

Autumn Flowers

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Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

My dear Angry Friend,

I write “angry” because I can imagine first your stupefaction and then your anger when you receive this letter and learn by it that I have not kept my word, that I have deceived you and have suddenly left the town instead of waiting for you tomorrow evening in my hotel, as had been decided. My darling, I have simply run away from you, or rather from us both, have run away from that torturing, that awkward, and unnecessary tension which unfailingly would have sprung up between us again.

And don’t hasten, with that caustic smile of yours, to accuse me of a saving wisdom, for you know, more than anyone on earth, how that leaves me when I am most in need of it. God is my witness that, up to the last minute, I did not know whether I should really go or not. Even now I am not at all sure that I shall resist to the end the intolerable temptation to have one more look at you, if only one more, even fugitively, even from a distance.

I don’t even know that I shall keep myself sufficiently in hand not to jump out of this railway carriage after the third bell. That is why, when I have finished this letter (if I can only manage to finish it) I shall give it to a porter and tell him to post it at the very moment when the train starts. And I shall watch him from the window and feel, as if I were actually saying goodbye to you, that painful oppression of the heart.

Forgive me. All that I told you about lemons and sea air and doctors who wanted to send me here from Petersburg, was untrue. I came here solely because I was irresistibly drawn to you, aching to recapture a poor little particle of that burning, dazzling happiness which sometimes we revelled in prodigally and carelessly, like czars in fairy tales.

From what I have told you, I think you must have gathered a rather clear picture of my mode of life in that gigantic Zoo which is called Petersburg society: visits, theatres, balls, my compulsory at home days, the charity bazaars, etc., etc., in all of which I must play the role of a decorative advertisement to my husband’s career and business affairs. But please don’t expect from me the usual tirade about the meanness, the emptiness, the flatness, the falsehood—I’ve forgotten how they put it in our society novels. I have been drawn into this life, with its comforts, its good manners, its novelties, its connections, its associations, and I should never have the force to tear myself away from it. But my heart has no share in it. Some sort of people flash before my eyes, repeat some sort of words, and I myself do things of some sort, talk about something, but

neither the people nor the words reach my soul, and sometimes all this seems to be happening far, far away from me, as if in a book or a picture, as though it were all “arranged,” as Domnoushka, my old nurse, used to say.

And suddenly, in this dull, indifferent life I was caught up by a wave from our dear, sweet past. Did you ever happen to wake up from one of those strange dreams which are so joyous that, after them, one goes about the whole day in a state of blissful intoxication, and which are at the same time so feeble in themselves, that if you repeated them, not merely to a stranger, but to your dearest friend on earth, they would sound null and flat, almost grotesque? “Dreamers often lie,” says Shakespeare’s Mercutio, and, my God, what a deep psychological truth there is in that.

Well then I, too, once woke up after such a dream. I saw myself in a boat with you, somewhere far out to sea. You were holding the oars and I was lying in the stern, looking up at the blue sky. That was the whole dream. The boat was rocking slightly and the sky was so blue that sometimes I seemed to be looking into a bottomless abyss. And a kind of unattainable feeling of joy permeated my soul with such tenderness, such harmony, that I wanted to cry and laugh at the same moment from too much happiness, I woke up, but the dream remained in my soul as if it had taken root in it. With a little effort of imagination, I was often able to recall it and to recapture a pale shadow at least of my dream.

Sometimes it would come to me in the drawing-room, during some lifeless conversation, which one listens to without hearing, and then I would have to cover my eyes with my hand for a moment to hide their unexpected gleam. Oh, how powerfully, how inevitably, I was drawn to you! How that captivating, magic tale of our love that flashed into my life six years ago under those caressing southern skies rises up before me, newborn in such moments. Everything comes back to me in a rush: our sudden quarrels, stupid jealousies, the comic suspicions and the joyous reconciliations, after which our kisses renewed their first fresh charm, the eagerly anticipated meetings, the feeling of sad emptiness in those minutes, after parting in the evening only to see each other again the next morning, when, again and again, we would turn at the same moment and our eyes would meet over the shoulders of the crowd that separated us, looking pink against the background of the dusky sunset. I remembered every atom of this illumined life, so full of strong, untrammelled happiness.

