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The house on Three Pond Lane

In the village of Talitsy near the city of Shuya in Vladimir Province of Central Russia, there lived in the middle of the nineteenth century a poor village priest named Vladimir Tsvetaev. The name Tsvetaev is derived from an odd imperative form of a verb which means 'to blossom' and it seems to have occurred only among hereditary provincial clergy. Marina Tsvetaeva once described her father's side of the family as an 'uninterrupted and uninterruptible clan: a primeval one,' and half-seriously suggested that its origins might be traced to the legendary epic hero Ilya of Murom, supposedly a native of the region around Vladimir.

Father Vladimir was one of those impoverished village clerics whose mode of life differed little from that of the surrounding peasantry to whose spiritual needs he ministered. He plowed his own land, threshed grain, and mowed hay until the end of his days. He enjoyed great esteem among his parishioners and his moral authority and prestige were so great that his advice was often sought by the city folk from the neighbouring towns. Not much is known of Father Vladimir's wife Ekaterina, who bore him four sons and who died when she was thirty-five. But we do have a handsome tribute in verse to her endurance and stamina, written by a granddaughter she never saw:

> My first grandmother had four sons.
> She had four sons, one wooden candle,
> A sheepskin blanket, a bag of hemp.
> She had four sons and her own two hands.

(The wooden candle, *luchina*, a splinter of wood dipped in slow-burning oil, was the cheapest form of indoor lighting in peasant huts, familiar from its evocations in Pushkin and other poets.)

The economic conditions under which Vladimir and Ekaterina Tsvetaev had to raise their sons can be further illustrated by the recollection of one of them, the poet's father, that he never had

shoes of his own until the age of twelve. If Marina Tsvetaeva valued Nikolai Leskov's novel *Cathedral Folk* (1874) higher than any of the acclaimed masterpieces by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, it may well have been because she saw a parallel between that novel's protagonists, a provincial village priest and his wife, and her paternal grandparents.

Of the four Tsvetaev sons, the eldest, Piotr, followed in his father's footsteps and inherited his parish in Talitsy. The other three became educators. Feodor, the third son, was a provincial school administrator, while the youngest one, Dmitry (1852–1920), was a professor of history. He taught at the University of Warsaw and was known for his reactionary politics and his anti-Semitism. Tsvetaeva's memoir about Andrei Bely, 'A Captive Spirit,' contains a dipped-in-acid portrait of her uncle Dmitry's wife, Elizaveta.

The second Tsvetaev brother, Ivan Vladimirovich (1847–1913), became passionately interested in Latin and in classical philology while attending the divinity school in Shuya. He eventually found his way to the University of St Petersburg, where he became the protégé of the famed philologist and ethnographer Izmail Sreznevsky, under whose direction he specialized in the study of ancient Italic dialects. For his dissertation on the language of the Oscans, a pre-Roman Italic nationality, Ivan Tsvetaev made an extensive sojourn in Italy, which inspired him to branch out into his other field of study, ancient sculpture.

From 1877 on, Ivan Tsvetaev settled in Moscow, where he was appointed at the university, first as Professor of Roman Literature and later to the chair of the theory and history of the arts. At Moscow University he became close friends with the well-known and ultra-conservative historian Dmitry Ilovaisky (1832–1920), the author, among other works, of the history primer for children used in most Russian schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Ilovaisky's beautiful daughter Varvara (1858–1890) was a gifted singer who had studied voice in Italy. When she returned to Moscow, she formed a romantic attachment her family judged unsuitable.

Accordingly, her father resolved to marry Varvara to his colleague Professor Tsvetaev, an arrangement to which she consented even though she could not reciprocate her husband's love and went on loving the man she was forced to give up. In 1882 a daughter, Valeria, was born and in 1890 Varvara Tsvetaeva died while giving

birth to her son Andrei. One year after her death, Ivan Vladimirovich married her friend, the twenty-one year old Maria Alexandrovna Meyn (1868–1906), the half-Polish daughter of a wealthy Baltic German businessman and publisher.

