



The
COLLECTED
STORIES
of
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THE STORY OF MY DOVECOTE

For Maxim Gorky

*A*s a child I wanted a dovecote very badly. In all my life I have never desired anything more intensely. I was nine years old when my father promised to give me the money to buy some planks and three pairs of doves. The year was 1904. I was getting ready for the examinations for the preparatory class of the Nikolayev Lycée. My family lived in Nikolayev, in the province of Kherson. This province no longer exists; our town was absorbed into the district of Odessa.

I was only nine years old, and was frightened of the examinations. In both Russian and mathematics I could not afford to get less than five, the highest grade. The Jewish entry quota for our lycée was harsh, only five percent. Out of forty boys, only two Jews could be admitted into the preparatory class. The teachers would come up with the most cunning questions for these two boys; nobody was given the kind of complicated questions we were. So my father promised to buy me doves on condition that I manage to get two five-pluses. He tormented me more than I can say, I tumbled into a never-ending daydream—the long, desperate dream of a child—and though I went to the examination immersed in that dream, I still fared better than the rest.

I was good at learning. The teachers, though they tried every trick, did not manage to waylay my mind and my sharp memory. I was good at learning, and so got two fives. But then the situation changed. Khariton Efrussi,* the grain merchant who exported wheat to

* The Efrussi family was one of the oldest and wealthiest Jewish merchant families in Odessa.

Marseilles, proffered a five-hundred-ruble bribe for his son, I was given a five-minus instead of a five, and the lycée admitted Efrussi Junior in my place. My father was deeply pained by this. From the time I was six, he had taught me all the subjects you could imagine. That minus drove him to desperation. He wanted to beat Efrussi up, or to hire two dockworkers to beat him up, but mother talked him out of it, and I began preparing myself for the examination next year for the following grade. Behind my back, my family talked my tutor into going over the lessons for both the preparatory class and the first class within one year, and, as we were completely desperate, I ended up learning three books by heart. These books were Smirnovsky's grammar, Yevtushevsky's book of mathematical problems, and Putsikovich's introduction to Russian history. Children no longer study these books, but I learned them by heart, line by line, and the following year Karavayev, the schoolmaster, gave me those unattainable five-pluses in my Russian language examination.

Karavayev was a ruddy-faced, indignant man who had been a student in Moscow. He was barely thirty. His manly cheeks blossomed with the flush seen on the cheeks of peasant children. He had a wart on his face from which a tuft of ashen, feline hair sprouted. Also present at the examination besides Karavayev was the deputy warden, who was considered an important figure not only in the lycée but in the whole province. The deputy warden asked me about Peter I, and a blankness came over me, a feeling that the end, the abyss, was near, a dry abyss surrounded by delight and despair.

I knew by heart the passage about Peter the Great in Putsikovich's book and Pushkin's poems. I recited the poems in sobs. Faces swarmed into my eyes, mixing and shuffling deep inside like a fresh deck of cards, while I, shivering, straight-backed, shouted out Pushkin's verses with all my might, as fast as I could. I went on shouting the verses for a long time, nobody interrupting my crazed rambling. Across my crimson blindness, across the freedom that had taken hold of me, I only saw Pyatnitsky's old face leaning forward with its silvery beard. He did not interrupt me, but turned to Karavayev, who was rejoicing in Pushkin and me, and whispered, "What a nation! The devil is in these Yids!"

When I finished he said, "Very good, off you go now, my little friend."

I left the classroom and went out into the corridor, and there, lean-

ing against the unpainted wall, I woke from the convulsions of my dreams. Russian boys were playing all around me, the school bell hung nearby over the official-looking flight of stairs, a watchman was dozing on a broken chair. I gazed at him and began to come back to my senses. Children came creeping toward me from all sides. They wanted to poke me and get me to play with them, but suddenly Pyatnitsky appeared in the corridor. Passing by me, he stopped for an instant, his frock coat undulating in a heavy slow wave over his back. I saw emotion in his large, fleshy, gentlemanly back, and I went up to him.

