

NATASHA

BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV

On the stairs Natasha ran into her neighbor from across the hall, Baron Wolfe. He was somewhat laboriously ascending the bare wooden steps, caressing the bannister with his hand and whistling softly through his teeth.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, Natasha?"

"To the drugstore to get a prescrip-

tion. Then he knocked on old Khrenov's door.

Khrenov lived in the room across the hall with his daughter, who slept on a couch, a couch with amazing springs that rolled and swelled like metal tussocks through the flabby plush. There was also a table, unpainted and covered with ink-spotted

said, seating himself by the bed and slapping his knees.

Khrenov offered his yellow, sticky hand and shook his head.

"I don't know what you've been hearing, but I do know perfectly well that I'll die tomorrow."

He made a popping sound with his lips.

"Nonsense," Wolfe merrily interrupted, and extracted from his hip pocket an enormous silver cigar case. "Mind if I smoke?"

He fiddled for a long time with his lighter, clicking its cogged screw. Khrenov half-closed his eyes. His eyelids were bluish, like a frog's webbing. Gray-ing bristles covered his protruding chin. Without opening his eyes, he said,



tion filled. The doctor was just here. Father is better."

"Ah, that's good news."

She flitted past in her rustling raincoat, hatless.

Leaning over the bannister, Wolfe glanced back at her. For an instant he caught sight from overhead of the sleek, girlish part in her hair. Still whistling, he climbed to the top floor, threw his rain-soaked briefcase on the bed, then thoroughly and satisfyingly washed and dried his hands.

newspapers. Sick Khrenov, a shrivelled old man in a nightshirt that reached to his heels, creakily darted back into bed and pulled up the sheet just as Wolfe's large shaved head poked through the door.

"Come in, glad to see you, come on in."

The old man was breathing with difficulty, and the door of his night table remained half open.

"I hear you've almost totally recovered, Alexey Ivanych," Baron Wolfe

"That's how it'll be. They killed my two sons and heaved me and Natasha out of our natal nest. Now we're supposed to go and die in a strange city. How stupid, all things considered. . . ."

Wolfe started speaking loudly and distinctly. He spoke of how Khrenov still had a long time to live, thank goodness, and how everyone would be returning to Russia in the spring, together with the storks. And then he proceeded to recount an incident from his past.

"It was back when I was wandering

BASTIENNE SCHMIDT, "EMBROIDERY" (2007)

around the Congo,” he was saying, and his large, somewhat corpulent figure swayed slightly. “Ah, the distant Congo, my dear Alexey Ivanych, such distant wilds—you know . . . Imagine a village in the woods, women with pendulous breasts, and the shimmer of water, black as *karakul*, amid the huts. There, under a gigantic tree—a *kiroku*—lay orange fruit like rubber balls, and at night there came from inside the trunk what seemed like the sound of the sea. I had a long chat with the local kinglet. Our translator was a Belgian engineer, another curious man. He swore, by the way, that, in 1895, he had seen an ichthyosaur in the swamps not far from Tanganyika. The kinglet was smeared with cobalt, adorned with rings, and blubbery, with a belly like jelly. Here’s what happened—”

Wolfe, relishing his story, smiled and stroked his pale-blue head.

“Natasha is back,” Khrenov quietly and firmly interjected, without raising his eyelids.

Instantly turning pink, Wolfe looked around. A moment later, somewhere far off, the lock of the front door clinked, then steps rustled along the hall. Natasha entered quickly, with radiant eyes.

“How are you, Daddy?”

Wolfe got up and said, with feigned nonchalance, “Your father is perfectly well, and I have no idea why he’s in bed. . . . I’m going to tell him about a certain African sorcerer.”

Natasha smiled at her father and began unwrapping the medicine.

“It’s raining,” she said softly. “The weather is terrible.”

As usually happens when the weather is mentioned, the others looked out the window. That made a bluish-gray vein on Khrenov’s neck contract. Then he threw his head back on the pillow again. With a pout, Natasha counted the drops, and her eyelashes kept time. Her sleek dark hair was beaded with rain, and under her eyes there were adorable blue shadows.

II

Back in his room, Wolfe paced for a long time, with a flustered and happy smile, dropping heavily now into an armchair, now onto the edge of the bed. Then, for some reason, he opened a window and peered into the dark, gurgling courtyard below. At last he shrugged one

shoulder spasmodically, put on his green hat, and went out.

