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Tchaikovsky: A Tribute

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**A Thesis
in
The Department of English**

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for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Tchaikovsky: A Tribute

Jessica Hutchings

Tchaikovsky: A Tribute gives a fictionalized account of Peter Tchaikovsky's life as experienced and related by Nicolas Conradi, teenaged pupil to Peter's brother Modest. Hailing from Paris, the deaf Kolya is as yet immature—self-centred, inconsistent, pretentious and idealistic. His attempted portrayal of the apparently contrary characters of composer and brother succeeds rather in betraying his own characteristics and flaws. Hailing from Paris, the deaf Nicolas is as yet immature—self-centred, inconsistent, pretentious and idealistic. His attempt to portray the apparently contrary characters of composer and brother succeeds rather in betraying his own, limited self.

Nicolas' character and narration set out the manuscript's twin themes: the dynamic between Romanticism and Rationalism and the nature of fiction-making. Allied to the first is an interest in the phenomenon of the sensitive artist, or, rather, in those uniformly obscure figures who support and allow for that phenomenon. Individualism and self-expression are balanced by the more circumspect if more circumscribed reason. Allied to the second is an interest in the contingent nature of interpretation, translation—from fact into fiction especially—and revelation. This meta-fictional quality derives from an imperfect understanding and immense admiration of Vladimir Nabokov, whose

style the novella likewise engages and variously travesties. *Tchaikovsky* is as much a tribute to him as it is to either brother.

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Thank you to Jack Illingworth for discussion that kept and keeps me sharper than I am.

Esse percipi est.

To be is to be perceived.

Dedication

Dedicated with all possible humility to the title character, extraordinary brother of an exceptional man.

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Preface

Yesterday the sea was as smooth as a mirror; it is smooth as a mirror today. The island is having an Indian summer. Such a mild, warm Indian summer! Yet there is no sun. It is years since I knew such peace, perhaps twenty or thirty years; or perhaps it was a previous life. Whenever it was, I must surely have tasted before now this peace that I feel as I walk around in ecstasies, humming to myself, caring for every stone and every straw, and sensing that they care for me once more. We are friends.

As I follow the overgrown path through the forest, my heart trembles with an unearthly joy. I remember a spot on the eastern shore of the Caspian where I once stood. The place resembled this one, and then as now the sea was calm and torpid and iron-gray. I walked through the forest, I was moved to tears of rapture, I kept saying, Dear God, to be here again!

As if I had been there before.

But if so I must have gone there, once upon a time, from another age and another land, where the forest and the paths were the same. Perhaps I was a forest flower, perhaps I was a beetle and made my home in an acacia tree.

Nice sentiment, but the Modest I know could not have written so, or I don't know Modest.

And then again:

Franklin. Hair carrot and brass. Irises seagreen, pupils hyacinth. Pathfinder brogans, collapsed socks. Lots of practical irony and cautious reticence, the hippety-hop who invented electricity. Love me some geography, he says to the mush bowl, because a map is a jigsaw puzzle. What I like is where the driblet islands make a trail at the south poke of thing, left behind, all on a drift to the west. And to the north, crumbly islands. Love islands. Show him the inland island in France, bounded by four rivers. Plains islands bounded by mountains. A country, then, he opines, is a lot of people pretending they're an island, because they all speak the same language. Well, sometimes. Or because they have a common interest, like the Swiss. There is no place without time, no time without place. So, says Franklin, knuckling his nose, you can't say where without saying when. The Mediterranean when it had seals on it. Holland before tulips. Everything wanders, he says. Land, people, animals, trees.

Another pretty thought. Franklin, and the inscrutable inconsistency in style aside, countries are islands, is it? Islands, I would hasten to add with, I hope, no undue obscurity, have their histories. . .

Well, as to that, that's all well and good, perhaps, as far as beginnings and scraps on foolscap (*des petits morceaux* or, again, *objets trouvés*, if you prefer) go, but none neither here nor there, really. No, nor Modest neither.

Chapter One: I Give You the Real von Meck

Of the two brothers you may have heard something more or less true. About the older one especially you may vaguely recall having been told, by a friend of a cousin's ex-husband, how a farmer, to judge by his grubby overalls and "Wellies," wizened and hairy beyond belief, used to turn up at the corner store on the highway—when "Chan's Pay-Less Gas Station and Quickie Mart" was indeed "Chan's Island View Road Corner Store Coke!"—at six month intervals for so long as Chan, Chan's clan, and various seasonal disciples of Chan could recall. Should you be in legion with Sam John, that gift to gluttony, you have no doubt been informed of this unfortunate brother's evident confusion upon, one momentous expedition, finding the convenience store overtaken by gas pumps and an obnoxiously lit "Quickie Mart;" how he crossed and re-crossed the highway, tugging his extensive yellow beard, hoisting aloft the spidery effluence of his eyebrows, thumbing the muck-encrusted eyes of his silver overall buttons. At last, he crossed the threshold of the automatic sliding door and in a soft, rusty voice asked this Sam John if he knew where the corner with the store with the Chinese clerk was.

"Yeah, buddy, this is it, man," one can easily imagine the butterball disclosing between smacking attacks on a candybar. "What d'you want?" he may further have had occasion to inquire, the delights of his confection having reached their sad but inevitable end.

"Supplies. For my brother Gustav and me," was the reply, and, overlooking a certain very lamentable lack of lyricity, the thing had candour to recommend it.

Having found the “Quickie Mart” did not carry contact cement, sewing needles or toothpaste, all of which useful articles it had been the happy unlikelyhood of “Chan’s Island View Road Corner Store Coke!” to stock, the farmer figure in question spent his last cent—there was no question of taking the dirty dollar bill at face value, although Sam John found it within the hardened arteries of his heart to give the old man a dime, as yet unfilched from the take-a-penny dish, for the novelty of the thing—on what goods they did have and which matched or approximated items on his list, this last some hieroglyphics chicken-scratched on a very yellow bit of newspaper. He left with a glue stick, three packages of cheese slices and five jumbo jars of coffee crystals. He did not soon come back. At some unspecified point in a future long since past, he returned for more coffee crystals, but he must either have found another more or less convenient store from which to acquire his supplies or else had given up his commerce with the world entirely, for he was not to be seen at “Chan’s” thereafter.

Where your vague recollections of this touching instance of monstrous-modernity’s-quashing-the-little-guy-and-all-the-rustic-simplicity-he-embodies would have been wrong, although through no fault of your own—it is hardly to be expected that every charming and instructive anecdote chancing to fall within earshot be met with the same deliberation with which some eke out a day’s diversion in poring over their daily horoscope—is in supposing the adventuresome farmer was the elder of the two brothers. True, he appeared to play the provider, but Fiodr was, in point of fact, the younger. Gustav, his senior by some years—although the millennial aspect of both betrayed nothing—was the stroprier about leaving the farm and too drunk a good deal of the time to try.

As an aside, let me submit without hesitation or diffidence my difficulty with that name: Fiodr. Modest was forced to write it down that I may make out its bare essentials, but it remains a shapeless hunk of gristle in my mouth and nothing can induce me to pronounce it correctly. But the reader in full possession of all his faculties can see for himself the legitimacy of my complaint about Fiodr. At one's best, one might remark on the altogether uneven distribution of vowels peculiar to a Slavic tongue that is consonant with the strictly guttural side of classic German and not rather a German moved (with the times) by that nation's more recent romantic approximation to French (my native tongue, I make bold to proclaim outright), rich as she is in *bonbon de miel* mouthfuls of vowels. Truer to form would be to call a spade a spade and point out a (faulty) omission of vowels altogether. Quite certainly a vowel is missing from between Fiodr's "d" and "r"—or are we to believe names are onomatopoeiac, the "drrr" sound here suggesting the same defensive growl as "grrr?" But the perfect idiocy of this idea may be amply demonstrated by challenging anyone attending to describe what my own moniker, Nicolas Conradi ("Kolya" to Peter, who delights in the Russian diminutive), sounds like? Notwithstanding the subtext of sovereignty secreted like the dark heart of a ruby in those vowel-studded characters, it cannot agreeably be done.

Quite certainly, therefore, something is amiss about Fiodr, but what? The sticky sweetness of an "e?" The cherry apple of an "a?" The cheery one of an "i?" The inscrutable openness of an "o?" To attempt to communicate the name *as is* is to sound the fool and naturally I've developed an aversion to Fiodr—too haughty (for all its relative diminutiveness) to part with the secrets of its rightful articulation, as if it were unique among Christian names otherwise replicated *ad nauseam* the world over.

Well, as to that, rest assured there may be any number of Fiodrs out there as I write this. Count on it. Moreover, that Fiodr (the person behind the name) should retain the particular identity he very likely has in common with other men of Russian extraction or those pretentiously branded to be or again otherwise entirely, is of no consequence to his part—which is distinctly minor—in the present narrative. I therefore propose, for my greater ease and for that of my discerning reader, to call Fiodr “Theodore,” “Theo” for convenience’s sake. Nothing closeted, no stumbling blocks about that name, as I see it. “Theo” (the quotation marks will, from here on in, be implied, or supplied, rather, by my reader’s lively imagination) is as clear-cut a handle as one could hope for. True, for that very reason it may not become that nondescript character so well as his original, but the effortlessness of the text must supersede such concerns. Theo he is!

To continue, alternately, or in addition, you may dimly recall having read an economic article about this same pair on page five of the five-page monthly, “The Islander.” The article may have been brief to a fault—its little stockpile of facts revealed the address, with postal code, of their farm, along with the details of size and stench associated with the manure pile, its remarkable entirety the work of one draught horse apparently of the same vintage as its masters; one of the brothers, it grudgingly admits at the last, was named Gustav—but the accompanying photograph is worth its proverbial thousand words. There the two brothers sit, the one behind the other, in a large copper relic of a bathtub as seen from the side. Their naked torsos seem in the very act of shrivelling, whether under the influence of water, cold or the reader’s scrutiny one cannot be sure. What expression succeeds in escaping the matted shroud of beard and eyebrows is twin on both visages and suggestive of the owners having recently been startled from a

kind of torpor, or awakened rather, and rather roughly at that, for there is a marked dazedness about the dull black eyes indicating a certain reluctance to come completely to life, the unaccountable presence of camera-equipped journalists at bath time notwithstanding. One is put in mind of a sheep looking around disinterestedly at the sound of a gate opening, never ceasing meanwhile to masticate its morning cud. Perhaps there is about the brother in front the hint of a pouty smile. Yes, if there is a ready distinction to be drawn between the two, it is perhaps this impression that Gustav is making *une petite moue* for his unknown audience.

The bathtub scene is quite true to form. It was in just such a situation—uncompromising only to those who had so long survived the ebb and flow of history that the mere persistence of their relic selves must overshadow and excuse any lesser eccentricity—that Modest and I found them when we visited. And might I say, as they say, what a beautifully rustic pair I considered them, especially Gustav, who was evidently and as the attentive reader shall soon see the deeper-feeling of the two. Indeed, if you want the truth, it is from his inspired shows of self-expression that Modest *a emprunté* the figure of Nadja von Meck, his fictive Russian widow and Peter's fabled patroness.

This was on the evening of my first having met Modest, my first having arrived on the island for all that. However I was, of course, all eagerness to meet Peter, Modest was intractable in his opinion that it would be best still to observe Peter's request, days-old already, that he be unmolested by idle visits for "a few days," having allotted himself just that duration to complete the libretto for his masterful "Eugene Onegin," neither eating nor sleeping nor sparing Alexey—his "manservant," as one often sees such

housekeeping types denoted—as many palliative trips to the decanter on the sideboard as were required to get the thing out of the way at last.

