A Sentimental Romance

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Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

My Dearest Friend,

Here I am at our sanatorium by the sea, just as I was last spring. Even my room is the same. Only, during the winter, the wallpaper has been changed and there is a slight smell of paste still in the room. I don't know how other people feel, but this smell always brings back to me that sweet, gentle melancholy which is so indissolubly linked with the memories of childhood. Perhaps it has clung to me ever since my schooldays. I remember how, in old times, they used to bring me back after the long summer holidays. As you pass through the quite familiar dormitory, the classrooms, the corridors and everywhere you detect the smell of paste, of fresh paint, of lime and varnish. And you feel, with a sense of troubled melancholy, that you are again stepping over a new border of life and you vaguely regret the past that has been left on the other side—grey, ordinary, unpleasant, but endlessly dear, just because it is the past and will never, never repeat itself. Ah, that past! What a mysterious, untranslatable charm it retains over one's soul! Even to you, my dearest, I only dare to write because I feel, since the morning, under the spell of last year's memories.

I am sitting at this moment at the writing-table, but I have only to lift my eyes from it to see the sea, that very sea with which you and I—do you remember?—were so poetically in love. But, even without looking up, I can feel it. It seems to be rising in a level dark blue shroud right up to the middle of my window, which is wide open. Over it is the blue sky, quite cloudless and solemnly calm. And under the window an apple tree is in bloom. One of its branches, spreading out, covered all over with delicate blossoms, transparently white in the sunlight and faintly pink in the shade, peeps in over the sill. When a faint wind stirs from the sea, it rocks slightly, as though bowing to me in a friendly greeting, and, scarcely audibly, rustles against the green barred shutter. I gaze at it and can never get enough of the swan-like movements of this white branch, covered with bloom, which, so softly, with such exquisite precision, outlines itself gracefully against the deep strong, joyful blue of the sea. And I simply want to cry, so touched am I at its unsophisticated beauty.

Our sanatorium is drowned (forgive this antiquated comparison) in the white waves of pear trees, apple trees, almond trees and apricot trees, all in bloom. They say that in the language of the old inhabitants, the Tcherkesses, this exquisite little seaside village was called "The White Fiancée." What a delightful and fitting name! There seems to emanate from it an atmosphere of coloured language and Eastern poetry an atmosphere as of from something taken straight out of "The Song of Songs" of King Solomon.

The garden paths are covered with light, white petals and, when the wind blows, the trees seem to be snowing in slowly falling, heavy flakes. These light snowflakes fly into my room, cover the writing-table, fall on my dress, my hair, and I can't—besides, I have no wish to—rid myself of these memories which agitate me and make my head turn like some old aromatic wine.

It was last spring, the third or fourth day after your arrival at the sanatorium. The morning was just as quiet, cool, and gleaming. We were sitting on the south verandah, I in the rocking-chair covered with a pale blue sailcloth (do you remember that armchair?) and you on the balustrade, leaning against the corner post and holding it with one hand. My God, even now, after writing these lines, I stopped, closed my eyes for a few seconds, with my hand over them. And again, in front of me with extraordinary vividness, came to me your face of those days—thin, pale, with fine, distinguished features, a coil of dark hair hanging carelessly over the white forehead and with those deep, sad eyes. I can visualise even that pensive and absentminded smile which used just to touch your lips when you said, looking dreamily at the falling petals of the white flowers, "The apple trees are shedding their blossom and the spring is only at its very start. Why does this swift, expansive bloom of the southern spring always awake in me such a maladive feeling of distress and unfulfilment? No later than yesterday, it seems, I was watching with emotion the first swelling buds, and today the flowers are already scattering and you know that tomorrow will come the cold autumn. Isn't it like our own lives? In youth, you live only on hope; you think that now, at once, something great, absorbing, will seize hold of you, and then suddenly you seem to wake up and you see that nothing is left but memories and regret for the past, and you yourself are unable to tell at what precise period your real life swept by—the full, consciously beautiful life."

You see how well I remember your words! Everything associated with you is imprinted on my soul in bright relief, and I treasure it, admire and delight in it, as a miser does in his gold. I confess even that I have come here exclusively to see once more, even from the window, a morsel of our sea and our sky, to smell the fine aroma of the apple trees in flower, to hear in the evening the dry chatter of the crickets and—to live endlessly over again in imagination those naive, pale memories at whose faintness a healthy person would laugh aloud. Ah, those healthy people—with their rough appetite for life, their depths of strong sensation, permitted them by their strong bodies and their indifferent prodigality of soul—they cannot even imagine those untranslatably delicate, inexplicably complex shades of moods through which we pass, we who are condemned almost from our birth to the monotonous vegetation of the hospital, the health resort and the sanatorium.