On her father's side of the family, apart from her grandmother Ekaterina, Marina Tsvetaeva could trace her descent only through the men. But on her mother's side, it was the matrilineal succession that fascinated her. Her maternal grandmother was a Polish noblewoman, Maria Bernacka, and *her* mother was Countess Maria Leduchowska. The poet was thus descended, on her mother's side, from three generations of Marias, all of whom were Polish and aristocratic and all of whom died before the age of forty. This circumstance gave rise, in her poetry, to the myth of her Polish roots, 'Polish pride,' and a possible personal connection with one of her favourite historical personages, Marina Mnishek (Maryna Mniszchówna, ca. 1587–1614), whom most people remember from either Pushkin's or Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

The second marriage of Professor Tsvetaev followed the pattern of his first one in an uncanny manner. Again the bride was a musician – this time a pianist who, after one single concert appearance was not allowed by her father to play in public. Again the bride was in love with another man. The man she loved was married and, although divorce was possible, her father considered it a sin. 'When my grandfather Alexander Meyn made her choose between the loved one and himself,' wrote Tsvetaeva, who had access to some of her mother's earlier diaries, 'she chose her father, and afterwards, she chose what was the most difficult: a widower with two children, still in love with his late wife.' Maria Meyn's own rationale for accepting Ivan Tsvetaev's proposal was that she was a friend of his first wife and that their children needed a mother.

This turned out to be a miscalculation. Her stepdaughter Valeria never did forgive her father's second wife for what she saw as usurpation of her mother's position and for becoming the mistress of the Tsvetaev family home at Three Pond Lane (*Trekhprudnyi pereulok*), No. 8. The house, which was a part of Varvara Ilovaiskaya's dowry, was technically the property not of Professor Tsvetaev, but of Varvara's children, Valeria and Andrei. This was where Marina Tsvetaeva was born on September 26 (or, according to the Gregorian calendar now in use, October 9), 1892. Till the end of her life, she continued to prefer the old Julian calendar, which

was in use in Russia when she came into the world. Two years later, in 1894, came the birth of her younger sister Anastasia, usually called Asya and still alive as these lines are being written.

The year Marina Tsvetaeva was born, 1892, was a fateful year in the history of Russia. Because of the disastrous crop failure in the previous year, there was a widespread famine in the provinces adjacent to the Volga. Though not as calamitous as the famine in the reign of Boris Godunov in 1601–3, and not to be compared to the starvation in the post-revolutionary period or during the collectivization of the early 1930s, it was the worst such instance within the memory of the people at the time. It shook Russian society from the stagnation and apathy that had come to typify it at the end of the 1880s.

The wide-ranging and by and large effective famine-relief work, in which a number of notable personalities took part, served notice of the extent to which the intelligentsia could engage in meaningful social action independently of the tsar's government. Vladimir Korolenko, the most politically engaged writer of the time, participated in famine fighting and published a book about it. Anton Chekhov dropped all literary activity and plunged into an organized campaign to prevent the farmers from slaughtering their horses for food, which would leave no draft power for next spring's plowing. When the famine was followed the next summer by a cholera epidemic, Chekhov volunteered his services as a medical inspector.

Leo Tolstoy, who no longer considered himself a writer at this time, but rather a leader of a religious sect, and his followers, the Tolstoyans, organized a string of soup kitchens and collected money for the famine victims. In February 1892, a young law student Sergei Diaghilev and his cousin Dmitry Filosofov (with whom in a few years Diaghilev would start the epochal journal *The World of Art*) came to Tolstoy's house in Moscow to offer their donation and to discuss ethical and moral problems. In a somewhat different vein, the young revolutionary Vladimir Ulianov, who as Lenin would become the founder of the Soviet system, launched a campaign to discredit and to sabotage the work of the famine-relief organizations, because his view was that the more peasants starved to death, the greater the likelihood of a revolution.

According to the historian Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, the shock of the 1892 famine was what led to the formation of the opposition

political parties which were to bring about the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (and were also to be important in Marina Tsvetaeva's personal and literary life): the liberal, middle-of-the-road Constitutional Democrats; the Socialist Revolutionaries, who continued the earlier populist tradition of Russian radicalism; and the Marxist party of Social Democrats, one of whose factions, the Bolsheviks, would eventually take over the country and exterminate all the other dissident parties and the libertarian outlook most of them represented.

