, she could fill the whole visible world with her essence. Did she reach God at the end of her flight, or, according to a legend, was she is still lingering somewhere which is neither here nor there—next to her own body and in the air— did she fly to the moon while at the same time still remaining on earth—or did she suffer drudgery and delays leaving—or soar high into the sky?... I felt surrounded by a mystery that tormented me and made me delirious.

I ran out of the room again. There was a bustle in Masha's bedroom. The servants came running up there. It was said that Masha's body was being bathed there. I came up to the door and heard a dull sound as if a doll fell onto the floor. "Is it possible that she is being bathed on the floor? —I asked.—"Yes, on some hay." This horrified me, and I again ran back into the yard.

Our white guesthouse, with the small glass gallery and high green roof, was showing serenely and clearly against the moonlight. A lush pear tree towered over it with two curved boughs. Two white chimneys were visible against the dark foliage. In the sky, next to the half-moon, a brilliant little star was flickering even brighter. "Masha!?" —I repeated in my madness.

I kept on walking, stumbled against stones, inhaled fresh air, looked to the sides, but mainly at the sky, and repeated to myself in horror: "However, there in the house... What am I to think?.. What am I to do?.."

Reaching the front porch, I saw that the door was ajar, and in the hall candles were burning. I entered. The door from the hall to the drawing room was locked; in the corner across from the door several tables were moved next to each other, and a fresh tablecloth was being spread over them. One of the wall mirrors was already covered with a bed sheet, and the other was still being covered. When the table was covered with a cold and clean tablecloth with the distinctive lines along which it was previously folded, a big pillow, likewise in a glaringly clean pillowcase, was put at the head of the table. All the time I peered anxiously at the dark door of the hall, through which the "deceased" had to be brought. I knew that mother was already with Masha, that she had come running to the departed from the guesthouse, that her muteness disappeared immediately, and that now she was "dressing her daughter like a bride," as the kindhearted simple people among our servants said.

Finally some movement was heard in the hall, and mother, dressed in black, was the first to enter the living room. She immediately turned toward the door adjoining the hall, through which the procession was expected to come, and after leaning against the door-jamb and holding her head up with the hand, broke into sobs



and frequent moans. She covered her eyes with a kerchief in order not to see whatever was approaching. Women carried dead Masha. First from behind the door appeared her stretched little feet, laid closely to each other, dressed in white stockings and golden shoes. Then I saw the white dress and unfastened black hair. The deceased was turned with her head toward the windows and put carefully onto the table. She looked so light, pure, and prettily dressed! The ends of the pink ribbons in the waistband were falling over an absolutely new muslin dress, which was sewn for some ball and hadn't yet been worn even once. Mother, shedding ceaseless tears, screamed spontaneously her thoughts about dressing Masha in her best and untouched clothing of a bride... Meanwhile Masha's body was brought into a proper order. Her head in a black frame of smoothly combed hair sank deeper into the pillow. Two long locks of unfastened hair were slipped under her arms, which were then folded on her chest. The sides of the muslin dress were tidied up. Three dark church candles in silver candlesticks were brought in and set up around the table, two—at the head, and one—at the feet. Behind Masha's head was placed a small round table, covered with a white doily; on it, a small pile of holy books was laid out, and the golden icon of the Mother of God was leaned against this pile. On top of the books, behind her, was set a saucer with an oil-lamp. The even light of the flames was permeating in the living room. The shutters were shut. The clean tablecloths, the bed sheets on the mirror, the white wallpaper, white dress and yellow lights prevailed over this indescribably chilling picture, which now arose in my mind. I approached Masha and could not take my eyes off her. And however dreadful this event was, next to Masha, contrary to my expectations, I was experiencing an astonishingly simple, reconciling feeling. I did not want to leave her. Her features were marvelously calm. The skin of her face and hands was still warm. "How simple is this death, about which I kept thinking horrible things!", I was telling myself. "Is it even at all possible to doubt that Masha now lives somewhere?" I did not doubt this at all, and felt her soul touch me. I saw her for sure hovering nearby, in all corners of this room. I imagined seeing on the white wallpaper the fluttering of the mournful winged soul, circling above this pure and sad body.