Here everything is as it used to be. Only you are not here, my dear friend and teacher. Of course, you can guess that through the newspapers I have heard of your recovery and that you are back again in your University chair. Our dear doctor, as fond of life as ever, has

confirmed this news, his face glowing with pleasure. Doubtless he attributes your cure to his system of hot baths and his theories of diet. As you know, I don't believe in either treatment, but all the same, I was ready to kiss this kindly and naive egoist for his news of your health.

He, on the contrary, is not at all pleased with me. I saw it in the way he shook his head, wrinkling his lips and breathing hard through his nose with that preoccupied seriousness of his, while he was listening to my chest and tapping it. Finally, he advised me to go somewhere in the real south, to Mentone or even Cairo, advised me with an awkward and jocular prudence which was a poor mask for the anxiety that kept peeping out from his eyes. Visibly, he is afraid of the bad impression that my death will create among his patients, and he wants to save them this unpleasantness. I shall be very sorry to prejudice, involuntarily, the good reputation of his establishment, but, all the same, I do consider myself entitled to the luxury of dying in this particular place, sanctified by the poignant charm of early autumn.

All the more, because this will happen much sooner than he expects; perhaps even before the last white petals of my apple tree have fled. I will confess to you, as a secret, that already I cannot go beyond the verandah, and even that is very difficult, though I still have the courage to answer the doctor's anxious, interrogative looks with an insouciant smile. But don't think that I am complaining to you in the selfish hope of arousing compassion for myself. No, I merely want to avail myself of the right, that a dying human being has, to discuss what healthy people are silent about from conventional shyness. Besides, I want to tell you that death does not frighten me and that it is to you, my dear friend, and only to you, that I owe this philosophic quietude. I understand now perfectly your words: "Death is the simplest and most normal of all the phenomena of life. Man comes into this world and lives exclusively through chance, but he dies only through inevitable law." This beautiful aphorism has become to me now particularly clear.

Yes, you have taught me a great deal. Without you, I should never have reached those slow, delicate delights, produced by a book one has just read, a deep and beautiful thought from a creative mind, inspired music, the beauty of sunset, the aroma of a flower, and—this first of all—the soul-communion of two refined natures, in which, owing to serious illness, nervous receptivity reaches a point of exaltation and mutual understanding passes into a silent clairvoyance.

Do you remember our long, unhurried walks along the seashore, under the perpendicular rays of the sun, in those burning, lazy, midday hours, when everything seems to die in helpless lassitude, and the waves just rustle and whiz on to the hot, yellow sand and go back into the dazzling sea, leaving behind a moist, dented edging, which disappears just as quickly as the traces of one's breath on glass? Do you remember how we used to hide from the doctor, who allowed no one to be out of doors after sunset, and steal out on the terrace

in the warm moonlit nights? The moonlight would cut through the espalier of the dense vineyard and lie on the floor and the white wall, like a pattern of light, fantastic lace. In the darkness, we could not see, but only guess at each other, and the timid whispers in which we had to speak gave even to the simplest words a deep, intimate, agitating significance. Do you remember how, on the rainy days, when the sea was enveloped in a fog all day long and there was in the air a smell of wet sand, of fish and refreshed leaves, we used to tiptoe into my cosy room and read Shakespeare, just a little at a time, like real gourmets, tasting the savour of every page, revelling in every spark from this great mind which, for me, became deeper and deeper, still more penetrating, under your guidance. These books, in their soft covers of tender green morocco, are still with me now. On certain pages of them, here and there, are sharp nail-marks, and when I look at these remaining symbols, which remind me so vividly of your vehement, nervous enthusiasm for the beauties and abysses of this Shakespearean genius, I am overcome by a quiet, sombre emotion.

Do you remember? Ah, how endlessly I could repeat this question, but I am beginning to be tired already, and I have still so much to say to you.

Of course, you can imagine that here in the sanatorium, I am condemned to perpetual silence. The usual stereotyped sentences which our invalids exchange when they are compelled to meet at breakfast, at dinner, at tea, drive me frantic. They always talk about the same things: today one of them has had a bath two degrees lower than the day before, another has eaten a pound more of grapes, a third has climbed a steep slope leading to the sea without stopping and—imagine—without even being out of breath! They discuss their maladies at length, with egotistic enjoyment, sometimes in disgusting detail, Unfailingly, each wishes to persuade the rest that no one else can possibly have such extraordinary complications of cruel suffering. It is a tragedy when two competitors meet, even if it is only a question of a simple headache. Scornful shrugs come into play, ironical half-hidden smiles, haughty expressions and the most icy glances. “What’s this you are telling me about your headache? Ha! ha. This is really funny. I can imagine what you would have said if you had endured once the cruel pain that I suffer every day!”

Here illness is a cause of pride and rivalry, a fantastic warrant for an odd self-respect, a sort of decoration in a way. However, I have noticed this sort of thing among healthy people, but here among sick people—it becomes dreadful, repulsive, incredible.

That’s why I’m always pleased when I find myself at last alone, in my cosy, impregnable little corner. But no, I’m not alone: with me there are always you and my love. There, I have said the word and it didn’t burn my lips at all, as it always does in novels.