In literature, too, 1892 was a watershed year. The great age of the Russian novel, which lasted from the 1860s to 1880s, was also a time of catastrophic decline of Russian poetry. A succession of utilitarian-minded positivist critics who dominated the literary scene after the 1860s tolerated poetry only if it contained social criticism or preached a simplistic moral. Language, style and craftsmanship were in a state of decay. Nineteenth-century poets who meant so much to Tsvetaeva and to those who came after her generation – Yevgeny Baratynsky, Afanasy Fet and Karolina Pavlova, for instance – were reviled and despised as empty-headed songbirds. The favourite poets of the 1880s were the maudlin poetaster Semion Nadson, hailed as the new incarnation of Pushkin merely because he wrote of the evils of exploitation and oppression; Alexei Apukhtin, author of flashy salon lyrics and a friend of Tchaikovsky, who set his poems to music; and Modest Musorgsky's friend Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, whose verse wedded the most banal clichés to the most hackneyed rhymes that existed. The fact that Musorgsky could seriously consider Golenishchev-Kutuzov a poet of magnitude comparable to Pushkin's or Lermontov's testifies to the depths to which the understanding of poetry had plunged.

There were, it is true, two enormously attractive presences on the literary scene of the 1880s: Anton Chekhov and the philosopher-poet Vladimir Soloviov. Each one represented in his own sphere (Chekhov in the secular and realistic one and Soloviov in the spiritual and mystical) the breadth of outlook, universality and tolerance of other viewpoints that were not usual in Russian culture. But their impact would not be felt until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first years of the 1890s, Chekhov had every reason to complain in his letters about the provinciality to which Russian literature and art had been reduced.

In 1892, Dmitry Merezhkovsky gave a public lecture 'On the

Causes of the Decline of Contemporary Russian Literature and on Its New Trends.' As spelled out in this lecture, later included in a collection of Merezhkovsky's essays, the causes were the compulsory adherence to radical utilitarian dogma, the ban on metaphysics and the disregard for artistic quality. One year later, Merezhkovsky's wife, the poet Zinaida Gippius, published in a major literary journal her poem 'Song,' the concluding line of which, 'What I need does not exist in this world,' created a considerable stir. This was the first of her authentically Symbolist poems, in which Gippius extended the boundaries of the usual nineteenth-century Russian meters and popularized accentual verse and assonance rhymes, later to be developed and perfected by such poets as Blok, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky.

Merezhkovsky's lecture and Gippius's poems were the early harbingers of the literary and artistic revival that came to be known as Russian Symbolism. Within two or three years, this trend was joined by such other important poets of the first Symbolist generation as Valery Briusov, Konstantin Balmont and Feodor Sologub (the second Symbolist generation, which included Viacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely, made its appearance in the early years of the twentieth century).

By the time Sergei Diaghilev, Dmitry Filosofov and the artists of their circle were ready to launch their journal *The World of Art* in 1898, there existed a group of major poets who had successfully revived the art of writing good verse and a group of important metaphysical philosophers, descended from Vladimir Soloviov's example. All of them were anxious to make common cause with Diaghilev in his efforts to liberate literature and the arts from the 'narrow prison of ideology and prejudice' (as Nikolai Gumiliov put it) to which they had been confined since the 1860s.

The spectacular explosion of artistic creativity that resulted from this alliance affected all aspects of cultural life in the early twentieth-century Russia. Its liberated and liberating influence was wide-ranging. Yet there were some areas where this influence did not penetrate. It was not felt, for example, in the academic families where Andrei Bely and, a decade later, Marina Tsvetaeva were growing up. Nor did it affect, as Tsvetaeva was to learn to her grief, the cultural attitudes of the leading figures of the liberal and radical opposition parties. But the world in which this poet was to develop, live, and create, began to take its poli-

tical and artistic shape, as I have tried to show, the very year she was born.