I will not say that I was not disappointed. Not so much in Peter's reclusion—quite the contrary; I felt myself to sympathize deeply with the artist's need to be completely free from the needling demands of social custom—but something about my new tutor's steadfast disinclination, if not to entertain my fondest desire to associate with the famous composer (the very heart and sole reason for my having quit Paris at all, the which fact I, in my innermost idolization of Peter, suffered no compunction to reveal, the which modicum of restraint I flatter myself suffered as a crumb to fatten Modest's small ego), then to salve my consequent disappointment as one might be right to expect of one's host (for, being my first contact on the island, host perforce he was) with some substitute form of entertainment: to be shown the city's nightlife, for instance, or what quarters and districts harbour what sorts of characters and charms—these would have been diverting and not entirely useless ways of conducting a first evening in a foreign land.

But no, I was soon confirmed in my suspicions that Modest is just not “of that ilk,” as they say. Oh, he is considerate, to a fault even, but his is the kind of mind quite incapable, it would seem, of hitting upon any of those harmless activities with which the rest of the civilized world occupies an idle moment (make no mistake, he is not so very old now: twenty-nine a week ago, December 14th. And he was entirely ten months younger when, halfway through the rainy, interminably rainy month of March, I stepped, shy, disoriented and slightly nauseous, from the regional carrier to the puddle-riddled tarmac of the island's miniature airport). No films, no dancing, no bars (with the

exception of that boathouse affair up the road from Modest's cottage, with its endless wood, its church-like atmosphere, its fireside chess and white-haired couples, more often than not slipping limp fries to a grandchild all a'sprawl on the chocolate-coloured carpet and industriously messing up a perfectly good colouring book. Nor is music suffered to enliven this dull constitution of circumstances, save the occasional happy tootle, as I like to think it, of the nearby ferry as it slips its moorings and makes for the big city on the mainland). Nor does Modest appear to hold with the gentler sex, saving the great Cate, that excellence of the species who had at last accepted Modest's twin brother Anatol and this I found not a little discouraging at first.

No, with Modest it is all intelligent (which is not to say particularly sparkling) conversation, pacific strolls and delicate repasts of healthful foodstuffs (raw fruits and fresh eggs and salads composed of nothing but tomatoes and onions, and while one must admire their simplicity and wouldn't care for cut of veal *aux noisettes et crème fraîche* if it were fantastically offered, one couldn't help but long at least for the hunks of meat and mounds of potatoes that is the authentic fare of rusticity). All was superhuman moderation with him, as if the common vices held no attractions whatsoever for him or, to a lesser degree, for Cate, who was so often (too often one might finally have been forgiven for feeling, considering Modest's tutorial responsibilities) our companion. It is not that Modest does not drink, but he sips these domestic wines (which are not really that fine, however contented he appears to bring forth from his little cellar precisely one of given case each year so as to partake of its progress) at so exceedingly tranquil a pace that one is made to feel virtually embarrassed to imbibe at anything like normal leisure. Oh, I grant I grew heartier of habit under Modest's tutelage, but at what cost? At least

Peter, so manifestly unlike his brother in so many respects, could be counted on for an odd occasion (more than one such being regrettable as it turned out, but one feels the odds-makers would have made up their losses had they only been given the means—that is, more time in the infamous man’s company) to cheat the implied imposition of such strictures; one may well be impressed when I aver that, for all his infamous carousing, not even Nick R— held a candle to that man’s prodigious capacity for cheap import vodka.

Such habits of Modest’s, it is not unreasonable for a new arrival from the old world to have assumed, must emerge from a lifetime cloistered nearly without respite on that island—submerged on one side by a pacific sea, dwarfed on the other by the rockiest of mountains. Subsequently, the shocking hordes of plaid-coated, high-top-runner-wearing, rotweiler-sporting roughs, drinking Lucky Lager to put Claudius’ wassails to shame in the backs of their chromium-bound GMCs, force him to recant the opinion and leave Modest’s behaviour the enigma that it is.

But all this is neither here nor there. At stake is the little *précis* of Modest’s, or Gustav’s, von Meck that I am endeavouring to construct and bring to the reader’s notice by way of setting the tone and tenor of this biography.

It was just one of these so-called “innocuous” strolls that Modest suggested by way of after-dinner “amusement” on the bucketing evening of my arrival. From the airport, I was ferried in Cate’s rattling red pick-up truck (borrowed by Modest for the occasion, not himself in possession of a vehicle, but ready, naturally and notwithstanding, with valid driver’s licence) to that peculiarly characterless house unpleasantly situated in a suburb sprung no little distance from the capital (I believe a bus, running every two

hours and quitting service at eleven, took one half hour at least to get into town). It seemed to me we pulled up to a mushroom-yellow lump of porridge left to rot in the sheeting rain. I was to “live” in a featureless, subterranean compartment of this potato sack under the stewardship of one *M. Bédard*, a Protestant minister friend of *Papa*’s. There is little to say about this irksome, shrimpy, wet-eyed, by-the-book, middle-aged spinster hailing from Quebec (and as yet unrelieved of the native habit of braying “ouain”—or so I recall having heard the Quebecois pronounce our sparkling “oui”—at the end of every insipid utterance, of which there was a tedious abundance) and I will not waste the reader’s time or mine on such very secondary characters.

Perhaps it is unavoidable that I explain myself. Insofar as it might contribute to the reader’s appreciation of our hero, I feel obliged to reveal that the boy with whom he was on such intimate terms, to wit: myself, had been struck stone deaf in the tremulous bloom of his thirteenth year. Always a delicate child, he was unequal to a particularly savage March flu, the which, having for a month congested his ears, nose and throat with a mucus no clear soup anxiously administered by a doting *Maman* could dislodge, of a sudden quit all orifices, although not without leaving the olfactory nerves, to say nothing of the boy’s spirits, shattered beyond hope of repair. I shall never forget the morning on which I sensed, with that delightful suddenness with which one rediscovers health, that my slight self was once again as hale as ever it was. Yet, the heavy envelope of awakening lay upon me still and under its dreamy influence I thought little of hearing no sound accompany my mother as she crept in with *café au lait*, deposited this on the nightstand by my head, whispered, “*Bon matin, mon ange,*” and quietly retreated. It was only when I sat up in bed and began to gulp down the offering like a fish too long out of

water that the far away trickling passage of the liquid down my throat informed me something was terribly amiss. I looked around. All was quiet. I shifted my legs under the covers. All was deadly quiet. I panicked, smashed the cup down on the nightstand and was paralysed by its lack of attendant crash. “*Maman! Maman!*,” I bawled, and the cry seemed like that of a child locked in a box kept in a cave plunged at the bottom of the sea; I could distinguish no syllable of it, only the bleary tone of utter terror.

Naturally, doctors were called upon to explain and exorcise this catastrophic condition, but, for all their willingness to accept great sums for the effort of conjecture, explain it they could not, nor could they heal it, but left it to time. “Time,” they all said. “Give it time,” as though it was a home-cure tried and true and not a cliché so cheap, his dole drawn out over so many years, you end up quite insensible of the reward so reward there isn’t, for it would seem self-evident that there is no distinguishing between how a thing seems to someone and what it is as far as I can see.

I further submit that I remain proof-positive that there are some fissures time does not fix, for I’ve improved not a jot these five years. It is the graceful notes I lack. I make nothing of the most delicate vibrations to be floated in air—neither bird song nor *Maman’s* silent sobs. What sounds I do register are only the coarsest, those loud enough to oscillate *les os*, shake the skull, batter the stunted follicles and wrench the broken bristles of those few knobby nerves left in the cavernous recesses between my ears. “Bone conduction,” they call it. True, I may lay my hand on Peter’s piano and his pounding enthusiasm is my own as the bass notes especially seem almost to call out clearly to me, booming through bone and intervening gristle, howbeit they seem almost to do so from very, very far away, muffled there in a thousand black cloaks. From where

I stand, Peter's music seems a brooding, wildly melancholic affair. Indeed, sad to say perhaps, insofar as I only heard of Peter after having lost my hearing, such is the essence and extent of my appreciation of the man, however forcefully I must insist that he nonetheless strikes me, however deeply I must say that he nonetheless stirs—

Well, then, so it was for the first little while that when *M. Bédard* punctuated his every superfluous question or comment with “ouain,” I could make nothing of the horsy curl of the lip and grandfather gurgle of the Adam's apple and spent some good deal of time in confusion as to whether I'd missed a question in the ass-infested thickets of his constant chatter and was being called upon for a reply. However, after having ignored the exigency to no appreciable ill-effect, I grew bold in the assumption that this curl-and-gurgle was but a characteristic capstone to his whinnying inanity. When I bid Modest later explain the tick, I found I was not far wrong, only that it was a medieval dunce cap crowning more or less all French Canadian speech.

But to return to my narrative, we three supped (at half-past five in the afternoon!) on chicken wings coated in a species of tasteless red gelatine, mealy mashed potatoes sunk in canola oil, and a pre-packaged salad of wilted iceberg lettuce laced with a niggardly few scrapings of very past-it carrots. Salt was at no point allowed to enter into the proceedings, neither then nor at those mercifully few future meals I was unfortunately unable to excuse myself from, *M. Bédard* having an altogether disproportionate fear of constipation, or so his surreptitious glass of “Metamucil” between meals led me to conclude. And there I was, a sensitive boy of fifteen who inconsiderate circumstances had conspired to make appreciably more tetchy; my natural frailty was sorely aggravated by jetlag and the burden of my hearing deficiency smarted all the more soundly in alien

surrounds—the bleak prospect without, the bland characters within. (Not, however, that my unfortunate impairment caused me undue embarrassment, but the more or less indecipherable indelicacy of the English tongue on my attendants' lips left me feeling uncomfortably “outside the loop,” as they say.) No Peter, nothing like a revitalizing feast, an instructor who was pleased to look completely content throughout this last, politely filling in what blanks I, stifling black thoughts behind an impenetrable dumb-show of shyness, left in answer to the minister's asinine inquiries (in point of which fact I might merely mention *M. Bédard's* insistence, then as now, on addressing me in what I feel I may safely assume is a hopelessly old-fashioned and bastardized French; take for lost on such a one any note of disdain, taught me by a fresh love of the language of Romance, however loudly it is nonetheless sounded by my perfect impassivity).

Yes, he was to be my tutor. In English, ouain? Yes. No, he couldn't say, but his brother may well have been that composer someone or other mentioned in passing. . . Or it may have been the radio, ouain? Yes, it may have been. Famous, ouain? Yes, quite. Well that will be nice, ouain? (But at this daft expression my black thoughts were inwardly compelled to protest. I mean to say, *what* will be nice? What can you mean, you limp biscuit of a man, by *nice*? Is artistic genius *nice*? Not even the hothouse pansies drowned and quietly moulding in their plastic pots on your front porch are, or, I suspect, ever were, *nice*. Repugnant word. Stupid man. Small-minded man. Uninspired, ineffective dollop of a man. *Quel type, cette espèce de gars là*. A protestant minister through and through, I can see that.) No, Modest wasn't sure how long I would be staying, only he hoped I found the island and its inhabitants engaging enough to settle some time. “Ha!” I thought. If Peter doesn't very soon materialize to sweep me into

headier waters than these, or worse, if he proves as characterless as his lesser brother here—all impenetrable *politesse*, his slight figure trussed up in a creaseless shirt and shapeless dove-coloured pullover—I'm for the first flight back to *Gay Parie*.

I mention the meal in such detail only to suggest on what depressed state of sensibilities the sodden dusk of that first day dawned, and how it is that I, having seen I could do no worse with the remains of the day than to accompany Modest's unlikely constitutional, availed myself of that brief but telling glimpse at Gustav going full bore.

Modest has a peculiar fondness for walking along the shoulder of highways, often with no ambition beyond that, that is, with no goal to speak of. And the bigger the highway, the straighter the stretch, the livelier his stride. For my part, I fail to perceive any attraction in the sterile prospect—broom, fungus and no shortage of candybar wrappers cluttering the ditch; grubby cabbage whites, as apparently was their *nom de plume*, as they say, doing their demented dance around cornflowers in August—or take gratification in the incessant stream of vehicles (their expeditious progress towards some convincing end marred only by the inevitability of traffic lights, of which cause for dawdling on the road they stand perfectly innocent and completely excused) sneaking up from behind, then squealing off (as if laughing), or else slowing their approach so as to goggle at you. As well they might, for, as I say, there can be nothing along the highway to justify this sauntering for all the world as though these foreign attentions to your unlikely person tickled some fancy deep within, unless you have a queer love of gas station architecture.