We couldn’t remain in the same spot. We were drawn eagerly to fresh places and fresh impressions. How charming they were, our long trips in those antediluvian, stuffy diligences covered with dirty sailcloth, in the company of gloomy Germans, with red, sinewy necks and faces that looked as if they had been roughly carved out of wood; and the lean, prim German women who stared at us with stupefied eyes, as they listened to our mad laughter. And those haphazard lunches “at some good old honest settler’s,” under the shade of the flower-laden acacia, hidden away in a clean yard, that was surrounded by a white wall and covered with sand from the seashore. Don’t you remember them? How ravenously we used to attack

the stuffed mackerels and the rough sour wine of the country, indulging in thousands of funny, tender little *bêtises*, like that historic, impertinent kiss which made all the tourists turn their backs on us with indignation. And the warm July nights in the fishing villages? Do you remember that extraordinary moonlight which was so bright that it seemed fantastic and unreal; that calm, irradiated sea, with ripples of silvery moiré and, on the lit-up background, the dark outlines of the fishermen as they drew in their nets, monotonously and rhythmically, all bending in the same direction?

But sometimes we would be seized by a longing for the noise of town and the hurly-burly of strangers. Lost in an unknown crowd, we would wander, pressing against each other, and realising more than ever our nearness each to each. Do you remember, my darling? As for me, I remember every minute detail and feel it until it hurts. All that is mine; it lives in me and will be with me always, to my death. I could never, even if I wanted to, get rid of it. ... Do you understand?—never. And yet it is not a reality. And I torture myself with the knowledge that I could never live it and feel it again because, God or Nature—I really don't know which—after giving man an almost Godlike intelligence has, at the same time, invented for him two torturing traps: ignorance of the future and the impossibility of forgetting the past, with the equal impossibility of returning to it.

On receiving the little note that I sent you at once from the hotel, you hastened to me. You were hurrying and you were agitated. I knew it at a distance by your quick, nervous step, and also because, before knocking at my door, you stood quite a long time in the corridor. At that moment, I was equally nervous myself, realising that you were standing there behind the door, only two steps away from me, pale, pressing your hand tightly against your heart, and breathing deeply and even with difficulty. And for some reason or other, it seemed to me then impossible, unimaginable, that at once, in a few seconds, I should see you and hear your voice. I was in a mood such as one experiences when half asleep, when one sees things rather clearly, but, without waking up, one says to oneself: this is not real, it is only a dream.

You had changed during the years, you had become more manly; you seemed to have grown. Your black jacket suits you much better than your student's tunic; your manners have become more collected; your eyes look at one with more assurance and more coldly; that fashionable, pointed little beard of yours is decidedly becoming. You thought that I too had improved in looks, and I quite believe that you said it sincerely, all the more because I read it in your first, quick, slightly surprised glance. Every woman, unless she is hopelessly stupid, will realise unerringly the impression that her appearance has produced. ...

All the way down here in the train, I was trying to imagine our meeting. I admit that I never thought it would turn out so strange, so strained, so awkward for both of us. We exchanged unimportant, commonplace words about my journey, about Petersburg, about our health, but the eyes of each were searching the other's, jealously looking for what had been added

by time and the strange life that was completely unknown to the other. ... Conversation failed us. We began with “*vous*” in an artificial, affected tone, but both of us soon felt that every minute made it more difficult and more stupid to keep it up. There seemed to be between us some foreign, oppressive, cold obstacle, and we did not know how to remove it.

The spring evening was quietly fading. It grew dark in the room. I wanted to ring for lights, but you protested against it. Perhaps the darkness helped us in our decision to touch upon the past. We began to talk about it with that kindly condescending mockery with which grownup people allude to the pranks of their childhood. But the odd part of it was that the more we tried to deceive each other and ourselves and appear gay and indifferent, the sadder grew our tone. At last, we became silent and sat for a long time—I in the corner of the sofa, you in the armchair—without moving, almost without breathing. Through the open window there came to us the indistinct drone of the large town, the noise of wheels, the hoarse shrieks of the tramway hooters, the jerky bicycle bells, and, as always on spring evenings, these sounds reached us softened into a melancholy that was almost tender. Through the window one could see a narrow strip of the sky—pale as faded bronze—and, against it, the dark silhouette of a roof with chimneys and a watchtower that shimmered faintly. In the darkness I could not distinguish your figure, but I could see the shining of your eyes, fixed on the window, and I thought there were tears in them.