We have at our disposal three primary sources on the childhood years of Marina Tsvetaeva: her early poetry, her sister's memoirs and her own autobiographical essays. All three are to be considered with caution as factual evidence. In the first category are the poems Tsvetaeva wrote between the ages of sixteen and nineteen and which were included in her first two published collections, *The Evening Album* and *The Magic Lantern*. Now, except for her plays and narrative poems written on subjects taken from folklore or historical sources and her philosophical and literary essays, all of Tsvetaeva's poetry and prose are personal confessions, where autobiographical elements are a basic component. But in the poems about her childhood in her first two collections, the reflections of actual experiences (and they are certainly numerous) are subordinated to the central myth that informs these two books: the myth of childhood as a magical region, an Eden from which one is expelled after growing up.

The resultant idealized depiction appears even more unreal when one remembers that the little child, who in some of these poems yearns for her mother and for the safety of the nursery, is at the same time a young woman of eighteen or nineteen who obstinately resists entering the world of adults. As biographical material, then, these early poems are of interest only as evidence of how the poet incorporated her actual experiences into the mythology of childhood that is expounded in those two early books.

Extreme idealization of the past is also a handicap with our second main source on the poet's childhood, the *Memoirs* (*Vospominaniia*) by her sister, Anastasia Tsvetaeva. Serialized in the 1960s in the journal *Novyi Mir* and published in book form in three different editions (1971, 1974 and 1983), these memoirs have become a great favourite with Soviet readers and a standard reference for Tsvetaeva scholars. Anastasia Tsvetaeva wrote her recollections during the seventh and eighth decades of her life, a life filled with hardship and privations, including an arrest on trumped-up charges and seventeen years spent in GULag camps and internal exile in remote regions of Siberia.

The rehabilitation and the eventual popularity of Marina Tsvetaeva's writings in the Soviet Union in recent decades pro-

pelled her surviving sister into a position of considerable literary eminence and gave her the access to publishing houses and the reading public that had been eluding her since she began her writing career at the age of twenty-two. In her gratitude, Anastasia Tsvetaeva has sought to minimize all conflict that was a part of her own and her sister's lives, either within the family or with the Soviet regime (Marina's conflicts with the émigré community in Paris are, of course, given extensive play). Therefore, while these memoirs are an inexhaustible storehouse of factual information on Tsvetaeva's life and an indispensable commentary on her early poetry, they need to be approached with wariness. Irma Kudrova and Viktoria Schweitzer, two devoted and knowledgeable Tsvetaeva scholars, were quite right to challenge in print the factual accuracy of these memoirs and to question Anastasia Tsvetaeva's depiction of her own and their mother's relationship with the young Marina. (See Appendix for the sources cited in this and subsequent chapters.)

There remains the remarkable series of the poet's own recollections about her earliest years, which she wrote during the 1930s, when, as Irma Kudrova put it, 'she distinctly understood the catastrophe that occurred in her interrelationship with the world' and 'insistently sought and found in the distant land of her childhood the seeds that later germinated and grew into the tragic realization [of being a] person who is disconnected from her time and her society.' Tsvetaeva's personal and literary memoirs are not always models of objectivity and reliability. We now know that she rearranged things, omitted some events she did not care to remember and was on occasion guilty of plain forgetfulness. But her memoirs are almost recklessly candid and, unlike her sister, she was incapable of falsifying her past experiences and attitudes in order to make them more acceptable within the notions of propriety or political correctness held by a later age.

Throughout the decade of the 1930s, Tsvetaeva felt compelled to return in her prose to the period between her earliest childhood memories and the departure of her family for Italy in 1902 because of her mother's illness, that is, to the first ten years of her life. Her memoiristic essays 'Women of the Flagellant Sect' ('Khlystovki'), 1934; 'The Devil' ('Chort'), 'My Mother's Fairy Tale' ('Skazka materi') and 'My Mother and Music' ('Mat' i muzyka'), all three published in 1935; and 'My Pushkin' ('Moi Pushkin'), 1937, are all

devoted to that period. 'The Ivy-Clad Tower' ('Bashnia v pliushche') of 1933 deals with a slightly later period when Marina was twelve and her younger sister ten. In addition, two other prose pieces from the same period, 'Natalia Goncharova,' 1929, and the memoir on Osip Mandelstam, 'Story of a Dedication' ('Istoriia odnogo posviashcheniia'), 1930, contain important episodes about little Marina's situation within her family (in fact, the writing of these two pieces might have suggested to the poet the memoir sequence enumerated above, which then followed).