I, for one, do not and was soon bold enough to propose that if we must walk, we should aim for this or that residence or landmark or eatery or (happy fate) pub, and

proceed thither by more picturesque means, viz. through wood or meadow, by way of the beach or a charming country road if road it must be. Of course, I instituted such a suggestion only on the evidence everywhere else transparent in Modest's industries, to wit: that his was an essentially diffident nature, that he lead me along highways not on account of his simple conclusion that the best way to get from A to B is the most direct, but according to his consideration that I, hailing from the big city, might feel more at home besieged by the cursory curiosity of the ambitious masses. Modest did not disoblige me in this either, and we now progress taking full advantage of what in the way of landscape the island has on offer—glowering arbours and overpowering mountains etc. And although I now suspect Modest of actually preferring the ignominy of the highway (for we have since not infrequently whizzed past his very lanky figure striding along with exceptional spirit), there still seems no compelling reason why I should be made to compromise in this regard of walking, convinced as I remain that mine must be the more beautiful, more spiritually healthful of the two courses and this, given his temperament, Modest would be bound to concede, given the opportunity.

But I introduce these minor details about Modest only by way of explaining why I, dejected beyond protest, found myself sopping wet to one side of the island highway in the curiously quiet company of a type who appeared as happy as a dog to fiord the veritable quagmires of standing water and to be caught in act by the glare of headlights and the inescapable splash of laughing tires. I myself felt amply justified in attempting no conversation, instead taking the opportunity afforded by the sickly rings beneath successive street lights to study *Papa's* new hire.

Oh, Modest is *Papa's* man in every respect. I remember feeling that quite strongly then. He is lanky, as I believe I've said, as tall as Peter, but in nowise similarly filled out so that, in addition to looking terribly gaunt beneath his button-down shirts, he looks tall and spindly and altogether breakable. This impression is only encouraged by a certain stiffness in his demeanour. Now, I all but readily admit that I have, often even, referred to him as appearing content, happy as a dog even, and as much very accurately describes one's sense of his disposition a good deal of the time. But I see such descriptives also give the sense, somehow, of bodily ease, of which trait it is my distinct impression Modest has little, with the exception, perhaps, of that distinctly uncharacteristic air of strutting he gives when going alongside highways. Equally, as the reader shall read I needn't rely solely on Cate's testimony to submit, his comportment when dictating "Nadja von Meck's" letters to her is not dissimilar. Finally, should you chance to observe him before he has noticed you—stumbling in when he is deeply engrossed in a book or stealing up ever so softly as he takes in a sunset at the docks, all in a state of relative disarray, his pants legs rolled, his alabaster feet sluicing around in frigid Pacific waters—it once again comes as a shock to discover how very human, how graceful even, he may be. All poised readiness is eased from the spine; all respectful inclination of the neck is relieved; the face is free of all intense consideration. But these characteristics, or, rather, their alter-ego and those leading among Modest's rightful traits are, as I have suggested, in evidence the overwhelming majority of the time, and the oppressive sense of civilized reserve they convey and seem to compel in turn is very much *Papa's* effect when, resplendent in his pure white robes, he welcomes each individual congregant to Sunday service with a bright and sober smile.

Modest's hair is neither greying, like Peter's, nor thinning, like Anatol's (who, as the reliable reader may be counted on to recall, I've already introduced as his [Modest's, that is] twin [as opposed to his (Modest's) brother, by which denotation I hope it is clear I mean to distinguish Peter]). It is thick and black, with his face a pale, sharp half moon beneath, like a sickle. It is very slightly wavy, giving it a tangled and unkempt appearance entirely out of keeping with him. One of Modest's characteristic gestures is unconsciously to rake a stray strand into place on his crown with a long, bony hand. (Cate also tucks and retucks an errant squiggle of auburn behind her pink ear, sweet as a dish, which habit I find wholly charming in her.)

His manner of dress would be "Ralph Lauren," did not the suppleness of the fabric belie the garments', I suspect, great age. As it is, it might be described as casual Amish: cotton Dockers in summer; corduroy trousers in winter, straight-legged without being form-fitting and most often of a dark hue; immaculately clean and pressed button-down shirts, also cotton, for the most part white and very often lashed stem to stern with a sombre tie—pinstripes or the like; a dull-coloured pullover in (the mostly) inclement weather. For footwear, there is a choice of three styles: black school-boy lace-ups, Wellington boots, or a pair of sandals, acquired in Italy one lucky summer one supposes, fastening with two simple straps across the ball and instep. Oh, and a coat. A coat, I must admit, I admire out of all measure. It is jet black, long to the ankles with a tapered waist; single-breasted, with no collar to speak of and fastening with three plain black buttons. It looks very severe, very dignified, almost military issue, except that it is lined head to toe with the silkiest, glossiest, blackest satin I've ever seen. To slip into this coat is to be deliciously lost in a kind of warm, black oil. It had been his father's coat. Ilya

(who, I may do as well to mention here, was Peter's father, and Modest's for that matter) had been chief inspector of mines in Russia, and "not particularly" (p 23) intelligent at that, although Modest maintains he was "a kind man . . . and very indulgent of his family" (pp 23 and 205). A small satin moniker in the cuff reads *Queen of Spades: Gentleman's Apparel*, and there appears a heart beneath.

Modest was dogging along in just this coat and appearing, in each dim pool of orange streetlight, relatively untouched therein by the deluge to which my flesh was heir, as they say, having not been sufficiently warned about the torrential nature of the downpour through which we, unmoved, were to make our way. It is not difficult to see that when my inclination to discover the subject of conversation wanes, when I renounce the terrible bore it is to accord trembling lips their rhetorical significance and tease from a collection of these something like sense (often discovering a lack of any such is in no way the fault of my interpretive faculties, which have, I am told, developed with remarkable haste) and turn my listless attentions to lettuce be-spattering my plate as though the chromium bowl had exploded and here the spent shrapnel, I must appear as any ordinary dinner guest. My disability is utterly forgotten and it is assumed I can hear the battering ram of the elements with the best man-jack of them. No need, therefore, to bring the altogether unexceptional gale to my attention. I believe, having induced me to consent to his "little stroll," Modest mentioned, very much in passing, that it "may" still have been raining "slightly." Accordingly, I donned a raincoat—a private-eye get-up I was boyishly enthusiastic about at the time—designed, really, for short bursts of exposure between awnings. And accordingly, we had no sooner joined the highway from *M. Bédard's* street than I was soaked through and all the more mortified by looking like a

trodden-on toad to be seen traipsing along the island's main artery in the middle of the night for no apparent reason.

A good hour of this forced me to enter into dialogue, making it my first point of business to inquire where we were going. I was not overjoyed to see him give the question due consideration, nor did I feel at all honoured to be asked if I had anywhere in particular I would like to go. Or, seeing as I was so very wet and "perhaps" "a little" cold (*a little!?!), "perhaps" I would like to pay some acquaintances of his a visit?*

"Where do they live?"

In the interests of accuracy, I am persuaded to freely confess that I may have expressed myself, "They live where?," spoken English still feeling like chaff in my mouth. Nor has the level in that manner of the language as I had achieved in grade school been much improved by Modest's tutelage. Impaired from the example, it is quite impossible to learn the trick, and it is only natural that I should lapse into French word order in the haste of expressing myself. But it should be clear that I am nowise dumb but retain my ability to speak perfectly, however I hear nothing of it if expressed at the volume of "normal" conversation. Shouting, I can make out two or three tonalities of buzzing, always seeming very far apart from myself. But my larynx tires like anybody else's (although I have grown less sensitive in this respect), and more often than not I will speak at levels comfortable for my listeners although indistinguishable to myself. However, I shouted now. Modest indicated, with slow, articulate movements of his surprisingly full, red lips, so that I should be able to make him out in the faint light available, that he estimated the distance was another kilometre along the dreaded highway and yet a further kilometre down a side road after that.

“How long walking?”

Oh, he saw (he seemed to eye me kindly). Twenty minutes “perhaps.” Would I rather go back?

Needless to say the thought of another hour spent freezing my best parts off in the leaden gunnysack of my once *très chic* sou'wester, varied from the last only by the increasing opacity of the gloom and with the end result of landing me back in that stale “Corn-Dog” of a house, did not appeal.

“But are they sure to be home?”

No, nothing is for sure, of course, but he thought it likely (and I do believe his eyes sparkled in the beam of passing headlights).

“All right, fine, yes,” I well-nigh screamed. “Let’s go.”

So go we did, and at long last arrived at the farm (reduced now to a potato field, a rank pasture, a bald patch for corn, and a barn straining dangerously towards the house and sprouting from its loose and missing planks chickens in variously advanced stages of death; but not not admirable in its rustic simplicity for all that) tended by those above-named brothers, Theo and Gustav.

And they were in. Well, Gustav, as I have indicated, was as yet in the above-mentioned bath and plainly smashed. His black eyes twinkled and his sunken chest rocked and his thin lips did not stop parting the stringy beard with song—one in a modest repertoire of dirty logger songs, it turned out—as Modest and I followed the shrivelled little form of his brother through to the kitchen.

But it is expedient to begin with the skin of things, as it were, and close inwards. To do so both sets the scene and lends the narrative a compelling sense of drama, of

atmosphere and rising action. More to the point, the effect produced is a more or less authentic representation of one's actual experience, for in life, as on our arrival, one is confronted on all sides with surfaces that must first be noticed before they can be deemed compelling and further probed. Added to which, details are of no little importance in these matters and description, as I understand it is commonly held, affords a great opportunity to inventory a few of these.

The quintessentially rural charm of the house, like that of the farm, of any farm, was not lost on me. Meagre and dilapidated, it may have been a cheery yellow when built at the turn of the century, but the paint was now as grey as ash, splintering from the solid wood and waiting only on the right wind to be carried off and leave the house exposed. Not one of its angles retained its integrity but walls leaned and roofs warped, lending the exterior the same care-worn appeal as its inhabitants. The front door would seem a long-standing stand-in for the original, consisting in a scratched and buckling piece of green plywood ill-fitting its distorted frame. On it Modest knocked what cannot have been very loudly for, after waiting untold aeons, he was obliged to try again. After no little tussle, the plywood was wrenched from its socket and Theo's goose neck emerged, his eyes to peer dully at us in the lamplight filtering past his shoulders. However lean, the crack in the door left unconcealed the fact of Theo's stark nakedness. Modest simply smiled. I stood alongside, shifting and shivering, avoiding the incredibly old, incredibly wizened apparition by straining to see if the house didn't lodge some more likely acquaintance of my tutor's. Another eternity passed with all characters so sketched. At last, the flint of recognition must momentarily have sparked in Theo's consciousness, however his expression of utter blankness faltered not once, for he now

levied a skeletal fist with which to rap Modest's shoulder, thereupon withdrawing into the softly glowing abyss. The door was left open behind him, less in welcome and more as if to say, "Come or go, it can make no difference to me."

The kitchen is immediately through a small, dark entryway chock-a-block with gumboots, single and in pairs, of every generation and uniformly tattered and caked in mud. The effect is of a colony of termite mounds slowly digesting their rubber tire foundations. The kitchen is the largest of two downstairs rooms (the other two having at one time been pressed into service as garage/workshop/laundry-room/cannery and never rehabilitated, although long since discharged); it is perfectly square, frugally furnished with a plastic-topped kitchen table set against the window, two wooden chairs (one missing a back, the other with an absurdly low seat), and a baby's changing station acting a counter top. On this lie some combination of dirty porcelain dishes, tin mugs, a speckled tin jug, eggs in and around a wire basket, a yellowing "Cola Cola" glass and a disorderly pile of twenty- and thirty-year-old duck hunting magazines. In the far corner of the room, a woodstove—far larger and less efficient, somehow, than Modest's—squats and smokes and supports the iron kettle set to boil eternally and augment the pattern of rust rings covering the backhand corner. Unlike Modest's, the stove yields no light, the door being of solid iron. Two oil lamps, their giant craniums murky, their bulbous trunks tainted with rusty-looking oil, sit one beside the other on the kitchen table while overhead a grainy opacity hovers around a twenty-five watt light bulb screwed into the middle of the ceiling—shadeless, dusty, the glass peppered with something inside.