Old Khrenov, who was sitting slumped on the couch while Natasha straightened his bed for the night, observed indifferently, in a low voice, “Wolfe has gone out to dinner.”

Then he sighed and pulled the blanket more tightly around him.

“Ready,” Natasha said. “Climb back in, Daddy.”

All around there was the wet evening city, the black torrents of the streets, the mobile, shiny cupolas of umbrellas, the blaze of shopwindows trickling down onto the asphalt. Along with the rain the night began to flow, filling the depths of the courtyards, flickering in the eyes of the thin-legged prostitutes, who slowly strolled to and fro at the crowded intersections. And, somewhere above, the circular lights of an advertisement flashed intermittently like a spinning illuminated wheel.

Toward nightfall, Khrenov’s temperature had risen. The thermometer was warm, alive—the column of mercury climbed high on the little red ladder. For a long time he muttered unintelligibly, kept biting his lips and gently shaking his head. Then he fell asleep. Natasha undressed by a candle’s wan flame, and saw her reflection in the murky glass of the window—her pale, thin neck, the dark braid that had fallen across her clavicle. She stood like that, in motionless languor, and suddenly it seemed to her that the room, together with the couch, the table littered with cigarette stubs, the bed on which, with open mouth, a sharp-nosed, sweaty old man slept restlessly—all this started to move, and was now floating, like the deck of a ship, into the black night. She sighed, ran a hand across her warm bare shoulder, and, transported partly by dizziness, lowered herself onto the couch. Then, with a vague smile, she began rolling down and pulling off her old, oft-mended stockings. Once again the room started floating, and she felt as if someone were blowing hot air onto the back of her head. She opened her eyes wide—dark, elongated eyes, whose whites had a bluish sheen. An autumn fly began to circle the candle and, like a buzzing black pea, collided with the wall. Natasha slowly crawled under the blanket and stretched, sensing, like a bystander, the warmth of her own body, her long thighs,



"Would you mind making room? My reading group is here."

and her bare arms thrown back behind her head. She felt too lazy to douse the candle, to shoo away the silken formication that was making her involuntarily compress her knees and shut her eyes. Khrenov gave a deep groan and raised one arm in his sleep. The arm fell back as if it were dead. Natasha lifted herself slightly and blew toward the candle. Multicolored circles started to swim before her eyes.

I feel so wonderful, she thought, laughing into her pillow. She was now lying curled up, and seemed to herself to be incredibly small, and all the thoughts in her head were like warm sparks that were gently scattering and sliding. She was just falling asleep when her torpor was shattered by a deep, frenzied cry.

"Daddy, what's the matter?"

She fumbled on the table and lit the candle.

Khrenov was sitting up in bed, breathing furiously, his fingers clutching the collar of his shirt. A few minutes earlier, he had awakened and was frozen with horror, having mistaken the luminous dial of the watch lying on a chair nearby for the muzzle of a rifle motionlessly aiming at him. He had awaited the gunshot, not daring to stir, then, losing control, started screaming. Now he looked at his daughter, blinking and smiling a tremulous smile.

"Daddy, calm down, it's nothing. . . ."

Her naked feet softly shuffling on the floor, she straightened his pillows and touched his brow, which was sticky and cold with sweat. With a deep sigh, and still shaken by spasms, he turned toward the wall and muttered, "All of them, all . . . and me, too. It's a nightmare. . . . No, you mustn't."

He fell asleep as if falling into an abyss.

Natasha lay down again. The couch had become even bumpier, the springs pressed now into her side, now into her shoulder blades, but at last she got comfortable and floated back into the interrupted, incredibly warm dream that she still sensed but no longer remembered. Then, at dawn, she awoke again. Her father was calling to her.

"Natasha, I don't feel well. Give me some water."

Slightly unsteady, her somnolence permeated by the light-blue dawn, she moved toward the washbasin, making the pitcher clink. Khrenov drank avidly and deeply. He said, "It will be awful if I never return."

"Go to sleep, Daddy. Try to get some more sleep."

Natasha threw on her flannel robe and sat down at the foot of her father's bed. He repeated the words "This is awful"

several times, then gave a frightened smile.