I peered at Masha's forehead, and a profound thought seemed to linger above her straight eyebrows. At this moment the nanny entered the empty living room and put two copper kopecks onto Masha's eyes. These two dark circles on the beautiful sleeping face disturbed my dreaminess in a crude and oppressive way. The natural and reconciling expression of this still warm face immediately disappeared. The eyelashes, heavy with sleep, got covered; the kopecks looked like two dark and blind holes on the delicately pale face; it lost any likeness to life, and acquired an expression of a dull and helpless amazement at this brute violence... "Is it really needed?"—I asked. "Of course! Or the eyes will open. It can't be left like that." I got very scared, and I suffered from the thought that Masha can't object to anything, and that she no longer is allowed to or even needs to look at anything!... I tried not to notice these black, and, as it seemed to me, incredibly heavy spots on Masha's face. My eyes ran over her hands and the white dress. How still, dreadfully still, this familiar, painfully mysterious body suddenly became! Abundant tears burnt my face under the influence of these unbearable thoughts. "She was so kind", I was saying to myself, "And now she cannot answer this agony she caused with at least a hint at something joyful, something relieving. How hard it must be for her to handle this stony indifference! For what reason is this unbearable suffering sent to her and to us?!" I touched the white frill of her sleeve, adjusted it, it moved under my hand, and then its starched pleats, pressed down by my hand for a brief moment, would straighten out and move by themselves again. The pleats moved, but Masha's cool hand, with sad, distinctly visible dark hairs would remain motionless; the hand lay flat and indifferent above the pink waistband. And anew two copper circles looked at me in a hostile and ghastly way from her motionless head. Everybody left the room. The light of the candles seemed to become brighter and sadder. The sexton with the psalm-book entered and took a place at some distance, at the separate small table. He opened the book, lighted a thin wax candle, and cleared his throat in order to start reading. Once again I ran my eyes over the white table, white dress, the eyes pressed down by the coins, and went through the front porch and into the yard.

The moon had risen high into the sky, and now was shining so brightly that in its whitish halo the little star next to it started to look entirely dim. "Where is Masha now?" — I kept asking myself. And I kept imagining that with every minute she ascended still higher and higher, and with every new moment learned still more significant and important mysteries of the spiritual world. "Has she now reached God himself? Does she see his mysterious face? Or is she still held by angels, still afraid of the new life, and with sorrow in her heart, does she want to return in order to console us? Do the angels tempt her with free heavenly life, and does she agree to abandon us forever? . . ."

The ground in our yard turned completely white from the beams of the half-moon; the stillness of the light fall night was not disturbed by anything. And in this white light I kept seeing: the white dress of the deceased, white tablecloth, white wallpaper — that whole room abandoned by our family, in which Masha was lying, separated from anything living. Through the open door of the front entrance I went again into the room. The sexton read Slavonic prayers in his lethargic and sad bass voice. I was tormented by the vision that Masha had to listen to these prayers of the sexton, whom she had never seen before in her life, and that this sexton would stay with her in private for the whole night, with her, the beautiful and gentle girl, wearing her best ball dress! After stopping at the doorstep, I noticed that the whole table, and the deceased herself appeared still more white and lifeless than before. I saw that Masha was already covered by a clean cold sheet from the bottom edge of the table up to her arms. From under this sheet her feet pointed sharply up. I approached... The black coins sank even deeper into her closed eyelids. These coins, which replaced her eyes, it seemed to me, were astonished even more than the eyes themselves by everything what happened, and, I thought, they were especially astonished by the voice of this unfamiliar sexton... But what tortured me the most was the coldness of Masha's skin. I could never before imagine that the live skin could become as cold as, for example, a slate or a copper lock. "Now, — I thought, — the last remnants of the soul have disappeared..." I glanced at this strange, horrible spectacle once again, and I left

completely, allowing the sexton to torture the senseless Masha with the fatal sounds of Slavonic prayers. I do not remember where I went, and I don't remember where I spent the rest of the night.

The next morning my first thought was drawn to the living room where the terrible and mysterious Masha lay. My empty head did not know how to think about anything else; my heart froze in a single painful feeling of hopeless grief; my eyes looked around apathetically, but the cold fear of what had happened kept rising endlessly inside of my chest. I came to the door of the living room from the side of the hallway. Even from a distance the daylight seemed more merciless than the light of the candles. The octaves of the sexton, who did not take notice of the morning bustle, tortured my ears considerably more with their dull monotony than Masha's raving which I had heard a month ago. Nothing was heard from the direction of Masha's table... Oh, such an insane riddle!