Peeking into the next room (the "bedroom:" two woeful cast-iron beds against opposite walls—a fireplace just visible behind one betrays the room's original purpose—

their centres sagging like the flapping belly of an old cat; on each of these, two or three wool blankets—grey, likely army issue, with moth-eaten middles and corners like cardboard—cover the room with an unearthly acrid smell of clay and sweat; a chest of drawers on top of which lie a lady’s hand-held mirror and a shoe-brush-cum-hair-brush, its back polished with handling; a press-back chair under heaps of filthy overalls and more or less filthy check shirts), you find another, bulbless socket. Modest’s idea is that the house is fully wired, but that the brothers find they only need light in the kitchen, that hub of any and all indoor activity with the exception of sleep, which is better carried out in the dark.

Upstairs, if you will credit it, alongside three unused rooms, there is a bathroom complete with flushing toilet. And still the brothers tend to give off a gruff cough, pushing back their chairs to relieve themselves, if not in this or that patch of dust, in the outhouse behind the house. Modest presumes they move it from year to year, perhaps with an (impossibly altruistic) neighbour’s help, but I’m not convinced the optimistic view of their concern for hygiene is justified, to say nothing of the physical decrepitude—worse in Gustav’s case, his nose and cheeks a shattering of veins—that must make their part in any such heavy industry difficult to impossible. You might be right, Modest conceded, but in that aggravating way that caused you to wonder whether you were.

It is certainly the case that their insularity surpassed all I had read about the great self-sufficiency of the simple life. Sam John’s legendary sighting might attest to as much. Still, the pervasive reductionism lent by age—one can imagine their whole lives comprehended no more than the short shuffle from bedroom to kitchen and back; always

the same clothes, the patented same industries, dishing egg shells to the chickens and, in the evenings, Gustav drunk and playing in the bath, Theo reading magazines and boiling water for his brother and for his tea—there was something to be uneasy about in that, like there is looking at a tremendous caricature. I said as much to Modest, but he was inclined to think it is not the caricature one should, or even, as I believe was the suggestion, one *does* feel uneasy about; it is one's taking the thing at face value. I gave Modest's thoughts due consideration, of course, but evidence of how shrunk and circumscribed the brothers' passage through this world had grown was everywhere and, although I could not hear the little I perceived the brothers to say, seriously, on any of our visits (there were some four odd), I saw no reason to believe that they weren't as simple as they seemed, Theo especially. I was only beginning to come alive to how bursting with wild offerings the world was and it seemed doubly shocking and dreadful as much could be wholly missed by anyone.

I write "seriously" above for Gustav's shows were anything but, and *his* version of von Meck is chatty as you please. (That is, it should be amply clear by now that Gustav and von Meck [the *original* von Meck that is] are one and the same [or is it one "in" the same? Is there any distinction? I ask you, and rather think not]. I mean simply to say the one plays the other; the former plays at being the latter; Gustav pretends to be a character called von Meck. Are we clear? Well, well, if it is not as utterly intelligible as it should be, it shall be; the slower sort of reader need only read slowly on. He may have my humble word for it.)

The infamous copper tub resides on the floor before the stove and from its tepid depths Gustav nightly presides over the room. This cabaret consists in Gustav becoming,

from tea time onward, recklessly inebriated by way of “Earl Grey” tea spiked moderately but steadily on his behalf by Theo, tender likewise of a still carefully concealed by the horseshoe shape of the manure pile (“The Islander’s” reporter had appraised more fruits than those of the draught horse).

The bath is run, the two climb in, and Theo scrubs Gustav’s back and digs about his ears with a washcloth so soiled its border of pale, diminutive forget-me-nots is almost obscured. Theo then gets out, drying by the stove as he waits for a fresh kettle to boil, and Gustav expands in his absence. He filters the cold dregs of his last cup through filaments of beard, sucks gratefully on these, and begins to stipple the water with languid movements of the washcloth—sole prop of his act—over its surface. He begins to hum. He begins to sing. He begins to pout and bat his eyes and recline with every air of feline regality against the stiff lip of the tub.

“La la,” he says to himself (whether the spectacle has outlived its outrageousness for Theo or he is genuinely disinterested, he gives every impression of being unmoved as he goes about the business of fixing still more tea for his brother. As well he might. The tantrum the drunken queen can throw is nothing short of tyranny).

“My dear,” Gustav goes on in what Modest describes as a shrill and often broken falsetto, “my dear, not even Jesus submitted to such manhandling without the promise of a golden ring at the end of it all.” Here Gustav slaps the side of the tub playfully with the washcloth and twitters “nasally, like a pennywhistle.”

Here, then, is Nadja von Meck, the *real McCoy* that is, aging socialite and confirmed tart of German extraction and Russian origin. Quite another story from the persona of the same name—that impossibly reserved widow patroness of the arts that

Modest undertook for the sole purpose of swindling Peter into accepting his “support.” True, Modest’s von Meck seems to meet the requirements of Peter’s strange fastidiousness in matters of money—it must come from an “outside” source if not from an acknowledged guardian, or else he can manage very well without, thank you—but I do think the *joyeuse vivante* has been tapped from the thing as a result.

Gustav’s von Meck is the extravagant jewel of his wartime imagination. I get this from secondary sources, of course, but apparently Gustav and Theo, shipped off as gangly farmhands hardly the right (or the wrong, if you will) side of puberty, took with the rest of the chaps to the cheap Russian vodka sold contraband behind the canteen. A small cog in the big machine, their platoon was sent almost immediately to Y—, there to await orders for the short march to the front—nothing short of a death sentence it must have felt to the company of virtually untrained youths familiar, as one may well imagine, with perfect nothing beyond their bucolic boundaries. Coupled with this oppression, the orders were rescinded again and again, for reasons varied enough to keep alive their terrible authenticity, and week after week passed in that drab camp in that dreary country (the nearest tiny village was many miles off and likely full of old peasant types) with nothing to relieve the constant dread they must have felt but for black market spirits. Gustav, no doubt the sensitive kind that drunks and extroverts in reality are, must have suffered the circumstances particularly acutely and one little wonders to learn that he took to drink like the proverbial fish. Under its fortifying influence, the personal demon melancholia was exorcised and their grim collective fate answered with a show of reckless flamboyance.

The spirits of the entire company rose with their laughter, right to rafters, as Gustav careered this way and that, diverting them all with impressions. Most popular was a drunken old Russian peasant woman conceived while that country was still in tenuous league with Hitler. The drunken part, one imagines, required no special effort; the performance was as convincing as the genuine article. For the Russian peasant bit, Gustav clutched the blanket draped over his head, adopted the only foreign accent he very vaguely knew—inflected with “ouains” Modest reported faithfully and without cracking a smile—and went about scolding the fellows for their high spirits when Russian victory was imminent and they would all soon be horribly dead. Mark how thick their numbers for one! (Here Gustav extolled in bluest terms the chief virtue of Russia’s rabble [that stalwart if uniformly stout and sluggish type that not only comprised the republic but ran it!], to wit: their propensity to breed like rabbits.) Mark how thick their many heads for two! When charged to leap, they did so with abandon, e’en unto (“into”, if you like) the very jaws of death as though there was no sweeter fate or better way to spend a half hour.

“Ouain it’s like this! Our brave Russian boys who are men and men who are boys, if they are unfortunate enough to be missed by enemy fire, they don’t pocket their tails, no! They take turns at shooting each other! Ouain! Then, when they are told to leap home, they can woo comrade breeders with the incredible story how they died for Stalin’s motherland!”

Gustav sent another tumbler-full crashing into the pit of his delicate belly and wagged an ominous digit at his audience of blasted boys.

“Ouain! This is the Russian way! It is our national character in our very blood! A great people! A proud people! A winning people! Ouain I tell you and don’t you scoff at me now you pansy western types!”

And they laughed and drank and waited and drank and drank and drank, Theo too perhaps, although you’d scarcely credit it of the lumpeen dullard. And as the sunk feeling among them stretched itself to breaking, the tempestuousness of Gustav’s flights was forced to new heights. His alter ego was exaggerated and refined, the old Russian matriarch becoming by degrees Nadja von Meck, the tart who played for effect with a boa of grungy wool socks and hadn’t the least thing to say about this bore of a war but a titillating tirade on all things frivolous—dancing and a girl’s *toilette*. Gustav sang and sauntered, twittered and twisted with cloying conviction the mingy thread around the necks of his fellows who squirmed with laughter in turn, right up until the morning they were sent in.

Back on the farm, as they say, Theo had dressed, stopping just short of covering his privates for, if you looked, you could still see these quite plainly, peeping from behind checks, wagging as he scuttled his withered shanks to the stove, reposing, as it were, in a moment of calm against a mottled thigh in attitudes of supreme resignation and infinite patience. For his part, von Meck greeted us with a languid wave of the washcloth, either inviting us to be seated or warding off possible interruption.

Naturally, I was struck dumb. It all struck me as straight out of an operetta. Castrati clad as peacocks and goose-stepping about the stage with gilded cages wherein to fetter their fine-feathered paramours was the height of classicism beside the rank sensationalism of the scene. And not even my mentor’s dispassionate manner (and this

no stiff effort of civility but a symptom of genuine ease with the spectacle of a prune playing a queen while his almost equally stark relation fenced the occasional polite inquiry into their collective health with laconic grunts) could dissuade me of its truly fantastic charm.

Not that Theo with his partial concealment, or Gustav with his unreserved exposition for that matter, was homosexual, if such terms are of any use in describing those whom to look at was to be aware—as one is aware of the philosophical underpinnings of the Florentine façade at which one stares; that is, dimly, with some little idea of their existence and none of their distinctions—of a time the brothers were viable sexual beings. But it is a time very far out of mind indeed, for that too had long since been deemed inessential, left outside the sequestered shell of one's character and duly forgotten. Which is all to say, by way of warning, that there may be far more here, there, anywhere, than meets the eye; surprising little, I've found, is what one is wont at first to find it to be.

And there it is in a nutshell: a faithful rendering of Peter's brother's von Meck. It was perhaps not strictly necessary to describe in such faithful detail circumstances with the old brothers, who, after all, are of but minor, even negligible relevance to the late, great man, a portrait of whom this chronicle purports to render and my association with whom it aspires to relate. However that may be, it is my sense that a superfluity is better than a pittance, and, in any case, doing so was perhaps worth its weight in the gold of perfect assurance gained that I may now proceed about my main subject with the scene's having been duly and comprehensively set.

Chapter Two: In the Beginning. . .

By way of introducing characters and establishing my relation to them, I might interest the interested reader in the genesis of the present memoir. I was put in mind to write “Peter and Me: Memories of Etc.” by Cate, who one day suggested, as “a sort of an exercise,” that I write Modest’s life. While flawless in all other enticements, Cate’s interests in the undertaking, or rather in its subject, were by that time all too plain, to all but Anatol, who is as decent and deserving, if slightly less sensitive in his sensibleness, as his twin, by whom, as I may have mentioned, I mean Modest. (I use the word “sensitive” in the sense of “perceptive of [often very minor] details” and not as it applies to the artist, his quivering antennae receptive as are none of his brethren’s to humanity’s starts and fits and terrible tantrums, if the indulgent reader will allow me the *petit embellissement*, that fabled hinterland of the young and zealous. Anatol’s air of apathy, it should be recognized, accounts for his success as an art dealer, in which profession, you may take it from me, attitudes of refinement are not to be scoffed at. He and precious few others are responsible for cultivating the island’s appreciation of art, complementing a penchant for high school dramatics with exhibitions by artists of recent mainland fame. His gallery is a charming space, a converted heritage home, the Byzantine convolutions of its original mouldings, hand-carved banisters and William Morris wallpaper not one wit moderated by modernity’s Spartan touch. I felt *très chez moi* there, especially at the beginning of my term on the island, and waited out many of Modest’s “Lunchtime Concerts in the Park” posing as Anatol’s apprentice, glad of the change my good clothes made and

content to flip through a fashion magazine while, beyond the glass, the world was awash in a confusion of people trying to get out of the rain. Laughable impossibility!)