Do you know what comparison occurred to me while we silently reviewed our dear, touching memories? It was as though we had met, after years of separation, at the tomb of someone whom we had both at one time loved with equal fondness. A quiet cemetery ... spring ... young grass all round; the lilacs are blossoming, and we are standing beside the familiar tomb, unable to go, unable to shake off the sad, confused, and endlessly dear phantoms that have claimed us. This dead being—it is our old love, my darling.

Suddenly you broke the silence, jumping up and pushing your chair sharply away.

“No,” you exclaimed, “this is impossible, this is becoming torment.” I could hear how painfully your voice shook. “For God’s sake, let us get out into the fresh air, or I shall break down or go mad.”

We went out. The transparent, soft, tawny darkness of the spring evening was already in the air, enveloping with amazing lightness, delicacy, and distinctness the angles of buildings, the branches of trees, and the contours of human figures. When we had passed the boulevards you called a cab, and I knew already where you wished to take me.

There everything is as it once was. The long stretch of yellow sand, carefully pounded down, the bright blue lights of hanging electric lanterns, the playful, exhilarating sounds of the military orchestra, the long rows of little marble tables, occupied by men and women, the

indistinct and monotonous talk of the crowd, the hastily darting waiters, the never-changing, stimulating environment of an expensive restaurant. Heavens, how quickly, how ceaselessly the human being changes, and how permanent and immovable are the places and things that surround him. In this contrast, there is always something infinitely sad and mysterious. You know, it has sometimes been my lot to stumble on bad lodgings, not merely bad, but disgusting, utterly impossible, and, in addition to this, to encounter a whole series of unpleasant incidents, disappointments, illness. When you change lodgings like those, you really think that you have entered the zone of heaven. But a week or so later it is enough to pass by chance that very house and glance up at the empty windows with the white placards stuck on them, for your soul to become oppressed by a painful, languid regret. It is true that everything there was odious, distressing, but, all the same, you seem to have left there a whole strip of your life, a strip that you cannot recover.

Just as before, girls with baskets of flowers were standing at the doors of the restaurant. Do you remember how you used always to choose for me two roses, one dark crimson and the other tea-coloured? As we were driving past, I noticed, by a sudden movement of your hand, that you wanted to do the same, but you pulled yourself up in time. How grateful I was to you for this, my dear one!

Under hundreds of curious eyes, we made our way to the same little arbour that juts out so impertinently over the seafront at a fearful height, so that, when you look down, leaning over the railing, you cannot see the shore and you seem to be swimming in the air. Beneath our feet, the sea was clamouring; at this height it looked so dark and terrible. Not far from the shore, large black, angular rocks emerged from the water. The waves were constantly rushing at them, breaking themselves against them and covering them with mounds of white foam. When the waves retreated, the wet, polished flanks of the rocks shone as if they had been varnished and reflected the lights of the electric globes. Sometimes a gentle little breeze would blow up, saturated with such a strong, healthy smell of seaweed, fish, and salt ozone, that one's lungs expanded from it, of their own accord, and one's nostrils dilated.

But something bad, dull, and constraining was more and more surely chaining us down. ...

When champagne was brought in, you filled my glass and you said with gloomy gaiety:

"Well, let us try to get a little artificial life. 'Let us drink this good, brave wine,' as the fiery French say."

No, in any case, "the good, brave wine" would not have helped us. You grasped that yourself, for you added immediately, with a long sigh:

"Do you remember how we used to be, both of us, from morning till night, drunk without wine merely from our love and the joy of life?"

Below, on the sea, near the rocks, a skiff appeared, its large white stately sails swinging prettily as it dipped and rose through the waves. In the skiff, one could hear a woman's laugh, and someone, probably a foreigner, was whistling, quite in tune with the orchestra, the melodies of the Waldteufel waltz.

