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Spring 2016

Excerpt From Novel "The Tale Is Fresh" By I. Grekova, Translated By Sibelan Forrester

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Recommended Citation
I. Grekova and Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (2016). "Excerpt From Novel "The Tale Is Fresh" By I. Grekova, Translated By Sibelan Forrester". *Two Lines: World Writing In Translation*. Volume 24,
https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/260

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I. Grekova, pseudonym of Elena Sergeevna Venttsel' (1907–2002), was a mathematician. Her name incorporates the mathematic variable y *(*igrek *in Russian). Along with textbooks and professional studies, she wrote three novels, six novellas, and numerous stories reflecting life in the Soviet Union, especially for women.*

Свежо предание

Первым впечатлением, которое он запомнил, был радужный солнечный зайчик на стене. Обои были светлые, в крупных косых клетках, и в самую середину одной из клеток упал зайчик и лежал там, не шевелясь, притихший и полосатый, сияющий каждым цветом.

Маленький мальчик еще толком не знал названий цветов— ему было всего три года. Он засмеялся и стал ловить зайчик рукой. Зайчик не давался: он только лег сверху на желтоватую худенькую руку и чуть-чуть изменил цвета. Мальчик был счастлив.

Он сидел на постели у мамы, на подушке, между мамой и зайчиком. Он давно не видел маму: она куда-то исчезла, а потом вернулась, и вот сейчас, сидя на подушке, он был ужасно счастлив, весь дрожал от счастья и от страха, что мама снова уйдет. Мама лежала желтая и бледная, та и не та, не совсем знакомая, остриженная, с короткой щетинкой на черной круглой голове. Малыш трогал щетинку пальцем, узнавал маму и боялся себе поверить и на всю жизнь запомнил радужный зайчик на светлых обоях и ощущение счастья, смешанное со страхом, что оно уйдет....

The Tale Is Fresh

The first impression that lodged in his memory was a rainbow-edged spot of light on the wall. The wallpaper was pale, with large slanting checks, and the light spot fell in the very middle of one of the checks and lay there without stirring, quiet and striped, shining with every color.

The little boy still didn't know the names of the colors well—he was only three years old. He laughed and started trying to catch the light spot with his hand. The light spot wouldn't let him catch it: it just lay on top of his thin yellowish arm and changed colors ever so slightly. The boy was happy.

He was sitting on mama's bed, on a pillow, between mama and the spot of light. He hadn't seen mama for a long time: she had disappeared somewhere, and then came back, and right now, sitting on the pillow, he was terribly happy, all trembling from happiness and from fear that mama might go away again. She was lying there, sallow and pale, herself and not herself, not entirely familiar, with her hair cut, short bristles on her round black head. The little boy touched the bristles with his finger, recognized that it was his mother, and was afraid to believe it. And he remembered for his whole life the rainbow spot of light on the pale wallpaper and the

feeling of happiness, mixed with fear that it would go away.

Afterward, much later, he found out that it had happened in the year 1920, that mama had been sick with typhus and had almost died, and the rainbow spot of light came from the crystal ashtray on the table. It was a big ashtray made of clear, heavy crystal with smooth gleaming facets. When the boy got bigger, he learned to move the ashtray himself on sunny days and to send the spot of light along the wall. And so a rainbow spot of light danced over his childhood, his life, but then it started to appear more and more rarely, until finally it went out altogether.

The boy's name was Konstantin Levin.

His parents—Izaak Levin and Vera Bergman—had met in 1912 at a student party. He was studying engineering, she was in the Bestuzhev courses for women. Both of them were young, even very young. Both were revolutionaries. Both had gone into the revolution because it was impossible to live in any other way.

Vera was merry, black-haired, with round trustful eyes and finely waving hair, such a fine wave that it didn't even seem fluffy. When she opened her mouth to laugh, her pale blue teeth stood in an even row like peas in a pod. She spoke with a very sweet guttural burr, and every "r" leaped and jingled in her throat like a little round bell. Vera often laughed, she liked to be with people, she was hard to embitter and easy to console, and she was firm as a rock in misfortune. A laughing flint pebble. When you strike it, it gives off laughter and sparks.