But to return to the “heart” of the matter at hand: although blindsided by desire, even I could not abjure understanding how Cate’s feelings strayed far left of home, and then not in my direction, alas. How many times did I lie in the grass, contemplating the exquisite line of her calf (as sculpted as a young Olympiad’s, I’ll have you know) as it presented itself to my happy vantage from beneath a patterned skirt and brooding on my seeming to have been created with no greater purpose than to register how her indifferent reception of shy and not so shy advances by any but Modest (who, of course, is incapable of any such towards his twin brother’s wife) only augmented her plentiful stock of allures by one? I ask you. Such is Cate. That much, I can say for sure.

But, while not a disinterested suggestion, nor was writing my memoir of another a bad one. With Modest gone, I am at pains to keep up with my studies and have little else to occupy my days besides. However, it did not take Peter’s death to appreciate that the effort might prove the more rewarding (in the sense of “improving,” for aggrieved writer as for inquiring reader) were the young scholar’s gaze trained on a man of greater distinction than Modest.

I feel compelled, merely in passing, to repeat, and thereby perfunctorily discredit any critical “Tom,” “Dick” or “Harry” rash enough to, with typical slothfulness, arch his ginger brow and bare his gold-capped incisors (stifling a yawn you may be sure, or a belch, the rotten carrion mongers) from within the secure swaddling clothes of his plush entourage: “it did not take Peter’s death.” It was nothing so vulgar and insubstantial as financial remuneration that I sought from the undertaking, but the remedial retracing of

my modest but intimate relationship with a man of brilliance whose reconsideration in the wan light left by his passing was, and is, nutrient for the desolate soul. That is, the undertaking was inevitable for one who had come as close to his gifts as I. However precipitated by Cate's love of the one, I should as well have written about his brother had Peter's tragic demise been saved for a good many years hence—years of continued amity, greater sympathy, more great works on his part no doubt. And no doubt I should have done it better, with more style to lavish on more substance. (For those deficiencies I seem now to exhibit I would readily fault Modest—his lessons having taken so much of my time to so little effect—were I not sensible that he did his best, as they say, and one is little rewarded and much disappointed in asking for more.)

It should be equally clear that I do not consider Modest less worthy than Peter, or less worthy of my attentions or the attentions of a more considerable reading public. On the contrary, Modest exemplifies much we would all do as well to know as not. He is unobtrusive, compliant, steadfast and ever composed, for example. But this little all is hardly good gritty grist for the literary mill, as it were. His very reticence renders him well-nigh null and void, according to common regard—that flitful touchstone roving like the cataract eyespot on a demented moth (a “cabbage white,” as Modest has it. Plain little things and dead common)—beside the force, the *tour de force* his brother's character is commonly considered to be. And I think Modest would agree, a writer must show concern for a base level of popular interest lest literature, especially the kind drawing for its substance on personal experience, be deemed an entirely self-interested industry, the trifling, impertinent, indefensible diversion of a single, probably negligible ego, which any fool can tell you it is not.

It was as early as July the seed was sown, although these memories only began to see fruition—and what a brisk growing season it has been!—in early December of the same year, a week perhaps after Peter's death and Modest's leaving to accompany the body back to Russia with a haste the measure of which may be taken from its having evidently slipped his mind to tell us when to expect to have him back. I did not speak to him once the whole remainder of my time on the island. Cate gently, sweetly, informed me that he was well, that he was very busy (his voice sounded tired), that there was apparently an incomprehensible amount of business of Peter's to attend to; however, it remains beyond me what as much might have entailed. The making of a museum in Peter's natal home, the dedication of conservatory wings and the like, I am told, but, I confess, I cannot, from a strictly practical point of view, understand what should have taken so very long about either—the work of an afternoon apiece surely, especially for one as diligent as Modest.

Nor do I see why Modest should preside over his brother's affairs at all. Indeed, such tributes may go on for years, *centuries* if anyone in that backwards nation is sensible of the treasure it had and lost and has now regained (rather unnecessarily, even illegitimately it seems to me, the family have *chosen* the island of all possible exiles. And to say that ages zero through ten are *the* formative years, as if one's nature was set in the stone of mere infancy and was thenceforth quite beyond the pale of the Lord's, or the muse's, if you like, inspired or inspiring hand, well, that is to beg the question of His, or her, might, which must, as sure as they exist, be great, to wit: a dazzling wingèd thing flitting through the fingers of all one's years, charming one's lumpish legs to slough on through the drudgery of common existence in kind with the vision of a rainbow and its

proverbial pot. No, childhood, although charmed beyond measure, is not so very singular a chapter in the annals of a man's lifetime. I, for instance, remember nothing but the standard sticky sweets and spilled milk and a particularly aggravating burn which fate, leaving to strike out temptingly overhead the handle of a boiling pot of *petits pois*, lay in store for me).

Nor that it must be Modest in particular. Modest was born and raised on the island, you see. Is he to be withheld from *his* rightful place forever? Are we here to be made to do eternally without him? If only I could have been sure how long it would be before he came again. Cate had given me the telephone number of Anton R—, the awesome composer and Peter's former teacher with whom Modest was staying in Moscow, but it seemed to me that he could just as easily have rung me (I was anxious not to interfere with his "Peter's business"). I do not say "abandoned"—one is not given to think of the dearly departed in such spiteful terms—but I felt very much alone come mid-December, more so for the festive flourishes everywhere in evidence of the season I had so been looking forward (with a childishly simple faith, perhaps, in light of the events of October and November) to spending up island with Modest and Peter and Cate and Anatol and Alex and even Peter's "Bobyk."

After a series of discussions in which I was not overtly consulted, it was decided that Modest could get along tolerably well in Russia without Cate. It is perhaps germane to my story to note that I, who I suspect spent far and away the most time with Modest from March to November of that year, never once saw that man cry. He might have looked a little gaunter, his face unusually flushed the week preceding and succeeding his brother's death, but I simply cannot imagine a thing in the world that Modest is unequal

to dealing with, calmly and with perfect self-sufficiency, and I find it very difficult to believe he entertained, let alone admitted to debate, a need for Cate's emotional support at that time.

Don't get me wrong. I suspect Modest felt; no doubt, as the person (it has since been argued) closest to Peter, he lamented that one's last leave-taking. Certainly, to give credit where credit is due, a good many of Peter's practical concerns were habitually entrusted to Modest—ensuring the desired formatting for transcripts, securing copyrights and payment for their purchase, financial solvency in general (in which his von Meck trick played no little part), getting a slot at the garage whenever Peter's pet Karmann Ghia gave up the ghost, reporting his absence at the conservatory on days Peter felt himself simply unequal to a class of impossibly haughty, hormone-riddled youths persuaded of their musical talent (“of which they are uniformly and completely bereft!” Peter maintained. “Except little Joe Kotek. I call him little! Ha ha! A big lump of a boy is what he is all over! But so devoted, so compliant, you know. A blond sort of boy. And there is tremendous virtuosity in his fingers.” Well, as to all that, I have met Joe Kotek. “Lump” is right. Stupid as a puppy, which is rather how Peter treated him and it was not at all serious), completing this or that libretto, and those no doubt perfectly dreadful negotiations with Antonia and that mother of hers.

Trifling as each instance was, taken together, Modest's part in Peter's day-to-day was not negligible. And while attending to these little things took time and energy from his writing (and never from our studies, as I only too keenly observed. A job's a job, I surmised), there was practically nothing else for it. As you might well imagine, the brilliant brother was no match for such trivial tasks; they confused him and any effort to

dispense with them personally only cluttered his desk and furnished its owner with a tremendous headache that nothing short of half the decanter could allay and there went the morning. Cate was greatly busy with the “Summer Symphony Series;” Anatol had the gallery and a joint responsibility for manning it to contend with; Alex was at the other end of the island almost and out to sea for months on end. Alexey was kept busy enough with domestic duties, preparing tea and packing picnic lunches and the like. He, and Peter likewise, one may well imagine, were further saddled with the constant fear of being found out, the gentleman’s gentleman thereupon to be sent back to X— for mandatory military service. Any reference to this end sent the roommates into a tizzy quelled only by a call to Modest to verify the status of Alexey’s citizenship application (the invariable assurance that he would see if he could discover anything more than last week little softened the disheartening blow of its not already being *un fait accompli*). Peter was especially vocal in despairing of the wait “without a care for those people it left vexed by their unsettled status.” (When not relaxing at Nick R—’s or out on the town in his good company, or again, I flatter myself to report, mine, Peter was a confirmed recluse on account of his nerves, often wonting to note the “little premium put on peace of mind these days.”)

Modest, on the other hand, was in a position to regulate his time.

Notwithstanding our studies and the odd deadline for an article or play (I was surprised to learn how generous these intervals were: an article was wanted for next month’s edition, two short plays were requested for next season—a whole year away. Really, I can’t comprehend what these so-called writers are on about with their constant complaints of insufficient remuneration [or was it recognition they were after rather? Well, as to that,

no matter really; one and the same some might be wont argue, fellow essayists among them]; I can't see but that the recompense is quite in keeping with the little all of effort this stuff levies. Quite enough for one to live off (or "on." Whatever). More than, if that one happens to be as assiduously moderate as Modest), Modest was at perfect liberty to devote whatever part of the day he found convenient to Peter's trivial needs. Besides which, there was no indication that Modest resented his position as secretary of sorts to the composer. His cheerful efforts told how he doted on dear Peter; his capacity for Peter's music—few days passed without his attending a performance, going over roughs, listening to Peter grapple with revisions upon revisions on his living room grand—told how he regarded it highly, very highly if von Meck's generous regards are at all to be taken as the measure of her author's opinion.

No, as I say, I surmise Modest felt, but, truth be plain, he was not wild with feeling and seemed to me to need no support to speak of. In any case, he would have had it in me should he have chosen to avail himself, which, characteristically enough, he did not. In fact, seeing so little of him in the time previous to his leaving, that is, previous to Peter's dying, I began to wonder if he wasn't avoiding me, to spare my seeing how gaunt his near-constant ministrations had perforce made him and unduly wasting away with worry about his emotional state when my prayers, such as they were, belonged rightfully to his brother.

It would be tedious and beside the point to draw into these memories how discussion with him, by whom I mean Peter, and Nick R— had roused my enthusiasm for the Catholic church, e'en unto the very threshold of conversion, so stirring did I likewise find the rites. Subsequent discussion with Modest (who is an unrepentant atheist,

claiming never to have seen the use of his family's religion or any other, ill-comprehending, that is, that faith is little in league with utility, but has a pious part to play in all men's lives, whether they like to believe it or not) succeeded in dissuading me of only the strictest adherence to these fancies too. (Contradictorily perhaps, he was pleased to maintain he had perfect faith in Peter's ability as a composer, but that, he said, was based on a substantial portfolio of proof. "And what is God's green earth?," one might well have been wont to ask, but, by the time the impulse arose, he'd long since flitted over oceans and settled, it seemed, quite beyond my grasp.)

Well, well, it was an issue on which we never saw eye to eye, but seeing as our studies left me little spare time for church, and seeing anyway that I could derive no more benefit from the pulpit than pleasure from the boy's choir, I deigned to entertain Modest's suggestion that I give it all some more thought before hastening to commit myself to any one view and left it at that. Presently, having not so much thought about it as gone without it and seen it was good, I have let alone any specific designs I may have entertained, viz. organized religion.