"Natasha, I keep imagining that I am walking through our village. Remember the place by the river, near the sawmill? And it's hard to walk. You know—all the sawdust. Sawdust and sand. My feet sink in. It tickles. One time, when we travelled abroad . . ." He frowned, struggling to follow the course of his own stumbling thoughts.

Natasha recalled with extraordinary clarity how he had looked then, recalled his fair little beard, his gray suede gloves, his checkered travelling cap that resembled a rubber pouch for a sponge—and suddenly felt that she was about to cry.

"Yes. So that's that," Khrenov drawled indifferently, peering into the dawn mist.

"Sleep some more, Daddy. I remember everything."

He awkwardly took a swallow of water, rubbed his face, and leaned back on the pillows. From the courtyard came a cock's sweet throbbing cry.

III

At about eleven the next morning, Wolfe knocked on the Khrenovs' door. Some dishes tinkled with fright in the room, and Natasha's laughter spilled forth. An instant later, she slipped out into the hall, carefully closing the door behind her.

"I'm so glad—Father is a lot better today."

She was wearing a white blouse and a beige skirt with buttons along the hips. Her elongated, shiny eyes were happy.

"Awfully restless night," she continued rapidly, "and now he's cooled down completely. His temperature is normal. He has even decided to get up. They've just bathed him."

"It's sunny out today," Wolfe said mysteriously. "I didn't go to work."

They were standing in the half-lit hall, leaning against the wall, not knowing what else to talk about.

"You know what, Natasha?" Wolfe suddenly ventured, pushing his broad, soft back away from the wall and thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his wrinkled gray trousers. "Let's take a trip to the country today. We'll be back by six. What do you say?"

Natasha stood with one shoulder

pressed against the wall, also pushing away slightly.

"How can I leave Father alone? Still, though . . ."

Wolfe suddenly cheered up.

"Natasha, sweetheart, come on—please. Your dad is all right today, isn't he? And the landlady is nearby in case he needs anything."

"Yes, that's true," Natasha said slowly. "I'll tell him."

And, with a flip of her skirt, she turned back into the room.

Fully dressed but without his shirt collar, Khrenov was feebly groping for something on the table.

"Natasha, Natasha, you forgot to buy the papers yesterday. . . ."

Natasha busied herself brewing some tea on the alcohol stove.

"Daddy, today I'd like to take a trip to the country. Wolfe invited me."

"Of course, darling, you must go," Khrenov said, and the bluish whites of his eyes filled with tears. "Believe me, I'm better today. If only it weren't for this ridiculous weakness . . ."

When Natasha had left he again started slowly groping about the room, still searching for something . . . With a soft grunt he tried to move the couch. Then he looked under it—he lay prone on the floor, and stayed there, his head spinning nauseatingly. Slowly, laboriously, he got back on his feet, struggled over to his bed, lay down . . . And again he had the sensation that he was crossing some bridge, that he could hear the sound of a lumber mill, that yellow tree trunks were floating, that his feet were sinking deep into the moist sawdust, that a cool wind was blowing from the river, chilling him through and through. . . .

IV

Yes—all my travels . . . Oh, Natasha, I sometimes felt like a god. I saw the Palace of Shadows in Ceylon and shot at tiny emerald birds in Madagascar. The natives there wear necklaces made of vertebrae, and sing so strangely at night on the seashore, as if they were musical jackals. I lived in a tent not far from Tamatave, where the earth is red, and the sea dark blue. I cannot describe that sea to you."

Wolfe fell silent, gently tossing a pinecone with his hand. Then he ran his puffy

palm down the length of his face and broke out laughing.

"And here I am, penniless, stuck in the most miserable of European cities, sitting in an office day in, day out, like some idler, munching on bread and sausage at night in a truckers' dive. Yet there was a time . . ."

Natasha was lying on her stomach, elbows widespread, watching the brightly lit tops of the pines as they gently receded into the turquoise heights. As she peered into this sky, luminous round dots circled, shimmered, and scattered in her eyes. Every so often something would flit like a golden spasm from pine to pine. Next to her crossed legs sat Baron Wolfe in his ample gray suit, his shaved head bent, still tossing his dry cone.

Natasha sighed.