Many people thought she was frivolous. And it was hard to guess, no one would have guessed, that this light, laughing, merry Vera carried an unchanging, horrible image with her, hiding it deep inside. It was the image of two dead people—her grandfather and Tsilya.

Her grandfather and her little sister Tsilya had been killed in a pogrom in 1905, when Very was twelve. Her grandfather was lying on

his back, head turned to one side, his gray beard sticking out to the side. He was motionless, but it seemed as if he was running, desperately hurrying, and his beard had been blown to one side by the wind. And across her grandfather's wide chest lay little Tsilya, with a blue face, her black curls in little ringlets. Grandfather was holding her, as if to protect her and carry her away with him—in his old man's arm, white and very skinny with blue veins.

This picture always lay before her. All Vera had to do was fall silent, get pensive, simply stop laughing, and something inside her would slip off—like a pendulum swinging toward its point of balance—and once again grandfather and Tsilya would be lying there, on the ground splattered with red. The moment she was off her guard they were there again. Grandfather and Tsilya.

At first it made her want to shout, bite her hands, but gradually Vera almost got used to them. And the picture itself changed with the years, grew more peaceful, and now in her memory grandfather lay more motionless, and his beard wasn't blown quite as much to the side by the wind. But the image was always inside her, and it was because of them that Vera went into the revolution: grandfather and Tsilya. It was impossible for things to be that way. Something had to be done so that it wouldn't be that way.

Vera saw Izya Levin for the first time at the door of the little apartment where a get-together had been scheduled. She rang the bell, and he opened the door. She had been running up the stairs, afraid she was being tailed; she was panting, and coming from the frost outside into the warm. She had long eyelashes and batted them to shake off the snowflakes.

On the threshold stood a tall, swarthy young man, slender as a whip, with enormous, light eyes that were merry to the point of insolence. These eyes were what stuck most in her memory, and also his tousled brown hair, damp in front, sticking to his forehead. He was wearing a white, gleaming Tolstoyan shirt and a twisted silk

belt with ornamental tufts. A student's jacket hung by some kind of miracle on one shoulder. In his hand, a guitar.

"I'm Vera Bergman," she said. The little bell rolled and jingled twice in her throat.

The student looked at her, his eyes laughing with furious joy, but he didn't say his name. Instead of greeting her, he moved the guitar into his other hand, brought his index finger up to his lips, then very quickly and without any constraint put it on one of Vera's cheeks, then the other, and said twice, "Tss! Tss!" as if he had burned himself.

"Like testing an iron?" asked Vera.

"Exactly. Clever girl. You understand everything."

"Well then..." said Vera, abashed, and stole a look in the mirror. And indeed, her cheeks were red as fire from the cold, with a light fuzz, and probably just adorable.

But he was a strange one, all the same...

Meanwhile the strange student quickly, gracefully, and just as unconstrainedly helped her take off her velvet jacket, her fur hat, took her little muff, and he hung and put all that down, turning this way and that way, flexible, slender, flapping the black wing of his hanging jacket, which had also figured out how to dance, hanging on his shoulder in some mysterious way. All this was a bit over the top. There was too much movement for the simple task he was doing. It seemed as if any moment his waist might snap.

He flung the door wide open and bowed, letting her go through ahead.

The room—not quite a dining room, not quite a living room—was thick with smoke; the samovar was singing, cups were clattering. The hostess—a thin, freckled young woman with a horsy face and a pince-nez that hung on some kind of reins—barely noticed Vera, quickly gave her hand a shake, said, "Amuse yourself independently. We don't stand on ceremony. Some tea?" and, without waiting for an answer, went back to the debaters.