"Children," he told the schoolboys. "Leave this boy alone!" And he laid his fat, tender hand on my shoulder. "My little friend," Pyatnitsky said, turning to me. "You can go and tell your father that you have been accepted into the first class."

A magnificent star shone on his chest, medals tinkled by his lapel, and hemmed in by the murky walls, moving between them like a barge moves through a deep canal, his large, black, uniformed body marched off on rigid legs and disappeared through the doors of the headmaster's office. A little attendant brought him tea with solemn ceremony, and I ran home to our store.

In our store a muzhik customer sat scratching his head in the grip of indecision. When my father saw me, he abandoned the muzhik and drank in my story without a moment's doubt. He shouted to his sales clerk to close the store, and rushed over to Sobornaya Street to buy me a cap with the school emblem on it. My poor mother barely managed to wrest me away from my delirious father. She stood there, pale, trying to foresee my fate. She kept caressing me and then pushing me away in disgust. She said that a list of all the children admitted into the lycée was always published in the newspapers, and that God would punish us and that people would laugh at us, if we bought a school uniform ahead of time. My mother was pale, she was trying to foresee my fate in my eyes, and looked at me with bitter pity, as if I were a little cripple, for she was the only one who fully realized how luckless our family was.

All the men of our clan had been too trusting of others and too quick to take unconsidered action. We had never had any luck in anything. My grandfather had once been a rabbi in Belaya Tserkov, had been chased out of town for blasphemy, and then lived in scandal and

poverty for another forty years, learned foreign languages, and started going insane in his eightieth year. My Uncle Lev, my father's brother, studied at the Yeshiva in Volozhin, evaded conscription in 1892, and abducted the daughter of a quartermaster serving in the Kiev military district. Uncle Lev took this woman to California, to Los Angeles, where he abandoned her, and he died in a madhouse among Negroes and Malays. After his death, the American police sent us his belongings—a large trunk reinforced with brown iron hoops—from Los Angeles. In this trunk were dumbbells, locks of a woman's hair, Uncle's *tallith*, whips with gilded tips, and herbal tea in little boxes trimmed with cheap pearls. The only men left in the family were mad Uncle Simon, who lived in Odessa, my father, and me. But my father was too trusting of others, he offended people with his exhilarating welcome of first love. They did not forgive him for this, and so cheated him. This was why my father believed that his life was governed by a malevolent fate, an inscrutable being that pursued him and that was unlike him in every way. So in our family I was my mother's only hope. Like all Jews, I was short in stature, weak, and plagued by headaches from too much study. My mother could see this clearly. She had never been blinded by her husband's destitute pride and his incomprehensible belief that our family would one day be stronger and richer than other people in this world. She did not foresee any success for us, was frightened of buying a school uniform ahead of time, and only acceded to my having my picture taken by a portrait photographer.

On September 20, 1905, a list of all those who had managed to enter the first class was posted outside the lycée. My name was on that list. My whole family went to look at this piece of paper—even Grandpa Shoyl, my great-uncle, went to the lycée. I loved this braggart of an old man because he sold fish in the market. His fat hands were moist, covered with fish scales, and reeked of wonderful, cold worlds. Shoyl was also different from other people because of his fabricated stories about the Polish uprising of 1861. In the distant past, he had been an innkeeper in Skvira. He had witnessed the soldiers of Nicholas I shoot Count Godlewski and other Polish insurgents. But then again, maybe he hadn't witnessed this. Now I know that Shoyl was no more than an old fool and a naive teller of tall tales, but I have not forgotten those little tales of his, they were good tales. So even foolish Shoyl went

over to the lycée to read the list that had my name on it, and in the evening he danced and stamped his feet at our beggarly feast.