Still, now, and certainly then, when left (one might say "abandoned") so completely to my own devices in that dreariest of seasons, prayers offered a pacifier of sorts; Peter would take great comfort, I argued, could Modest bring himself to mention them at his bedside. Whether he did or not I do not know. Probably, ever conscientious and ready to carry out people's petitions if he is in anything like a position to do so as he is. But perhaps it's one and the same if he did or he didn't. Perhaps Peter is in a better position to appreciate all now.

But the abortive notion of Cate's accompanying Modest to Russia had a far more probable cause, the poor, perfect darling. And, rebuffed, she remained to shed her honey light on those dark days and during my visits to her at home. These I, profoundly in need of her sympathetic companionship, treated myself to as often as I was assured of avoiding Anatol, who, completely out of his mind with grief, had taken a leave from the gallery. At first, he could be seen shadowing Modest's doings—his organizing, his telephonings. By the time that twin was on to his packings, Anatol hadn't the will or the energy to follow suit. Instead, he took to moping about the house, thoughtlessly disturbing Cate's cello practice (how supremely sexy is that, I need hardly ask) to inquire whether they oughtn't start a family. He was not lusty (to Cate's satisfaction, Anatol's distinguishing banality extends e'en unto the bedroom and violent passions are almost as unknown to him as they are to Modest. [Oh, but how one yearns to be allowed to demonstrate the intense joys they promise!]); he was aggrieved by the loss of a family member; he was bored. Cate thought the timing not ideal. Anatol bought a retriever rather and named it (it in dubious taste, I think, for all his dealings with contemporary art) "Petya," although it was, in fact, female. All this and more about Cate's inhibited little life I gleaned from her demure but ultimately revealing responses to Modest's considerate inquiries, these repaying vigilant if veiled attention to a far greater extent than the essay at hand.

Indeed, as to that, I do not believe it entirely digressive from the matter at hand to insert here a scene from memory, not so much merely diverting as properly propitious in view of the von Meck business that opened the show (and may well close it, as the restless reader will not be long in determining), owing its livelihood to just those above-implicated living room studies. Much may be gleaned about our hero by keeping our eye

discreetly directed at the *tableau* (an antique deal, the sketch of which I may or may not have occasion to return to in order to more completely draw out. Or do I mean “fill in?” No matter, I think; it’s just a desk) at which sits Cate—a full blown flower over whom Modest hovers, never touching, never settling, but stately pacing in a curve around her upright chair back—all in readiness to transcribe Modest’s von Meck’s response to Peter’s latest. This last the former is re-reading some part of for some reason, and when he chances, with metronomic regularity, into the narrow panorama of my peeking, I oversee the following telling tidbits with a flawlessness I might be made to swear to barring that as much is hardly necessary now, having since had further occasion to verify these first impressions (pps. 268, 118-122 and 170-171, I believe) and to sew up the greatest gaps they proved to exhibit (half the telling tidbits were lost on me, Modest’s back being turned to me every time he completed the closest side of the arc he was describing).

But before the soloist’s virtuoso performance is allowed to take centre stage, allow me to direct my audience’s attention to the sage, which is not to say self-important, tone of Peter’s musings. I did, and thought too how prettily, which is not to say hyperbolically, put these were, and how generous, which is not to say vain, was his devolving them upon the rich widow who was his most munificent audience (or so he might well be forgiven for thinking!). And *so* modest, and I, for one, find myself entirely in sympathy with his every lofty sentiment and well-made point, however academic the question, the which I really am in no position to judge, being that I was then only beginning my studies with Modest and the verisimilitude of this re-enactment must be preserved at all costs, even at that of greater lucidity.

But, now, here, then, is how, according to what I gleaned from Modest, some largish excerpt of Peter's epistle of the nth March sounded:

When one reads the autobiographies of our best people, or reminisces about them, one constantly encounters emotions, feelings, and general artistic sensitivity that one has often experienced and that is completely comprehensible. But there exists one man who is not understood, who cannot be reached, who remains alone on his unattainable heights. Not unseldom does he arouse my anger—hatred almost. Why, I wonder, does this man, who can, as no one else before him ever could, attune our souls to the highest and most miraculously euphonious melody, this writer who was gratuitously granted from on high the power never before granted anyone, to enable us, dull-witted creatures that we are, to penetrate the most inaccessible alleys of our secret moral life—why has this man become addicted to teaching, why obsessed by the mania of preaching and enlightening our dark or limited minds? In the past, his depiction of, as it seemed, the simplest and most ordinary scene created an unforgettable impression. The highest love for mankind, the highest pity for its helplessness, limitations, and insignificance could be read between the lines. One wept, hardly knowing why. . . . Because for a fleeting moment, through his intervention, one came into contact with an ideal world of absolute goodness and humanity. . . . Now he annotates his texts, and [would seem] to have the sole monopoly of understanding the problem of faith and ethics (or whatever) [sic.]; but a cold wind blows from all his present writings. . . . The former Tolstoy was half divine—the present one is a priest. And in essence priests are teachers only by the grace of a role they have themselves assumed, not through the power of an irresistible vocation.

Now I must bore you with certain abstract things, but I hope you will listen patiently to them. I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things, of which I happen to repent, more or less, afterwards. Now and then I speak and act too quickly, when it would have been better to wait patiently. I think other people sometimes commit the same errors. Well, this being the case, what is to be done? Must I consider myself a dangerous man, incapable of anything? I do not think so. But the question is to try by all possible means to put those selfsame passions to a good use. For instance, to name one of the passions: I have a more or less irresistible passion for books, and I continue to want to instruct myself, to study if you like, just as much as I want to eat my bread. You certainly will be able to understand this. When I was in other surroundings, in the surroundings of pictures and objects of art, you know how I then had a violent passion for them, that reached the highest pitch of enthusiasm. And I do not repent it, for even now, far from that land, I am often homesick for the land of pictures.

But you see, there are many things which one must believe and love. There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, and of Correggio in Michelet, and of Delacroix in Victor Hugo, and then there is something of the Gospel in Rembrandt, as you like it—it comes to the same, if one only understands the thing in the right way, without misinterpreting it and assuming the equivalence of the comparisons, which do not pretend to lessen the merits of the original personalities. And in Bunyan there is something of Maris or of Millet, and in Beecher Stowe there is something of Ary Scheffer.

If now you can forgive a man for making a thorough study of pictures, admit also that the love of books is as sacred as the love of Rembrandt, and I even think they complete each other.

And there you have it! I mean, what a breadth of personality is contained therein! And how capable it seems of comprehending these sorts of things! And how wonderfully completely Peter appears able to submerge himself in the fiction at hand (some voluminous Russian thing, I suspect, Tolstoy being what he is, I imagine, in Russian, which is to say, so much better, I expect, in English translation, that is, altogether quite Dickensian, which author's style I revere as ardently as Peter adores his content. Great minds, as they say. Need I say more? But that I, for one, as freely admit to preferring, I do not say "easier"—shall I say "more consuming?"—reading. Yes, more consuming it is)! What remains to be ascertained is whether it requires an outsized imagination or a hypersensitive heart to get so much out of a mere book. Again, a question for the academics in the audience.

I might add that there then followed some stuff about the programme for his fourth symphony, which von Meck must have asked him to detail or else I can't think that he would have laboured so, and at such length. The gist of the thing may be well enough apprehended through a few choice sentiments selected at random: "The answer is no, none," after which show of modesty, conscience reminding him, perhaps, of all that was owing to his correspondent, Peter expands with such insights as "it is a purely lyrical process. It is a musical confession of the soul, which is full to the brim, and which, true to its nature, unburdens itself through sounds just as a lyric poet expresses himself through poetry. The difference lies in the fact that music has far richer resources of expression and is a more subtle medium into which to translate the thousand shifting moments in the soul's moods;" then, "this is fate, the fatal force that prevents our striving for happiness from succeeding. . . . The unconsolable (sic.), hopeless feeling is growing

stronger and more consuming. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and immerse oneself in dreams?;" and then again, "Oh joy! . . . Little by little, dreams have completely enveloped the soul. . . . Happiness is here, it is here!;" concluding with, "but no! They were only dreams. . . ." etc. I believe all this was in reference to what is called "the first movement" and find it not unmoving at that.

Modest's reaction to these deep thoughts, however, was entirely lacking from my observation. That is, his back was turned upon completing the passage, but, if Cate's Delphic face was any kind of mirror, rapt approbation (I would go as far as to say "adoration," but fear of confusing my reader by seeming to confuse Cate's feelings for the one brother with those for the other stays my hand) was likewise writ all over Modest's countenance.

"How will you answer?"

"Oh," Modest started along his line again and a profile came quickly within the grasp of my sights, "perhaps. . . . But are you ready?"

"Yes." Cate sat before a pad of crisp white letter paper with a tiny maroon monogram at the bottom corner of each page. These corners were perfectly aligned with those of the desk, with nothing of the rakish tilt I submit my manuscripts to to accommodate my writing style, for the greater ease and comfort of the thing.

"Honoured Sir," Modest began. And, although a queer strutting quality now animated his step, his face was impassive, like a plastic manikin's, the deep blue eyes looking far away while his whole being concentrated on the shrunken figment whose voice he was impersonating. For a moment, I wondered how good a method actor he was—whether he felt, as I imagine, the deadweight of Nadja's withered breasts, her

husband's death, her children gone, and now nothing but the stabbing pain in the joints of her hands, working, always working, with the needles. The weariness of long, grey days like this, in this new world; the respite from one's own torments offered by playing witness to another's; the grateful release that is Peter's music. The moment was brief; looking again only to find him still strangely bobbing along, his face still a perfect mask, betraying nothing, I devoted myself to prettier pursuits. What a charming tint of pink had suffused Cate's cheek, scribbling away as she tried to keep up.

That they thought they were carrying out this little charade in perfect privacy just because I couldn't hear them and anyway seemed ("*seemed!*" I say. My italics, just as it was my cunning duplicity) immersed in my own piece of writing does not bother me much at all, having, as I do, the last laugh, as they say.

But, to get on: by Christmas, time and the news that "Peter's business" preceded apace in Russia had restored Anatol to his former poise and he could see nothing against cultivating Petya for breeding. He spent those desultory holidays filling the living room with one after another dog book, circumstances Cate found no less satisfying, as she had occasion to intimate to me directly, her time then split between being detained at "The Nutcracker" rehearsals—which *chef d'oeuvre* has decked the mall's halls annually from time immemorial and whose every ping every mother's son of the Island Symphony, as every member of every symphony the world over, must have known like the backs of their bow-sawing, triangle-tickling, kettle-drum thrumming hands—being cloistered in her practice study, and being transported on my arm as we carried on with walking in Modest's absence.

Perhaps more diverting still were nights at Nick R—'s (one is not to be further beleaguered at times of bereavement with the health-quotient of one's pursuits, the island's pet mania notwithstanding; I call it enough to survive so sudden, so seemingly final a separation by any means fortunate enough to be put in one's way).