The argument was humming like a hive of bumblebees. Tobacco smoke marched over the tea table with the dirty plates, soggy cigarette butts, bloodless lemon slices in unfinished glasses of tea. What was the debate about? She could hear "The State Duma... Markov the Second... the Beilis case... medical expertise... international scandal... the Beilis case..."

Suddenly one person who stood out from the group of debaters—a hefty man with a black beard—lifted a hand as broad as a frying pan, and announced in a powerful bass that drowned out the argument, "That's not the main thing now. The important thing now is theory. There's no revolution, no struggle without theory."

But Vera didn't understand anything about theory. It seemed to her, most likely out of naivety, that you didn't need any theory. Do you really need a theory to love and to hate? She had joined the revolution because she couldn't do anything else. And also because they were lying there forever: her dead grandfather and dead Tsilya. But she never spoke about that to anyone. She couldn't let anyone in to the place where they lay.

Sitting on the couch and barely listening to the debate, she looked around, her lively eyes flashing. No, it seemed he wasn't here—the comrade she had agreed to meet. To whom she was supposed to say prearranged words (if only she didn't forget!). Who was supposed to give her letters from the Center. She wasn't acquainted with any of the faces around her. The only one who seemed familiar—frighteningly familiar—was the student who had opened the door for her and burned himself on her cheeks. He kept appearing here and there around the room—quick, mobile, eyes burning, flapping the wing of his jacket, bending first to one person, then to another, and suddenly he stopped in front of her, put his foot on a chair, seized the guitar firmly and precisely, tapped his knuckles on the soundboard, plucked the strings—once, twice... And at once the debating voices were drowned out. The strings began to ache with a penetrating tenderness...

"Well then!" he cried under his breath and broke into a rapid, stifled patter, rushing forward:

In the field a little birch tree stood...
In the field the curly birch tree stood...

he informed her confidentially, in a half whisper, as if it were who knows what kind of news (only for you, only for you!). And the guitar kept fluttering in his hands, twisting, jumping.

I'll break the white birch tree...

he informed her in the same way, as a secret, looking fiercely into Vera's eyes. "He'll break it," she started to believe, "oh, he'll break it!"

"There we go," he said, once he finished the song and sat down beside her. "Let's drink some tea."

Everything was blue-gray with smoke, and there were cigarette butts lying everywhere: in the saucers, on the windowsills, in the glasses with the lemon slices. The debates were soggy and yellow too, like the cigarette butts, and Vera didn't understand any of it, but the merry student was beside her: he would jump up, sit back down, pick up the guitar, and put it away—restless as fire in the wind. But strangely, his restlessness made her feel calm. That other comrade still hadn't come in. That should have worried Vera but it didn't, everything was fine, and she wasn't even afraid when around midnight the bell rang—long, demanding—and someone said, "The police!" There was a bit of a commotion, someone gasped, someone broke a glass, the hostess suggested that they should all keep their presence of mind, while the hefty blackbeard went to open the door. Vera herself had no idea how she wound up in the corridor, and then in the kitchen, with that same student.

"Put your things on quickly," he ordered in a whisper, holding her

jacket and hat for her. "I couldn't find your muff. Can you manage without it?"

"No doubt."

"Now I'll get you out of here. You aren't afraid?"

"No."

He sharply pulled the window frame inward, it flew open wide with a dry paper snap. Outside breathed the dark, damp air of early winter. The snow had already stopped, and after the smoky room, the unexpected freshness of the night air went into their lungs like a delicate happiness.

The student jumped up on the windowsill like a cat and pulled Vera up behind him. Outside the window was a sloping roof, powdered with snow that was very white in the darkness. It rang under their feet like a bucket.

They ran across the roof, went down the fire stairs, climbed onto another roof, then a third... Then Vera had no more idea where they were and what roofs and ladders they were taking. Up and down... The student led her by the hand, sometimes carefully lifted her or helped her down. He went lightly and confidently in the darkness, with a catlike, sensitive step. Vera would not have been surprised if he had dropped from the roof, flipped over like a cat and landed right on his feet. She wasn't afraid—on the contrary, she felt cheerful and curious: how would all this end?