My father organized a feast of celebration and invited his comrades—grain merchants, estate brokers, and itinerant salesmen who sold agricultural machines in our region. These itinerant salesmen sold machines to everyone. Both muzhiks and landowners were afraid of them, as they could not get rid of them without buying something. Of all the Jews, the itinerant salesmen are the most worldly and cheerful. At our feast they sang drawn-out Hasidic songs made up of only three words, but with many funny intonations. Only those who have celebrated Passover with the Hasidim, or who have visited their boisterous synagogues in Volhynia, know the charm of these intonations. Old Liberman, who taught me Hebrew and the Torah, also came to our house that evening. My family always addressed him as Monsieur Liberman. He drank more Bessarabian wine than he should have, the traditional silk strings slipped out from under his red vest, and he called out a toast in my honor in Hebrew. In this toast the old man congratulated my parents, and said that by passing this examination I had won a victory over all my foes, I had won a victory over the fat-cheeked Russian boys and the sons of our roughneck rich. Thus in ancient times had David, the King of the Jews, won a victory over Goliath, and just as I had triumphed over Goliath, so too would our people, through its sheer power of mind, triumph over the foes that surround us, eager for our blood. Monsieur Liberman wept, pronounced these words weeping, drank some more wine, and yelled, "*Vivat!*" The dancing guests took him into the circle and danced with him the ancient quadrille, as at a shtetl wedding. Everyone was joyful at our feast, even my mother took a little sip of wine, though she did not like vodka and did not understand how anyone could. Which is why she thought all Russians were mad, and why she could not understand how women could live with Russian husbands.

But our happy days were to begin later. For my mother they began when she started making me sandwiches in the morning before I left for school, when we went from store to store buying festive supplies—a pencil box, a piggybank, a schoolbag, new books with hard covers, and notebooks with glossy covers. No one in the world has a stronger response to new things than children. They shudder at the smell that

new things give off, like dogs at the scent of a rabbit, and experience a madness, which later, when one is an adult, is called inspiration. And this clean, childish feeling of ownership of new things infected my mother too. It took us a whole month to get used to the pencil box and the morning twilight, when I would drink tea at the edge of the large, brightly lit table and gather my books into my schoolbag. It took us a whole month to get used to our happy life, and it was only after the first school term that I remembered the doves.

I had gotten everything ready for them—the one and a half rubles and the dovecote made out of a box by Grandpa Shoyl. The dovecote was given a coat of brown paint. It had nests for twelve pairs of doves, a series of little slats on its roof, and special grating I had invented so that it would be easier for other doves to come in too. Everything was ready. On Sunday, October 22, I set off to the wild game market, but I ran into unexpected obstacles along the way.

The story I am relating here, in other words my entry into the first class of the lycée, took place in the autumn of 1905. Czar Nicholas was in the process of giving the Russian people a constitution, and orators in threadbare coats were clambering onto podiums outside the buildings of the town councils and giving speeches to the people. On the streets at night shots were fired, and my mother did not want to let me go to the wild game market. Early in the morning on October 20, the boys from next door were flying a kite right outside the police station, and our water carrier, abandoning all his duties, strolled pomaded and red-faced along the street. Then we saw the sons of Kalistov, the baker, drag a leather vaulting horse out onto the street and start to do their exercises right in the middle of the road. Nobody tried to stop them. Semernikov, the constable, was even egging them on to jump higher. Semernikov was wearing a homemade silk waistband, and his boots that day had been polished to a shine they had never before achieved. An out-of-uniform constable frightened my mother more than anything else, and it was because of him that she would not let me go out. But I crept out onto the street through backyards, and ran all the way to the wild game market, which lay behind the train station.

Ivan Nikodimich, the dove seller, was sitting at his usual place in the market. Besides doves, he was also selling rabbits and a peacock. The peacock, its tail fanned out, sat on a perch, darting its dispassion-

ate head from one side to the other. Its foot was tied with a twisted string, the other end of the string lay wedged under Ivan Nikodimich's wicker chair. The moment I got there, I bought from the old man a pair of cherry-red doves with wonderful ruffled tails, and a pair of crested ones, and hid them in a sack under my shirt. I still had forty kopecks after my purchase, but the old man wouldn't give me a male and female Kryukov dove for that price. What I liked about Kryukov doves was their beaks, which were short, mottled, and amiable. Forty kopecks was the right price for them, but the old man overpriced them and turned away his yellow face, harrowed by the unsociable passions of the bird-catcher. As the market started closing, Ivan Nikodimich called me over, seeing that there weren't going to be any other buyers. Things turned out my way, things turned out badly.