Different people appeared in the drawing room. I entered the room, saw everything the same as yesterday, and turned my step toward the table, closer to Masha's body, and closer her face. My God! What had happened to her! The coins were taken from the closed eyes, but the yellowish-white, bloodless face had acquired completely strange features. I thought that we would bury Masha looking the same as we knew her during her life; only yesterday I was finding comfort in this, looking at her not yet cold, calm, and thoughtful face. And now I see: no! Death must be terrible. The outline of Masha's long eyebrows lost any expression of thought; her pinched lips and chin froze into a plaster quadrangle; her sunken eyes were encircled with a cold and dark color; the smooth hair around her forehead lost its luster and began to look like dry wool; her nose lengthened and infused the face of the departed with the expression of dumb surprise; white dots appeared on the sides of the nose; and on her folded hands, on her bent fingers, I was horrified to see blue, almost black nails. I knew that Masha would have shuddered even from the thought that her beautiful, almond-shaped nails could ever turn into these black spots... Out of love to her memory I stopped glancing at the fingers and looked

only at the upper sides of her hands. Their color was reminiscent of the petals of lilies. Bloodless whiteness did not spoil them. On one of the fingers there was the black enamel ring, to which my lips were drawn during that English lesson, the first kiss in my life: mother slipped this ring onto Masha's finger, so it could "rest on her". My face burned in a dull fever, and became swollen from endless tears; now these silent tears appeared every minute and kept running at any painful thought; rarely, very rarely, a quiet and hoarse sound would rise in my throat when tormenting thoughts exhausted the last of my patience, and I wanted to say something, but I could not express anything.

Meanwhile strangers began to arrive at the drawing room. And if I happened to notice a familiar person enter, who witnessed our grief for the first time, only then, after seeing the visitor, I would sob loudly, with a new, abundant flow of tears. And so it went with everyone in our family upon seeing each familiar visitor.

The day was bright. The yellow, strong light of that day filled me with an inexpressible anxiety and yearning. A crowd grew in the drawing room, and it was constantly renewed. Everybody was unusually quiet, so that at moments the crackling of candles was clearly heard, with their flames abominable in the light of the sun. The room grew stuffy; gradually a distinct scent appeared, which was said to "come from the deceased." In fact, this heavy, metallic scent was unlike any other scent known to me in the past. And this new terrible event offended Masha's memory. I suffered for her, this familiar, attractive, defenseless Masha. The door leading from the drawing room to other rooms remained closed or half-closed all the time; and the drawing room with candles, with the sexton, with Masha, with the strange crowd that kept coming from the street, appeared as a frightening delirium, which remained within one's head and chilled the heart, no matter to which corners of the house one was forced to retreat.

The procession to the cemetery church was to happen on the same day. It was scheduled for seven o'clock in the evening. During the day, we received in the mail a leaflet with a black border, in which the news about Masha's death, the funeral procession, and

burial were printed. I read this news about Masha with aversion, and was convinced that most likely somebody all-powerful and invisible knew about this all along, and only we, who lived with Masha, did not have a clue that these leaflets had most certainly to arrive today. Still a little bit later, the pink coffin was brought, white on the inside, with a hard pillow. It was set down onto two stools, parallel to the table; the lid with the cross made of silver lace was on the porch, next to the front door. By the evening the crowd gradually increased. We were all preparing for something even more horrifying than all that had preceded. We were fussing and putting on black clothing. Carriages arrived at our gate. People were gathering along the boulevard, across from our window... Peasants came to our yard carrying church banners. Ladies and gentlemen of the local high society entered the drawing room. To me, they all looked so alive that it was not at all fathomable that one of them might ever be in Masha's position. Seeing them reminded me of those careless days when we visited each other: as more of them arrived, it felt like the chill in our souls slightly receded, as if the energy of someone else's life came to somewhat alleviate our madness. The clergy appeared. The choir men came. The archimandrite arrived. His dry monastic face and loud, vigorous voice, the calm expression of his eyes as he looked at Masha, whom he saw often during her life, all this gave me strength for a short while. He put on his robe and a funeral mitre. I felt some strange satisfaction from a realization that a person of the higher clerical order is praying above Masha, as if it expressed our extreme and touching care for the deceased. The first memorial service<sup>8</sup> began. The crowd was dense, like in a church; everybody held thin candles in their hands; Masha, with her terrifying table, was separated from me now by the whole wall of people and clergy. The archimandrite walked around the table with a censer; the choir singer began to sing mournful prayers. Masha's body turned into a sacred thing. It seemed that suddenly everybody felt unbearably grief-stricken, and almost everyone started crying; I saw wet eyes and kerchiefs everywhere around me. There, up-front, behind the wall of people, Masha was laid in her coffin. The

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<sup>8</sup> *Panikhida* in original text. Note of translator.