"In the Middle Ages," she said, gazing at the tops of the pines, "they would have burned me at the stake or sanctified me. I sometimes have strange sensations. Like a kind of ecstasy. Then I become almost weightless, I feel I'm floating somewhere, and I understand everything—life, death, everything. . . . Once, when I was about ten, I was sitting in the dining room, drawing something. Then I got tired and started thinking. Suddenly, very rapidly, in came a woman, barefoot, wearing faded blue garments, with a large, heavy belly, and her face was small, thin, and yellow, with extraordinarily gentle, extraordinarily mysterious eyes. . . . Without looking at me, she hurried past and disappeared into the next room. I was not frightened—for some reason, I thought she had come to wash the floors. I never encountered that woman again, but you know who she was? The Virgin Mary . . ."

Wolfe smiled.

"What makes you think that, Natasha?"

"I know. She appeared to me in a dream five years later. She was holding a child, and at her feet there were cherubs propped on their elbows, just like in the Raphael painting, only they were alive. Besides that, I sometimes have other, very little visions. When they took Father away in Moscow and I remained alone in the house, here's what happened: On the desk there was a small bronze bell like the ones they put on cows in the Tyrol. Suddenly it rose into the air, started tinkling, and then fell. What a marvellous, pure sound."

Wolfe gave her a strange look, then threw the pinecone far away and spoke in a cold, opaque voice.

"There is something I must tell you, Natasha. You see, I have never been to Africa or to India. It's all a lie. I am now nearly thirty, but, apart from two or three Russian towns and a dozen villages, and this forlorn country, I have not seen anything. Please forgive me."

He smiled a melancholy smile. He suddenly felt intolerable pity for the grandiose fantasies that had sustained him since childhood.

The weather was autumnally dry and warm. The pines barely creaked as their gold-hued tops swayed.

"An ant," Natasha said, getting up and patting her skirt and stockings. "We've been sitting on ants."

"Do you despise me very much?" Wolfe asked.

She laughed. "Don't be silly. After all, we are even. Everything I told you about my ecstasies and the Virgin Mary and the little bell was fantasy. I thought it all up one day, and after that, naturally, I had the impression that it had really happened. . . ."

"That's just it," Wolfe said, beaming.

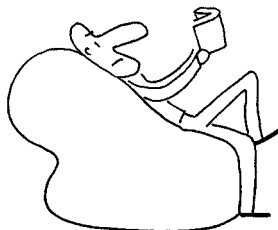
"Tell me some more about your travels," Natasha asked, intending no sarcasm.

With a habitual gesture, Wolfe took out his solid cigar case.

"At your service. Once, when I was sailing on a schooner from Borneo to Sumatra . . ."

V

A gentle slope descended toward the lake. The posts of the wooden jetty were reflected like gray spirals in the water. Beyond the lake was the same dark pine forest, but here and there one could glimpse a white trunk and the mist of yellow leaves of a birch. On the dark-turquoise water floated glints of clouds, and Natasha suddenly recalled Levitan's landscapes. She had the impression that



they were in Russia, that you could only be in Russia when such torrid happiness constricts your throat, and she was happy that Wolfe was recounting such marvelous nonsense and, with his little noises, launching small flat stones, which magically skidded and skipped along the water. On this weekday there were no people to be seen; only occasional cloudlets of exclamation or laughter were audible, and on the lake there hovered a white wing—a yacht's sail. They walked for a long time along the shore, ran up the slippery slope, and found a path where the raspberry bushes emitted a whiff of black damp. A little farther, right by the water, there was a café, quite deserted, with nary a waitress or a customer to be seen, as if there were a fire somewhere and they had all run off to look, taking with them their mugs and their plates. Wolfe and Natasha walked around the café, then sat down at an empty table and pretended that they were eating and drinking and an orchestra was playing. And, while they were joking, Natasha suddenly thought she heard the distinct sound of real orange-hued wind music. Then, with a mysterious smile, she gave a start and ran off along the shore. Baron Wolfe ponderously loped after her. "Wait, Natasha—we haven't paid yet!"

Afterward, they found an apple-green meadow, bordered by sedge, through which the sun made the water gleam like liquid gold, and Natasha, squinting and inflating her nostrils, repeated several times, "My God, how wonderful . . ."

Wolfe felt hurt by the unresponsive echo and fell silent, and, at that airy, sunlit instant beside the wide lake, a certain sadness flew past like a melodious beetle.