Shortly before noon, or a little after, a man in felt boots walked across the square. He walked lightly on swollen feet, his lively eyes twinkling in his haggard face.

"Ivan Nikodimich," he said, as he walked past the bird-catcher. "Gather up your bits and bobs, in town the nobles of Jerusalem are being given a constitution. On Rybnaya Street they've just served Grandpa Babel a helping of death."

He made his way lightly among the cages, like a barefoot plowman walking along a field path.

"This is wrong!" Ivan Nikodimich muttered after him. "This is wrong!" he shouted more adamantly, gathering up the rabbits and the peacock, and pushing the Kryukov doves into my hands for forty kopecks.

I hid them under my shirt and watched the people run from the market. The peacock on Ivan Nikodimich's shoulder was the last to disappear. It sat like the sun in a damp autumn sky, like July on a rosy riverbank, a scorching July in long cold grass. There was no one left at the market, and shots were thundering not too far away. Then I ran to the train station, cut across the little park, which suddenly seemed to turn upside down, and I dashed into a deserted alley tamped with yellow earth. At the end of the alley sat legless Makarenko in a wheelchair, in which he rode around town selling cigarettes from a tray. The boys from our street bought cigarettes from him, the children liked him, I went running toward him in the alley.

"Makarenko," I said, breathless from running, and patted the legless man on the shoulder. "Have you seen Shoyl?"

The cripple didn't answer, his rough face of red fat and fists and iron was shining translucently. He was fidgeting in his chair, his wife, Katyusha, turning her puffed-up backside toward us, was riffling through things that lay scattered on the ground.

"How many have you counted?" the legless man asked her, pitching away from the woman with his whole body, as if he knew in advance that he wouldn't be able to bear her answer.

"Seven pairs of spats," Katyusha said, without straightening up, "six duvet covers, now I'm counting the bonnets."

"Bonnets!" Makarenko shouted, choked, and made a sound as if he were sobbing. "Obviously, God has chosen me to bear the Cross, Katyusha! People are carting off whole bales of cloth—these people get nice and proper things, and what do we get? Bonnets!"

And sure enough, a woman with a beautiful, fiery face went running down the alley. She was holding a bunch of fezzes in one hand and a bolt of cloth in the other. In a happy, desperate voice she was calling out to her children, who had disappeared. A silk dress and a blue jacket trailed after her scuttling body, and she didn't hear Makarenko, who went rushing after her in his wheelchair. The legless man couldn't catch up with her. His wheels rattled, he moved the levers with all his might.

"Madame!" he yelled deafeningly. "Madamochka! Where did you get the calico?"

But the woman with the scuttling dress was no longer to be seen. A rickety cart came flying around the corner where she had just disappeared. A young peasant was standing upright in the cart.

"Where's everyone run off to?" the young man asked, raising the red reins above his nags, who were straining in their collars.

"Everyone's on Sobornaya Street," Makarenko whined in an imploring voice. "Everyone's there, my dearest, my very dearest friend! Whatever you can grab, bring it here to me—I'll buy everything!"

The young man leaned forward over the front of his cart and whipped his skewbald nags. They bounced in their dirty cruppers like colts and went galloping off. The yellow alley was once again left yellow and empty. The legless man glared at me with his dead eyes.

"Well, am I not the man that God singled out?" he said lifelessly. "Am I not the Son of Man, huh?"

And he stretched out a hand flecked with leprosy.

"What've you got there in that bag?" he said, snatching away the sack that had warmed my heart.

The cripple's fat hand turned the sack upside down and he pulled out a cherry-red dove. The bird lay in his palm, its feet sticking up.

"Doves!" Makarenko said, and rolled up to me with squeaking wheels. "Doves!" he repeated, and slapped me across the face.

He hit me hard with the palm of his hand, crushing the bird. Katyusha's puffed-up backside loomed before my eyes, and I fell down in my new overcoat.

"Their seed has to be stamped out!" Katyusha said, getting up from the bonnets. "I cannot abide their seed and their stinking men!"