But I find that I am not what I was, for I flourish on no more than four such *soirées* a week. Whether my experiences on the island have aged me, made me wiser, I cannot rightly say but that, while still only seventeen, I seem alive now as I'd not been on my arrival to the necessity, even the joy, of quiet industry, and, on the clearer kind of morning, I take no little pleasure in labouring two or more hours at a stretch on this memoir. It is a disposition influenced, perhaps, by the memory of Modest taking basically every free moment to "improve" himself, meditating and meditating on the great matters contained in a great many ancient-looking tomes. While, confined to the counter that runs the length of his workshop (Modest, if it is of any interest or significance, is a woodworker as well as a brother, tutor and writer. Not counting the von Meck letters, as, really, one cannot, I have had occasion to assess only one of Modest's literary offerings, if his disturbingly dramatic adaptation of "The Queen of Spades" can, rightly considered, be considered his. The delicately inlaid boxes, on the other hand, I grew accustomed to, seeing as I saw them daily, in various stages of readiness, strewn about the workshop—from the pupate slabs of pale wood to the deeply burnished, ornately patterned artefacts as smug and glowering as beetles on the bookcase. I can say nothing about his patrons, nor did I ever see Modest at work upon these containers so rococo I cannot rid myself of the suspicion they are the work of some fantastic sprites and not that of my simple, sombre, plodding mentor. Boxes, boxes, boxes. For jewels and

love letters, one gleans from the size of them, although Modest admits he has made urns and even caskets in his time. In fact, now that I'm put in mind of it, he may well have built the (above set up) *tableau* I took to be the commonplace quaintness of an antique—a gift or an inheritance, I would have said, knowing Modest's sparing tastes—and gave no further thought to. Strange to think that it might be his. However, be that as it may, I maintain, here as elsewhere, that there is no appreciable difference between a thing and one's impression of it. Whether Modest's work or that of some hack ripping off the best of the fifteenth century [I may be off by a hundred years or so here. History is not my subject], the bureau remains in my mind's eye thoroughly antiquated. But more on Modest's efforts in their place, if place in this memoir they end in having), I wrestled with a (15 page!) essay on the difference between Mill and Carlyle (ironically enough, my reading at last gave me to understand the more soft-hearted of the two expressed himself tersely, the more hard-lined, floridly. Despite and in defence of all that runs contrary to anything that the attuned reader might be excused for expecting of me, and just as contrary to where I myself would have thought my preferences ran, I was for the former and blame it on the scornful reaction that *Papa's* more or less puritanical religion had provoked from childhood in me), Modest reclined in the battered leather armchair by the stove, wholly immersed in a beautifully bound book, cross-checking references—*Voltaire* to *Rousseau* and back again—and pencilling his discreet corroborations in the margins (in miniscule characters I initially took for the wholly private scrawl of which I assume, we are all guilty in moments of haste, but which, as it chanced to be pointed out to me, was a species of shorthand, and that perfectly formed, to see it held up against the book of technique produced by Cate).

During the period of germination or, to trot out another metaphor that flits to mind (I have Modest to thank again for what precious little I grasp of that useful device), during the term in which I “sat” on the idea of a biography, I did so not without brooding, however unconsciously. Unacknowledged by me as I waited on Modest’s putting to rights first one then another disaster in Peter’s life, some industrious behind-the-scenes man was busy researching my subject and collecting materials, for it is from these most proximate months, for all their remarkable tumult, that I retain my most vivid memories. Modest, as I say, looked gaunter for having missed a meal here and there. Peter looked more and more haggard—his hair uncombed, his suit creased, his eyes red-rimmed and his nose bursting with broken vessels—towards the last days of our acquaintance, these dating to a good week before his final demise; he was agitated and weakened by events and stuck fast to the asylum of home about which he skittered, from one settee to the next, sopping up pick-me-ups as quickly as Alexey could divest himself of them. Not that he got drunk; nothing so jolly. As I may have written, or, again, may yet write, Peter’s capacity to remain perfectly unrelieved by spirits, no matter in what quantity they were administered, was really quite awful. Drinking vodka is with him as morbid and ineffectual a habit as anyone else’s jingling pocket change.

But I call those last evenings *too* dreadful—the grimmest of parties consisting in manservant, Modest, myself and often Cate rallying round only to spend endless leaden hours hoping it would dawn on master or maid to replenish a guest’s glass, too swiftly drained in light of Peter’s distress looking like never stopping and not to be otherwise easily endured. After welcoming us with too expansive gestures—locking Modest in a long embrace; faltering, finally catching hold of my raincoat and peeling it off in one

paroxysmal gesture that left me feeling suddenly exposed and absurdly breakable, awkward before Modest and Cate and mortified by Peter's own ruddy embarrassment— Peter threw himself onto a plush loveseat and assumed attitudes of acute unease which outlasted my visitation.

He fidgeted a good deal as I recall it, as if uncomfortable in an ill-fitting suit, but that the suit was his body and he was unsure what to do with its habitual robustness. His great red hands rummaged in his hair, slapped the thick at the back of his neck, fell back on his black lap, lay dead a minute, convulsed the next and the next quenched their spastic new life in the depths of his pockets. He took up his empty glass and drummed it absently on the side table, strolled with it to the mantle and drummed it absently there.

He chatted nervously—oh about nothing, the weather, the upcoming holidays, some petty adventure of Bobbie's, drumming the empty glass on his knee. Sometimes he spoke shrilly, sometimes so quietly he might have been an old man alone in a room, smiling faintly and looking through you or at some point over your head as if there were something deeply interesting to him about your shock of blond.

And he laughed, abruptly: a short, sheepish twitter halfway between a debutante's midnight hiccup and a shrug, or else an abrupt, snorting guffaw when struck anew by one of his pet fixations. He was deathly fearful Antonia would contest the divorce, or, forgetting it had gone through safely, would not grant it him at all. Another outrageous lapse of logic and he was resolved to remain married—it was best for all, for idiotic Antonia, her bastard baby, his reputation. He might have included Modest and Cate had he known it took their combined savings to buy her assent.

“You see, I am a public figure!” he burst out, dealing the dependable sideboard a dramatic blow. “I have a duty to the people and my happiness be damned! It is good that I suffer!” and his eyes flared and it was plain how deeply he felt the truth of his saying so and equally evident it referred less to artistry—although that idea was also a potent one with him—but gurgled up out of his old self-loathing.

“Bobyk, you know,” he said weakly, but whether as the beginning of an anecdote or the end of an explanation it was unclear. It was clear that the thought of a life with Antonia was torture and it came as a great relief when the circuitous route of his thinking recovered the truth: that the divorce was granted and that that unholy woman was not to return to the island; that Alexey was with him and that there was less shame in that than in Bobbie, or myself, although it somehow seemed (seemed somehow, if you like) that Peter had been persuaded to disregard his feelings for me by then.

Of course, he was also in agonies over his estrangement from the Church on account of the divorce, but as to that, however well-matched the two aesthetically, one wonders how he had ever felt at home in that particular fold, given his predisposition. It was a relief, Modest confessed in an idle moment, that Peter had at last settled down with Alexey. And it was quite true they acted the regular married couple—Alexey anxious to please, Peter dismissive but fond, as one made out from the occasional grateful glance. Hardly a love for the ages then! No ardour but all felicity and the swaddling-clothes comfort of familiarity. Naturally, I was disappointed. However, I suppose it’s also true that the history of Peter’s affairs, his rash marriage aside, saw real romantic feeling inextricably hitched to a violent pitch of emotion which was not, perhaps, strictly conducive to the recovery of his nerves.

But waxing as was his wont, Peter had a queer tick of slipping from one subject to another, seemingly without realizing he'd done so. He might begin with an incoherent critique of a concert from years ago, often of the works of Anton R—'s ("He is a tyrant. His mode of music is pure tyranny. The scourge of young boys, their every whimsicality with his, 'No, no, it is not done so!' But *why* must we be so precise and correct all the time? Are men the measure of all things or rulers merely? Hrmf. But just let him break out Mozart! Yes? I think so, yes! Now, then, there's whimsy to knock the stuffing out of his sort of socks; there's real redemption for your money!" Peter chuckled ruefully, as if having delivered the *coup de grace* with a mighty slash to his non-attendant opponent's suspenders and glorying in that one's sudden sheepishness. In point of fact, I can't think that he knew what he was on about at all).

The Russian Five were also dredged up and impossibly abused, Peter forgetting how Modest had long since sutured his rift with them. Works were confused, "Boris Godunov" attributed to the composer of "Prince Igor" and the divergence of style soundly censured ("Has the man no voice to speak of, no signature by which to know him?"). All were condemned for preferring the plink-plonk redundancy of a folk tune to "the cult of musical technique" (p. 161), Peter forgetting his uneasy history with said same; forgetting what an unnatural struggle his own late admission into and famed conquest of that cult had been; forgetting how passionately he'd resented Modest's constant presence in the conservatory, his "That is good," which Peter, who adored his baby brother as ardently as he loathed practice, took to confirm his own outsized intuition that it was not perfect, thereby compelling him to do it again and again and again; forgetting how he himself, one lucky vacation, had paid a blond little Venetian to prove

himself (“When I begin to sing,” the boy had said, “you will be convinced that I am the one”) with a Viennese lullaby that made him weep and which later escaped the rungs of orchestration to become his so-called “Opus 38” (pp. 177).

Soon enough, the babble will have slipped imperceptibly into a spectacle of self-flagellation. Peter has always been his own worst critic and his greatest admirer; the newest work is ever his best, something really quite special, while the last suddenly makes him sick to think of. One must marvel at the self-deception, the whys and hows of his refusal to acknowledge the ties connecting the two just as day follows imperceptibly from its progenitor, the night. I mean, can the man not hear? Can he not see, as even I, shy of the perfect sight-reader although I admit that I am, seem readily enough to see, that the very same pitch and swoon of violins is a motif plucked whole from the one and pressed in its service to the next?

But the present tirade reaches another level of nonsense again. Now he is denouncing himself for wrongs committed in dead versions of this or that composition, as if all previous selves maintained their seats at the round table of his being, a quarrelling litter of wild enthusiasms, and that each shows up an untutored vanity in the mellow light of experience needs must debase and arouse poisonous doubt about the most fervently flowering passions of today.

No, I really must insist he makes no sense and cannot know what he is saying, shuttled from one thing to another by a nervous torrent of words bound only by their prevailing tone of anguish, of self-important self-doubt. And such, I might suggest, is the sacred if sorrily (I quite firmly believe in the existence and even the common usage of such a word and spell-check be damned. Furthermore, if I happen to be mistaken in this

regard, I don't at all see that I should be. But, be that as it may, I will allow that the finicky reader may substitute "sorely" if he wishes; it is one and the same to me) self-defeating subjectivity of creative genius—a sensitivity morbidly acute and/or one morbidly self-conscious of its darkest fruitions: all inner ear solely attuned to its inner child, if you like, its gaze forever fixed on, its finger forever palpating, the rampaging flutter of its self-provoking pulse alone.

Naturally, Cate and I would attempt to intervene, to counter if not quench the flow of absurd, plainly neurotic complaints. But they were not to be stymied until Peter had exhausted himself, often mid-sentence, those fierce eyes you know so well suddenly startled and casting questioningly about the room, from me to the piano to Alexey, and coming to rest at last on Modest, whose own gaze was incessantly solicitous and entirely devoid of contempt.

Indeed, I could not but note with what singular placidity Modest greeted his brother's raving delusions (delusional ravings, if the finicky reader prefers it); how strangely easy he looked, sitting with legs crossed, hands calm in his lap or stroking Alexey's old dachshund who'd wormed its way onto his lap. And always training his face after Peter's as if his brother were making all sorts of very compelling sense. Only when another spoke (precious rarity!) or Modest must thank Alexey but no, none for him, thank you, was his soothing obsequiousness directed elsewhere. Indeed, the blinding intensity of his attentions was all there was to suggest that Modest suffered any real upset; I don't believe he addressed me more than twice of an evening and once it was to ask whether I wanted to go home. "Good grief, yes!" I longed to own, but, alas, by that time I was well enough inculcated with Modest's ready example to understand that one

did not, for some unfathomable reason, express oneself with complete candour in company, and the closer to your heart they were, the more ginger you were to be with them. Backwards backwoods! Still, I contrived to indicate my consent to liberty with an unmistakable nod where another might have feigned perfect contentment to remain engaged with Peter. I then tried offering to escort Cate home—it was late; the streets were dark, perhaps dangerous; Anatol might be worried or not even at home—but, of course, she was for staying with Modest.

“Laundry on the line is like the shed skins of ghosts.” Or is it just like ghosts pure and simple? (Well, as to that, I propose to let the open question stand as a reminder that I ought really to ask Modest). And again: “Cat’s ears are like paper.” Tissue paper? Paper bags? It remains a mystery what I was on about, but I can say with credible certainty that these lines come to light intact from the little black *cahier* of my student days (the 13th June) by way of pleasant diversion (I recall so well wrestling with them and how it felt—or feels now, at any rate, held up against the fiery glare of sentiment perhaps only proper to reminiscence—that every problem Modest set me I seem destined to drop, the delicate matter shattering into a thousand pointed questions on the workshop floor) and simply to substantiate what I wrote about Modest’s having taught me metaphor. Such a subtle, elegant, surprisingly accurate means of self-expression—it has become a favourite ploy of mine the which I hope my sympathetic reader does not begrudge indulging in these pages from time to time. May the amusement he derives from such fancies repay this indulgence, as I, for one, satisfy myself in assuming it will.