Had Tsvetaeva been as popular and highly valued in her lifetime as she is now, her childhood memoirs would have been collected into a separate book soon after their publication in various periodicals, a book that would find its rightful place next to such earlier classics of the genre as Tolstoy's *Childhood* and *Adolescence* and Maxim Gorky's *Childhood*. The penetration into the psychology of a very young child is equal to the very finest fictional treatments of similar material to be found in Russian literature, such as Chekhov's 'Grisha' and 'The Cook's Wedding' and Andrei Bely's autobiographical novel *Kotik Letaev*. Anastasia Tsvetaeva has objected that little Marina could not have possibly felt about herself and other members of the family the way she described it in those memoirs. But neither Anastasia, nor anyone else can deny that this was how Tsvetaeva, the grown-up woman and the mature poet of the 1930s, *remembered* her childhood. Memoir after memoir, year after year, a consistent picture emerges, supported also by the poet's evocations of her childhood in letters to such friends as Vera Bunina and Boris Pasternak.

The picture presented in the memoirs is not entirely unhappy. We read of the leisurely life of the Tsvetaev family and their retainers in their house, with its dove-grey, dove-filled yard, the house of which the sixteen-year-old Marina was later to write:

> Our marvellous, our wonderful house in Three Pond Lane
> Which is now turning into verse.

We read of the summers at their *dacha* in the picturesque town of Tarusa on the river Oka. We meet the frequently changing governesses, among them the Baltic German Augusta Ivanovna and the somewhat flashy Parisienne named Alphonsine Dijon. Marina had no traditional Russian nanny (*niania*), but there was one for little Asya. This nanny was quite the opposite of Pushkin's

folktale-reciting nurse, for in her case we find the six-year-old Marina ecstatically declaiming Pushkin's verse to the uncomprehending and disapproving *niania*.

The visits of her maternal grandfather Alexander Danilovich Meyn were particularly joyous occasions for Marina, or Musen'ka, as she was then known. He brought her presents and bananas (an exotic treat in those days), recited German poetry, and, above all, he showed a partiality for her and an affection she so desperately wanted and did not get from the members of her immediate family. The cheerful visits of her grandfather are contrasted with the infrequent visits of the dour, forbidding Professor Ilovaisky, the grandfather of Marina's half-sister Valeria and half-brother Andrei. Instead of presents, Ilovaisky brought copies of the anti-Semitic newspaper *The Kremlin*, of which he was reputedly the publisher, the circulation manager and the sole regular subscriber; otherwise, he showed little interest in the two little girls who were not directly related to him.

The siblings are clearly delineated through numerous references to them in the memoirs. Valeria Tsvetaeva, twelve years older than Marina, was kind to her as a child, though as adults they were hostile to each other and became permanently estranged. Musically, the Tsvetaev household was divided into two spheres: the vocal, which belonged to Valeria and her late mother, and the piano-playing one which was the realm of Maria Alexandrovna and her unwilling daughters. The feud between the stepmother and the stepdaughter, while under reasonable control most of the time, was present throughout Marina's childhood. Music, however, provided the ground for an occasional armistice, when Maria Alexandrovna would accompany at the piano Valeria's singing of the traditional Russian popular songs, the *romansy*.

Valeria's brother Andrei took no part in the Ilovaisky–Meyn division. He was his stepmother's particular favourite. Little Asya, who later, at the time of Marina's adolescence, would become her closest and dearest friend, emerges in the childhood reminiscences as the pampered baby of the family, selfish, spoiled and envious. Professor Tsvetaev is described as a kindly and considerate man, who on occasion would take Marina's side and defend her from her mother's whims and excessive demands. But his main interests clearly lay outside of his family and at home he could be absent-minded to the point of absurdity: 'my attentively incomprehending father.'