In the end they had to jump off a low shed roof right into the soft, fluffy snow, which settled under their feet. The courtyard was deep, dark, without a light in the windows. He jumped first and caught Vera right in his arms—thin, strong, with hard muscular knobs at the shoulders. They stood that way, locked in a hug, knee-deep in snow, catching their breath and listening.

"I guess that's it," he said. "I don't hear anyone coming after us. Well, how are you?"

"Great."

"Great," he teased, trying to roll the little bell of the "r." And suddenly, without letting go or holding her more tightly, he kissed her cold lips that smelled of thaw and snow.

"Is it all right that I did that so soon?" he asked and opened his arms.

Vera didn't answer; for some reason she started laughing. She just stood there and laughed, loudly, carefree, slapping her palms against her knees. Her knees were low, right against the snow. Actually, he was standing knee-deep in the snow and also, probably, looked like a shorty. Was she laughing at him?

"What is it?" he asked, fairly offended. "If you didn't like it, slap me and we're done."

"No, it's all right. It just seemed very funny. I don't even know what your name is."

"I'm Izya. Izaak Ruvimovich. Izaak Ruvimovich Levin. Got it?"

"Got it. Ruvimovich," she said, and suddenly put her head on his shoulder. He gave her a slight hug.

"And I don't know your patronymic."

"Oh, it's very simple. Ilyinishna."

"Ilyinishna," he said pompously, carefully, and kissed her again. "From some fairytale: Ilyinishna. We have to go, Ilyinishna. Only where?"

"Does it matter? Somewhere."

"They're watching my apartment. Otherwise I'd invite you."

"Funny. They're watching mine too."

"Then you know where let's go? To the train station."

They sat at the station until morning. And in the morning, when they said good-bye, not knowing whether they'd see each other again, they already knew everything about each other. And the main thing was, there was no need to say anything—everything was clear without it. Izya was the first one she let in there—to grandfather and Tsilya. She

didn't say it in words—he already knew everything about her.

"My Nonsensishna," he said, kissing her good-bye.

Two weeks later they got married, and two weeks after that Izaak Levin was arrested. They managed to meet again only in 1916, when Izya was released from prison and almost immediately sent to the front. He spent only two weeks in Petrograd. They only lived together for two weeks, twice, before the revolution. It was all right—they were young. Their happiness lay ahead of them. It was waiting for the revolution—and the revolution came.

The boy was three years old in 1920, but he was born in 1917, in Petrograd, at the very same time as the February revolution.

Vera Levina was walking down the street on a windy winter evening, gasping at the wind, and with excitement. Here, finally, it was beginning, it had started! Here it was—the Revolution! The very same one they had fought for, died for, spent time in prisons, escaped from exile and hard labor. Was it really? It was! All the horrors were in the past: the police, the gendarmes, and those terrifying drunk ones, with their hiccups and "God Save the Tsar," who had killed grandfather and Tsilya. Nothing like that would ever happen again! The revolution had always been in the future, but now it was here, here it was, you could touch it with your hand. Revolution on the streets of Petrograd! The sky shook and burned with an amber smoky glow, and here and there shots cracked merrily, harmless and not at all frightening. Vera tried to see, as she used to, grandfather and Tsilya, but the image she always saw had gone fuzzy, slipped to one side. And what she did manage to see wasn't the same—not alive, not terrifying. It was as if grandfather had stopped running and was lying peacefully on the ground, stretching out his long legs, while Tsilya didn't want to appear at all—she flickered for a minute and disappeared. "Have they really let me go?" Vera thought. That was just as unlikely as the revolution.

Logs were piled up on the corner, under a torn-off sign that flapped loudly in the wind: a barricade. An aged, solidly bearded soldier in a fur hat, grunting, was piling the logs higher. Vera stopped beside him.