Natasha frowned and said, "For some reason, I have a feeling that Father is worse again. Maybe I should not have left him alone."

Wolfe remembered seeing the old man's thin legs, glossy with gray bristles, as he hopped back into bed. He thought, And what if he really does die today?

"Don't say that, Natasha—he's fine now."

"I think so, too," she said, and grew merry again.

Wolfe took off his jacket, and his thickset body in its striped shirt exhaled a gentle aura of heat. He was walking very close to Natasha; she was looking straight ahead, and she liked the feel of this warmth pacing alongside her.

“How I dream, Natasha, how I dream,” he was saying, waving a small, whistling stick. “Am I really lying when I pass off my fantasies as truth? I had a friend who served for three years in Bombay. Bombay? My God! The music of geographical names. That word alone contains something gigantic, bombs of sunlight, drums. Just imagine, Natasha—that friend of mine was incapable of communicating anything, remembered nothing except work-related squabbles, the heat, the fevers, and the wife of some British colonel. Which of us really visited India? . . . It’s obvious—of course, I am the one. Bombay, Singapore . . . I can recall, for instance . . .”

Natasha was walking along the very edge of the water, so that the child-size waves of the lake plashed up to her feet. Somewhere beyond the woods a train passed, as if it were travelling along a musical string, and both of them stopped to listen. The day had become a bit more golden, a bit softer, and the woods on the far side of the lake now had a bluish cast.

Near the train station, Wolfe bought a paper bag of plums, but they turned out to be sour. Seated in the empty wooden compartment of the train, he threw them at intervals out the window, and kept regretting that, in the café, he had not filched some of those cardboard disks you put under beer mugs.

“They soar so beautifully, Natasha, like birds. It’s a joy to watch.”

Natasha was tired; she would shut her eyes tightly, and then again, as she had been in the night, she would be overcome and carried aloft by a feeling of dizzying lightness.

“When I tell Father about our outing, please don’t interrupt me or correct me. I may well tell him about things we did not see at all. Various little marvels. He’ll understand.”

When they arrived in town, they decided to walk home. Baron Wolfe grew taciturn and grimaced at the ferocious noise of the automobile horns, while Natasha seemed propelled by sails, as if her fatigue sustained her, endowed her with wings and made her weightless, and Wolfe seemed all blue, as blue as the evening. One block short of their house, Wolfe suddenly stopped. Natasha flew past. Then she, too, stopped. She looked around. Raising his shoulders, thrusting his hands

deep into the pockets of his ample trousers, Wolfe lowered his light-blue head like a bull. Glancing sideways, he said that he loved her. Then, turning rapidly, he walked away and entered a tobacco shop.

Natasha stood for a while, as if suspended in midair, then slowly walked toward the house. This, too, I shall tell Father, she thought, advancing through a blue mist of happiness, amid which the street lamps were coming alight like precious stones. She felt that she was growing weak, that hot, silent billows were coursing along her spine. When she reached the house, she saw her father, in a black jacket, shielding his unbuttoned shirt collar with one hand and swinging his door keys with the other, come out hurriedly, slightly hunched in the evening fog, and head for the newsstand.

“Daddy,” she called, and walked after him. He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and, tilting his head, glanced at her with his familiar wily smile.

“My little rooster, all gray-haired. You shouldn’t be going out,” Natasha said.

Her father tilted his head the other way, and said very softly, “Dearest, there’s something fabulous in the paper today. Only I forgot to bring money. Could you run upstairs and get it? I’ll wait here.”

She gave the door a push, cross with her father, and at the same time glad that he was so chipper. She ascended the stairs quickly, aerially, as in a dream. She hurried along the hall. *He might catch cold standing there waiting for me. . . .*

For some reason, the hall light was on. Natasha approached her door and simultaneously heard the susurrations of soft speech behind it. She opened the door quickly. A kerosene lamp stood on the table, smoking densely. The landlady, a chambermaid, and some unfamiliar person were blocking the way to the bed. They all turned when Natasha entered, and the landlady, with an exclamation, rushed toward her. . . .

Only then did Natasha notice her father lying on the bed, looking not at all as she had just seen him, but a dead little old man with a waxen nose. ♦

(Circa 1924. Translated, from the Russian, by Dmitri Nabokov.)

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