white dress was seen for a moment above heads of the crowd, and then the pink coffin was raised and then lowered onto the table. The choir singers sounded louder and sadder further on into the service. The incense filled the room, the lights of candles and hundreds of breaths created such a heat that all faces were covered with the drops of sweat. When it came to the “memory eternal,” cries were heard.<sup>9</sup> The choir singers chanted with abandon, covering up all cries with the reverberations of a heartbreaking melody. A commotion ensued. The coffin was raised high above the crowd. Carrying out the deceased seemed more painful than anything that happened earlier. Even our little twins—brother and sister in the hands of their nannies—broke into inconsolable crying, as if protesting against this last, intolerable cruelty. Everybody moved outside through the wide open door. The choir broke into singing the slow, loud, and dreary “Holy God!” These sounds, after breaking into the open air, rang in strong, weeping notes of altos. The coffin was turned as it was carried through the door, ducked down on the steps of the porch, and exited into the street through the open gate. The funeral procession started moving.

At that time there weren’t hearses in our town yet. Workers carried the coffin on long towels, passed underneath its silver handles. Mother was led by her arms, she walked closely behind the pink casket, with downcast head, as if looking inside of the coffin. All of us children walked next to her with our heads uncovered. My eyes burned from tears, and the white, soft, and dusty streets ran under my feet. I walked with others in the middle of the crowd. The pink casket was swinging in front of me, almost touching the ground. Church banners were carried on both sides of the coffin. Through the sounds of singing and stomping of the crowd I heard the bells ring somewhere in the sky. I knew that I at that time I was at the very heart of the deepest sorrow that a person can possibly experience in his life. What happened to others in the past, happened now to us. And now I was convinced more than ever before that I was entirely right when I mourned so

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<sup>9</sup> In Eastern Orthodox Christendom, it is the song at the end of every Orthodox funeral. This song is known as “Memory Eternal” (in Church Slavonic: *Vechnaya Pamyat*).

painfully for all those unfamiliar people who bemoaned the death of a family member. I did not notice when we turned around the very same street corner where in the past the unfamiliar funeral processions regularly passed the windows of our previous apartment. The procession was already on the road leading directly up to the graveyard. This street, which I avoided previously, turned out to be significantly longer than I thought. The graveyard was still at some distance. Outside of town, after the last small houses, a wide empty field opened. We climbed the mountain slowly, and I already began to hear clearly the faint sounds coming from the graveyard's bell-tower. That small church on the mountain which had long since terrified me was now clearly visible against the sky, with its low cupola and pointed bell-tower, and it seemed that the delicate babbling of its bells told me that it was not as frightening as I imagined it from a distance, and that from now on we might be drawn together. I already clearly saw its white walls behind the fence. The procession headed for the small arched gate. Above this arch a dark angel was standing on one leg, holding a long trumpet; underneath him and above the gate, a Slavonic inscription arched on the white stucco: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>10</sup> And finally I am at the threshold of the afterlife! . . . Behind the fence, a road with lush trees planted on both sides came into view. In the openings between the trees white headstones were visible. The coffin, swinging low on the towels, moved quickly along the alley; the nearby bell-ringing seemed now to be especially loud, as if the bells finally expressed their joyfulness and hospitality without embarrassment. Having proceeded along the alley past the graves that broke through the green, we followed the casket and turned to the left, walked up the low porch and through an open door into a dimly lit church. It was cold inside. With only a few candles and oil-lamps burning and accompanied by the final loud peals of the bell, the uncovered casket was set onto two stools. The choir-men entered with the same crying sounds of the solemn chant: "Holy God!" Apparently, the ceremony was over for the day. Mother glanced at Masha, and burst into tears once again; a racket

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 11:28.



broke out, after which the lower part of Masha's face, beginning with the nostrils, was covered with cotton wool. Meanwhile, our servants were saying that "black blood" was leaking from her nostrils. Masha's face changed horribly from transport; it seemed that the inexpressible suffering, fatigue, and exhaustion were impressed on it. This face seemed to be asking for rest and wanted to tell others that if they continue to bother it, even slightly, it will disappear completely. Masha's casket was wrapped in a thin white cloth. The service ended, and people began to leave. And we finally left, leaving Masha alone in the cold church...

It is painful to admit, but after returning home I nonetheless felt a brief relief realizing that in our house there was no longer a heart-wrenching, maddening, and horrifying room containing Masha's lifeless body. But later, when I was lying in my warm bed, I paid for this insignificant consolation with painful and upsetting thoughts. I felt Masha's reproaches for our egoism; I was tormented by the thought that we could rest under warm blankets, and think about whatever pleased us, while she was locked in the dark church and was lost to us forever... I don't remember when and how uneasy sleep interrupted this pointless torment.