"Soldier, say, soldier," she said.

"What is it?" the soldier answered reluctantly.

"How is it?" she asked.

She herself didn't know "how is it." Maybe she wanted the soldier to confirm her joy, her pride. To praise her for the revolution, or something.

"You should be away from here, miss," the soldier said gloomily.

Then something incomprehensible happened. She heard a kind of cold, fine chirp, not outside—no, but inside her, in herself. Vera thought the chirp was funny, but something in her chest stopped her from laughing. She waved her mitten at the soldier and softly, her boots slipping, started to fall to one side against the beams. Suddenly she saw her grandfather: alive, laughing, with a handsome beard. He was sitting on the chair under the clock, and little Tsilya sat on his lap, playing with his watch chain.

The soldier bent over. He saw her pale face, blue-tinged, the rounded lids on her partly closed eyes, and out of the corner of her mouth—a wavering black string: blood.

"Oh Lord, they've wounded her. Mother of God," he said, catching Vera under her arms. The little miss turned out to be unexpectedly heavy. So that's what it was...

"Ah, you little birdie," the soldier said bitterly and protectively.

He picked Vera up in his arms and took her off to an army field hospital. That night they operated on her, and toward morning Konstantin Levin was born.

"It's you, it's you," Izaak Levin repeated pointlessly, kneeling beside Vera's cot, kissing the rough woolen blanket. He was thin and scary,

with white lips, in a short fur coat with a Mauser at his belt. He'd come home from the front for one day, and the next day he had to go back. Perhaps he had even deserted—Vera didn't quite understand. She was lying with her weak arms spread on top of the blanket, but for some reason he wasn't kissing her hands but the blanket, and he kept repeating: "It's you." Suddenly he remembered the baby boy. The boy was superfluous, unreal, had no significance. Only she existed, Vera—alive!

"How's the boy," he asked. In essence, he wasn't concerned with the boy. He asked in essence just out of politeness.

A little smile fluttered on Vera's pale lips.

"He's very nice, very nice," she answered in a whisper. "I have no milk. What should we call him?"

"Doesn't matter," said Izaak. "It's you."

And Vera named the boy Konstantin.

And did she ever get it for that from Izya, when they finally saw each other! The boy was already six months old when his father found out for the first time what his name was.

"What lack of forethought!" shouted Izaak. "Konstantin Levin! Why not just call him Evgenii Onegin? Or Childe Harold? You've disgraced him for his whole life. Everyone's going to ask him: has it been a long time since you made your appearance in the novel *Anna Karenina*?"

"I just forgot," Vera said, laughing.

"Forgot what?"

"That there's an Anna Karenina. That there's a Konstantin Levin."

"Konstantin, and on top of that Izaakovich! A very attractive combination! Did you think at all about what they'd call him when he grew up?"

"No, I didn't think," Vera answered flippantly. "Maybe when he grows up there won't be any more patronymics. But for now everyone

calls him Tang-Tin. As if he's Chinese. Isn't that nice?"

Nonsensishna!" Izaak thundered. "You really are a proper Nonsensishna! By the way, where is that paradox? I haven't even seen him yet."

"He's lying on the balcony, blue with happiness."

"Why blue?"

"Go see for yourself."

They went out on the balcony. And indeed, there was Tang-Tin in a laundry basket, blue with happiness. He was drunk, dead drunk on the fresh cool air, he was sleeping desperately, passionately, ecstatically, with fine transparent blue eyelids, with blue veins on his little white temples.

"Konstantin Izaakovich," Izya suddenly said tenderly. "An absurdity and son of an absurdity."

"That's much better," said Vera with approval. "Well, and now take me in your arms."

He took her in his arms, and they stood quietly beside the laundry basket, attentively watching as Tang-Tin labored with his inspired sleep. Without words they thought about the world he would live in, where there would be no more passports, and perhaps not even patronymics, and where no one would ask little Tang-Tin whether he was a Jew or not and why he was Izaakovich.