She also said other things about our seed, but I no longer heard anything. I lay on the ground, the innards of the crushed bird trickling down the side of my face. They trickled, winding and dribbling, down my cheek, blinding me. The dove's tender entrails slithered over my forehead, and I closed my uncaked eye so that I would not see the world unravel before me. This world was small and ugly. A pebble lay in front of my eyes, a pebble dented like the face of an old woman with a large jaw. A piece of string lay near it and a clump of feathers, still breathing. My world was small and ugly. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see it, and pressed myself against the earth that lay soothing and mute beneath me. This tamped earth did not resemble anything in our lives. Somewhere far away disaster rode across it on a large horse, but the sound of its hooves grew weaker and vanished, and silence, the bitter silence that can descend on children in times of misfortune, dissolved the boundary between my body and the unmoving earth. The earth smelled of damp depths, of tombs, of flowers. I breathed in its scent and cried without the slightest fear. I walked down a foreign street filled with white boxes, walked in my raiment of blood-drenched feathers, alone on sidewalks swept clean as on a Sunday, and I cried more bitterly, more fully and happily than I would ever cry again. Whitened wires hummed above my head, a little mongrel mutt was running in front of me, in a side street a young muzhik in a vest was smashing a window frame in the house of Khariton Efrussi. He was smashing it

with a wooden hammer, his whole body steeped in the movement. He breathed in deeply, smiled in all directions the gentle smile of drunkenness, of sweat and hearty strength. The whole street was filled with the crackling, crashing song of shattering wood. All this muzhik wanted was to flex his back, to sweat, and to yell out bizarre words in an unknown, not Russian language. He shouted them and sang, opening his blue eyes wide, until a religious procession appeared on the street, marching from the town council.

Old men with painted beards were carrying the portrait of a neatly combed Czar, banners with sepulchral saints fluttered above the religious procession, inflamed old women were running in front of it. When the muzhik in the vest saw the procession, he pressed the hammer to his chest and went running after the banners, while I, waiting for the procession to pass, carefully made my way to our house. It was empty. Its white doors stood open, the grass by the dovecote was trampled down. Kuzma, our janitor, was the only one who had not left our courtyard. Kuzma was sitting in the shed, laying out Shoyl's dead body.

"The wind brings you in like a bad splinter," the old man said when he saw me. "You were gone for ages! See how the townsfolk have hacked our Grandpa down?"

Kuzma began sniffing, turned away, and pulled a perch out of the fly of Grandpa's trousers. Two perches had been shoved into Grandpa—one into his fly, the other into his mouth—and although Grandpa was dead, one of the perches was still alive and quivering.

"Just our Grandpa's been hacked down, no one else!" Kuzma said, throwing the perches to the cat. "You should have heard him curse their goddamn mothers up and down! What a sweet man he was. You should lay two fivers on his eyes."

But back then, just ten years old, I had no idea what dead people needed fivers for.

"Kuzma," I whispered, "save us!"

And I went over to the janitor, embraced his old, bent back with its crooked shoulders, and peered at Grandpa Shoyl from behind the janitor's back. Grandpa Shoyl was lying there in the sawdust, his chest crushed, his beard pointing up, rugged shoes on his bare feet. His legs, spread apart, were dirty, purple, dead. Kuzma was bustling around them. He bound Grandpa's jaws, and kept looking to see if there was

anything else he had to do for the deceased. He was bustling about as if some new object had just been delivered to his house. He only calmed down after he finished combing the dead man's beard.

"He cursed their goddamn mothers," he said, smiling, and looked at the corpse lovingly. "If they had been Tatars attacking him, he'd have fought them off—but it was Russians who came, women too, damn Russians; those damn Russians think it's an insult to forgive someone, I know those Russians well!"

The janitor poured sawdust under the dead man. He took off his carpenter's apron and grabbed hold of my hand.

"Let's go to your father," he mumbled, squeezing my hand harder and harder. "Your father's been looking for you since this morning, he must be half dead with worry!"

And I went with Kuzma to the house of the tax inspector, where my parents had hidden from the pogrom.