In the morning, without exchanging a single word with each other, the whole family was about to go to the strangely intimate cemetery chapel, which now seemed to hold the pain of all of our hearts. During last few days, I saw my father very little. He purposely secluded himself, and grieved without allowing others to see him. I only remember that during the service, before the procession, his large head with a high and bold forehead towered above the crowd, and the lids of his bulging eyes looked horribly red from the tears swelling in them. He kept quiet and controlled himself to such a degree that only a few tears ran down his cheeks and into his trimmed gray whiskers. And even now, sitting in the carriage next to mother, with her pale and swollen face and vacant and clouded eyes, he preserved his self-control and remained silent.

The morning was bright. The carriage climbed the mountain, drove through the cemetery gate into the alley familiar from yesterday, and approached the porch. The green iron door was still

locked. The pink casket was standing as yesterday, covered with the folds of the thin white cloth. Mother walked up to the casket, pulled the white cloth away, looked for a long time with her weary eyes at Masha's face, sighed helplessly, adjusted something around the deceased, asked again for some cotton wool, and again after tidying up the body, halted contemplating the beloved face, sighed again, and walked away after covering Masha up.

The bells began to ring for the day service.

Slowly the church filled with people. Many new people, who weren't at yesterday's funeral, arrived. Midway through the service the church became as crowded as our drawing room yesterday. The rite was accompanied by the sorrowful singing of the choir. The pink box loomed cruelly in the middle of the church, with outstretched, mutilated, blue, cold, and unrecognizable Masha. Under the sun and candles, over the densely packed, silent crowd, in the increasingly sultry air, the distinct, unbearable, incomparable metallic scent of her corpse filled the room... I was taught that after death only the saints do not exude the scent of decomposition, but in my madness I was perplexed as to what sin good and pure Masha could have committed, that the "odor of corruption" made itself known to everyone present.<sup>11</sup>

The service ended. The archimandrite and priests came from the altar and began to cense vigorously around the casket. The odor wafting in the church became intolerable in the dingy air, which joined with the breath of the crowd, the fumes of the incense, and the "putrid scent" of the dead. My head refused to think. I felt nauseated to the bottom of my heart, but my eyes followed mechanically all of this horror. We were called to the coffin in order to bid farewell to Masha. I remember that I bowed shivering above Masha's bony, cold and almost completely black hand, glanced at her face, and saw that her eyes had sunk so deep that I imagined them to be two holes in the skull... But the torture did not stop at this. The archimandrite placed a paper crown on her forehead, stuck a wax cross and a printed sheet into her hands, poured dark holy-oil onto her dress, and covered her with a white

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<sup>11</sup> The title of a chapter from the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (Part III, Book 7, Chapter 1).

cloth. Then the lid of the casket was lowered, closed tightly, and hammered down. We carried her off to the grave. At the last minute, when the coffin was lowered into the grave, thus hiding it from us forever, the workers had to hold mother by the hands as she dashed forcefully, with an agonized shriek, for the pit. This is how we buried Masha.

Life, Death, and the Whole Damned Thing. I remember once, early on in my development as a writer (in my early twenties) when I had a case of writer's block. I asked Mom, "What should I write about?" "Life and death and the whole damned thing," she replied. It was decades later, after she'd been gone for more than a dozen years that I finally wrote a book about life and death and the whole damned thing. It was a terrible experience. The cover of *Choosing to Live* [Courtesy Nikki Tate]. Category: Books about death. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search. This category includes books whose primary topic is death and dying. Subcategories. This category has the following 5 subcategories, out of 5 total. B. Books about murder (4 C, 2 P). Books about near-death experiences (11 P). N. Novels about death (5 C, 43 P). S. Books about sacrifice (4 P). Books about suicide (1 C, 8 P). Pages in category "Books about death". The following 27 pages are in this category, out of 27 total. This list may not reflect recent changes (learn The book ultimately offers practical advice on how to have conversations related to death, no matter the setting, yet manages to be amusing at times. This is a recommended read, to say the least. "The Hype. "A reader-friendly guide to the conversations most people avoid having...A vade mecum that will make one's reaping a bit less grim." Kirkus Reviews. I wouldn't hesitate to talk about death over dinner, but if you would, I recommend reading this book. It's super important for you to learn to get better at this, because, well, just trust me on this one. Read more.