You too were following the sails with your eyes, and, still looking at it, you said dreamily:

"It would be nice to get into a little boat like that and go far out to sea, out of sight of land. ... Do you remember how we used to do it in the old days?"

"Yes, our old days are dead. ..."

It slipped from me unintentionally, in answer to my thoughts, and immediately I was frightened by the unexpected effect that the words produced on you. You grew suddenly so white and threw yourself back in your chair so quickly that I thought you were fainting. A minute later, you began to speak in a strangled voice that seemed suddenly to have become hoarse:

"How oddly our thoughts have met. I was just thinking the same. It seems to me fantastic, unreal, impossible that it was really we, not two other people, quite strangers to us, who, six years ago, loved each other so madly and revelled in life so fully, so beautifully. Those two have long ceased to belong to this world. They have died ... died. ..."

We returned to the town. The road ran through cluster after cluster of villas built by the local millionaires. We passed impressive cast-iron railings and high stone walls behind which the thick green of platanes hung down over the road; enormous gateways carved like lace work; gardens with wreaths of many coloured lanterns; magnificent verandahs, brilliantly illuminated; exotic plants in the flower gardens in front of villas which seemed like magic palaces. The white acacias had such a strong odour, that the aroma of their luscious sweetness could be felt, even on one's lips. Sometimes we experienced, for a second, a damp chilliness, but immediately afterwards we passed once more into the perfumed warmth of the quiet spring night.

The horses were running fast, their hoof-beats falling loudly in even time. We swayed gently on the carriage springs, as we sat silent. When we were nearing the town, I felt your arm cautiously, slowly, winding round my waist and quietly but insistently it drew me to you. I made no resistance but did not yield to this embrace. And you understood, and you were ashamed. You withdrew your arm and I groped in the dark for your hand, gratefully pressing it, and it answered me with a friendly, apologetic pressure.

But I knew that your wounded male pride would assert itself all the same. And I was not

wrong. Just before we parted, at the entrance to the hotel, you asked permission to come to see me. I fixed a day, and then—forgive me—I stealthily ran away from you. My darling! If not tomorrow, then in another two days, in a week perhaps, there would have flamed up in us merely sensuality, against which honour and will and mind are powerless. We would have robbed those two dead people by substituting for our love of the past a false and ludicrous make-believe. And the dead people would have cruelly avenged themselves by creating between us quarrels, distrust, coldness, and—what is more terrible than all the rest—a ceaseless jealous comparison of the present with the past.

Goodbye. In the heat of writing I have not noticed how I have passed on to the old “*tu*” of lovers. I am sure that in a few days, when the first ache of your wounded pride has passed, you will share my opinion and will stop being angry at my escape.

The first bell has just sounded. But I am sure now that I shall resist temptation and shall not jump out of the train.

All the same, our brief meeting is beginning, in my imagination, to clothe itself in a little cloud of smoke, a kind of tender, quiet, poetic, submissive sadness. Do you remember that beautiful verse of Pouchkine: “Autumn flowers are dearer than the beautiful newborn ones of the fields. ... So, sometimes the hour of parting is more vivid than the meeting itself ...”?

Yes, my darling, these very autumn flowers. Have you ever been out in a garden late in autumn on a wet, morose morning? The almost naked trees are threadbare and swing to and fro; the fallen leaves rot on the paths; on all sides is death and desolation. And only in the flowerbeds, above the drooping yellow stalks of the other flowers, the autumn asters and dahlias bloom brightly. Do you remember their sharp, grassy odour? You are standing, perhaps in a strange listlessness, near the flowerbeds, shivering with cold; you smell this melancholy, purely autumnal, odour and you are distressed. There is everything in this distress: regret for the summer that has fled so quickly, expectation of the cold winter, with its snow, and the wind howling through the chimneys, and regret for one’s own summer that has so swiftly rushed away. My dearest one, my only one! Exactly that feeling has taken hold of my soul at this moment. In a little time, your recollection of our meeting will become for you just as tender, sweet, sad, and poignant. Goodbye, then. I kiss you on your clever, beautiful eyes.

Your Z—.