But I don’t even know myself if one can call this quiet, pale, half-mystical feeling “love.”

I’m not going to conceal from you the fact that girls of our class have a much more definite

and realistic comprehension of love than is suspected by their parents, who watch modern flirtations through their fingers. At school, one talks a great deal on this subject and curiosity gives it a kind of mysterious, exaggerated, even monstrous, significance. From novels and the stories of married friends we learn about mad kisses, burning embraces, about nights of delight, voluptuousness and goodness knows what. All this we assimilate instinctively, half consciously, and—probably according to individual temperament, depravity, perspicacity—more or less clearly.

In that sense, my love is not love, but a sentimental and amusing play of the imagination. Sickly, puny, and weak from my very childhood, I have always had a horror of everything in which, one way or another, physical force, rough health, and the joy of life displayed themselves. A horse ridden quickly, the sight of a workman with an enormous weight on his back, a big crowd, a loud shriek, an excessive appetite, a strong odour—all this makes me wince or rouses in me disgusted antipathy. And these are exactly the feelings that I experience when my thoughts are confronted by the real sensual love of healthy people, with its heavy, inept, shameless details.

But if one is to call the exclusively soul union of two people when the feelings and thoughts of one of them through some mysterious current, transmit themselves to the other, when words yield place to silent glances, when a scarcely perceptible shiver of the eyelids, or the pale ghost of a smile in the eyes say sometimes so much more than a long confession of love between “ordinary folk” (I’m using your actual expression), when through the mere meeting of each other’s eyes at table, or in a drawing-room at the arrival of a newcomer or at a stupidity that has just been uttered, two people, without words know how to share an impression—in a word, if relations of this kind can be called love, then I may boldly say that not only I, but each of us has loved the other!

And not even with that love which one calls mockingly “brother’s love.” I know this because I have a very clear recollection of one instance, the one instance at which I am afraid of blushing when I talk about it. It happened on the broken cliff over the sea, in the vineyard summerhouse, which is still called, just as it was last year, with faded sentimentality, “the arbour of love.”

It was a quiet peaceful morning and the sea seemed green with just that alternation of bright and pale green that certain species of malachite have; sometimes over its quiet surface there would creep an uneven purple spot—the shadow of a cloud. I had not slept well the night before and I had got up feeling broken, with a headache and my nerves overstrung. At breakfast I had quarrelled with the doctor, not so much because he had forbidden me to bathe in the open sea as on account of his self-assertive and radiant health. When I complained to you about him in the arbour I burst out crying. Do you remember the incident? You were disconcerted and you were saying disconnected but kind, caressing words, cautiously stroking my head as if I were a child. This sympathy was too much for me,

and I leaned my head on your shoulder and then … you kissed me again and again on the temple and on the cheek. And I must confess (I knew that I should blush at this part of my letter) that these kisses, not only were not repugnant, but even gave me a pleasant, purely physical pleasure, like the sensation of a light warm wave running over the whole of my body from head to foot.

But this was the only instance of that kind. You, my friend, said more than once that for people like us, exhausted consumptives, chastity was not so much a virtue as a duty.

All the same, this love, gleaming through my sad sunset, was so pure, so tender, so beautiful in its very malady! I remember, when I was quite a little schoolgirl, lying in the infirmary, an enormous, empty, dreadfully high room, lying there for some reason or other, apart from the rest of the sick ones, and being intolerably bored. And then my attention happened to be caught by a simple, but wonderful thing. Beyond the window, in the moss-covered recess—moss grew almost all over the saliences of that old, pre-Catherine wall—a flower had sprouted. It was a real hospital flower, with a corolla like a tiny yellow star and a long, thin, pale green little stalk. I couldn't tear my eyes from it and felt for it a sort of pitiful, pensive love, My own beloved one, this weak, sick, yellow little flower—it is my love for you.

There, this is all that I wish to tell you. Goodbye. I know that my letter will slightly touch you, and the thought of this pleases me beforehand. For, with a love like this, actually like this, no one has probably ever loved you or ever will love you. …

It is true that I have one wish: it is to see you in that mysterious hour when the veil will begin to lift itself from my eyes, not to cling to you in senseless terror, but so that in that moment, when the will weakens, in the moment of involuntary fear which—who knows?—will perhaps seize me, you might press my hand tightly and say to me with your beautiful eyes:

"Courage, my friend—a few more seconds and you will know all."

But I shall resist this temptation. I shall seal my letter at once, write the address, and you will receive it a few days after I have crossed "the enigmatic border of knowledge."

My last feeling will be one of deep gratitude to you who have illumined my last days with love. Goodbye. Don't be anxious about me. I feel well. There, I have closed my eyes, and over my body there runs once more a sweet, warm wave as then—in the vineyard arbour. My head swims so quietly and pleasantly. Goodbye.