To end it then, Peter's recovery from the mess of his marriage was painfully provisional and endlessly unexceptional. It was very soon clear to me anyway that our presence for that undistinguished feat was a waste of time, that perhaps Modest was right and Alexey's dull ministrations would best promote Peter's peace of mind and we might as well leave the latter to the former and take the night(s!) off. It was, therefore, with Peter's welfare in mind that, at a some proximate point in the proceedings, I declined to call on him with Modest and Cate, but rather removed my distress from the sphere of his sensitivity, drowning this (my distress, that is), as it is well within social norms to do, at Nick R—'s. Despite Modest's suggestions to the contrary—that these visits were a waste, that Peter was not "on the mend"—was amply, tragically, retrospectively justified by his suicide at the end of the following week.

Chapter Three: Peter

I must trust the forgoing suffices by way of preamble (and indeed, it quite simply must, for here we are on “Chapter Three: Peter” already!), for I am anxious (and may count, no doubt, on the reader’s similar impatience) to get on with the “meat” of these memoirs.

In fact, rereading the foregoing, it seems the essentials have been reasonably exhaustively supplied; before my arrival on the island in March of that year, I had been born in Paris to a Protestant minister and his beautiful, docile wife. Roused by *Rousseau*’s apparition on the curriculum (as I need hardly rationalize to my *savvy* reader, in my uniquely individual case, in common with so many of the more deep thinking adolescents throughout Western Civilization—hello *Rimbaud*!—with insipient maturation there germinated a growing affinity with the complexities [stylistic if not not often otherwise] of a *Hugo*, or, better yet, a Shelley, a Byron!, a Wilde! [those Brits! How I fetishize them, if that is *le mot juste*; if there is under the sun that which threatens to come under the dominion of their translation, their mother tongue can be counted on to conclude the tryst *tout de suite* and with *style*! Thus, as I am given to understand, we know our own *Montaigne* best as we have him translated by Florio, that lively scamp, and, I mean, the modern variants are altogether *too* lean, wouldn’t you say? I, for one, would], in marked contradistinction to a distinct coolness one such as I, for one, was liable to feel was the effect, and, consequently, the due, of the inhumane Occam’s razor of a *Voltaire*, or worse, a Pope), as by my complete imminent empathy with a group of

future Bohemians who had, in my precocious pre-adolescence, affected me greatly, I soon chafed against the strictures of a too comfortable, however thoroughly middle-class, upbringing (it was naughty for *Maman* to have conceded, with nearly no struggle to speak of, to my every whim. I refer not to *Papa*'s look of dismay when he found already in pieces at the bottom of the stairs the rattlely tin chicken a lad is designed to pull along dismally level planes: "*Pas encore des jouets. Puis c'est cassé après tout. Vraiment Viviane. Il faut qu'on arrête avec ça, car ça coûte, enfin, des jouets. Puis, il n'est plus bébé, Nicolas.*" Well, as to that, that rankled. Just because I retained something of childhood's lusty wonderland into the wastrel battlefield of socially-conditioned maturity, of which *Papa* seemed to me a cut and very dried specimen, with all his mild preaching and solicitous greetings, which is anyway just what it seems: so much numbness of heart and vapidness of wit).

What blind rage did I level at *Papa* across the dinner table, however it touched me to see *Maman stressée* and attempting pre-emptive knee petting beneath the table. But I was having none of it anymore; I was no longer a child to be thus placated, but a young man moved by great stirrings and an even greater want to defend their justness. And then, just when I was beginning to sample the fruits of this heady, liberating audacity—to waste no more time in school but dispense with the hours and my lunch money drinking the most fantastically bad plonk along that part of the Seine where, in winter, emaciated men discuss art and, in summer, lounge as good as nude on brightly coloured towels—I was smote with deafness. Now that's what I call unfair and I'm afraid I must confute the sages of the ages and contend that Dame Fate is not blind; she has only the spiteful heart of a perfect child.

But I won. I survived the blow and, if anything, my sensitivity has intensified to compensate for the deficiency of a single, all but superfluous, sense. And I trust I need hardly mention, as I discovered with Modest, that things were famously the same with the great Gloucester. And ill-omened Oedipus. I too feel attuned to my feelings and feel convinced that they have not withered without the stimulus of sound, but flourished. Oh, I feel strongly all right, overwhelmingly strongly even: rage, frustration, divine bliss at those insignificant things overlooked by most but which are, for the inspired, proof-positive of The Divine—a bright butterfly chancing into your corner of shade; Modest covering me with his mother's throw when I have "fallen asleep" in his bed, a crib whose bars are naught but books and tinkling tea cups all around. I feel his marble touch linger a minute on my bared nape, and then he is gone, to sleep on the couch.

As I may have mentioned at some previous point in some more advanced "Chapter" than this, the suggestion that I be tutored by the famous composer's brother persuaded me to resume my studies with something akin to relish. I have nothing against learning, you understand, so long as one is at liberty to be led by one's whims. It is obvious to me, then, that one may learn nothing in the prison house of a public school where individuality is stripped bare and let not the panacea of accolades attesting to your exceptional erudition in your part as party to the fourth grade debating society tempt you to think otherwise. I now see it was an unsought boon, then, when my tragic loss barred me from continuing my education by "normal" means; I had a good many friends and had, at a remarkably young age, distinguished myself as a pupil; it would have been tedious to account for my slightly altered needs and habits in that anyway altogether ruinous environment. Thus, finally fatiguing of *Maman's* ministrations and much more

readily of the seemingly indefatigable series of studious trysts, played out on iron benches to the, I can only suspect, tuneful distraction of midtown traffic, with any number of *Papa's* sarcophagal apprentices (if the reader will allow that word—“sarcophagal,” I mean—to convey their uniform boot-faced lifelessness), the suggestion that I be tutored in a country largely unencumbered by what is, with (or, if you like, without) irony, called “civilized” society met with little enough resistance from me.

The essence of Peter's story should be equally clear. His family (I save particulars about its history and its relevant members for later “Chapters” largely devoted to such subjects) set up shop in what became Peter's house in the capital. The twins were born (“I have already seen them several times,” a morose, mal-adjusted boy of ten wrote his natal-land nanny Fan, “and each time they have seemed to me angels come to earth (page 25).” Peter began his music career, the inducement to practice provided by his younger brother, to wit: Modest, with the help of his (that is, Peter's, for who else's could it have been?) passionate character, making up for the retardation of its development. Ludicrously uncomfortable with his homosexuality (again, Peter/Peter's, although it is quite *de rigueur* among artists and however the censure to which I suspect it is still subjected by the beefier sort of redneck is, if not inconsequential, not worthy of consideration by a civilized minority; in my experience, nothing saps the spirit from a thing like being ignored), Peter's sexual maturity consisted in violent and thwarted obsessions on the one hand, and, on the other, in confused and clandestine *rendez-vous* with any number of students, sailors, gigolos etc. (The lucky reader chances to find me in the happy position to elaborate on both and may best believe that I will do so in the appropriate place.) His pre-eminence as a Romantic composer augurs, if that's the word I

want, nothing from my complimentary commentary (however I am stirred almost exclusively by the bass notes, I consider my understanding and appreciation of his music no less than *au courant* with popular opinion). Highlights of Peter's private life in recent months I can and will conveniently and summarily reiterate as follows:

1. Struggles with the "Onegin" libretto leave him so weak that Modest must be called upon to finish the trifling task;
2. Falling prey (remarkably easy prey, despite his infirmity and characteristic acuity of feeling. Were external forces at work? What induced Peter to submit to their influence?) to a former student's professions of love and to his self-doubts, he marries;
3. He attempts suicide (this episode will certainly justify its own little highlight later in the memoir I think);
4. He dies (evidently far from being "on the mend," as Modest thought him) from the foregoing afflictions.

I suppose, strictly speaking, the circumstances of item 4. might endure being looked upon in a more brilliantly optimistic light than is my wont, such as, for example, it might be Modest's best behest to do. But to one in the privileged position of having been privy, during fully nine months of acquaintanceship, to the deepest woes besetting the composer, *and yet* having retained an objectivity towards these (nine months is and isn't a long time) to which more familiar familiars can only aspire (in the end, a seat of unburdening takes the shape of the sitter, to make use of an opportune if obscure metaphor), all evidence seems to point to suicide. The notoriously refined nature, the melancholy of legendary proportions, the rumoured likelihood of a letter from Antonia

that threatened what was, to Peter, both the stuff of his success and the due of his downfall, to wit: making public the darkest of his private feelings. Knowing these details alone, can one imagine his unfortunate death was otherwise than premeditated?

Yes, certainly, there it is in a nutshell. But is plot the most important aspect of a story? Is it necessary at all? It takes but a glance at Browning to see that plot is superfluous to character and I, for one, maintain that character must assume all the more prominence if a non-fictional account of a real man is to be given due credit. Again we concern ourselves with details. Again we take up where Browning left off in submitting that, so far from simply filling a story out (making it “imaginatively alive” and lending it “verisimilitude,” as they say and to which I would only add “a sense of literal weightiness”), details *are* the story. That is, the story *is in* the details. To understand the story, that is, to understand the man *who is* the story (in the case of biography, the character isn’t simply *in the* story, the character *is* the story; details about that character’s life, then, will be of utmost significance and, *en effet*, will constitute that very “meat,” to reconstitute a metaphor I’m all but sure breathes life into other vital tidbits of this recollection, of the biographical matter), it will be necessary to describe, *in detail* (*en tous détails*, if you will), choice aspects of the above *précis*.

I met Peter at long last a week after my arrival. Feeling, from time to time, the avid student of life’s fury to refresh himself with the pitiable barbarism of modern civil society, and having nothing better to do in the suburbs of a Sunday, I helped Modest run some errands in town. I must have slackened slightly as I noted the establishment of yet another McDonald’s (that enterprise that is the apple of the eye of my disregard and the symbol of everything I think wrong with the modern world, viz. precooked, overcooked,

automatically-prepared “food” for the soulless masses, to wit: any number of “fashionably” dressed, copiously pimped youths making up the coiling lines spreading from the counter like the very tendrils of something insidious; and the inhuman logic of selfish profit), for I suddenly realized Modest was miles ahead down the block and, to all appearances, arrested there not, as one might be excused for expecting, by any transparent pang of conscience or concern for the companion he’d left so irretrievably behind.

I might take this opportunity to add that, at such times, I am almost forced to think his supposed “interest” in one is led by a blind pursuit of his own subtle if unlikely pleasure, such as, to take a most convenient example, it would seem that he derives from the mere menial matter of walking, on finer days especially, when another might naturally be encouraged to take the time to appraise the value of what passes for fashion in this, or, again, that shop window only to find the study of social niceties repaid by one’s being utterly forgotten.

Now my eyes are not completely closed to the virtues of a spring morning, but one, such as myself, would like the interest of another, such Modest, to be of another kind and of a more flattering quality again than that transient sense of that other’s own well-being that is the trick of clear skies and song birds; one would like that one’s interlocutor thought of nothing but him on whom he everywhere and at all times else presses his undivided if apparently indiscriminate attentions. I was to put it to Cate roughly thusly: “The thing about Modest. He’s not what he should be, what you think he is, I mean. All that selfless consideration, you know, the way he appears so attentive to you all the time. I think he doesn’t give a fat ‘fig’ about you when he asks how you are. He’s just drinking

you in, you know. Gorging on you, as one might as well go as far as to say. Sucking some species of satisfaction from your simply being there, speaking to him. Just like you go around feeling all chirpy and chuffed with yourself because the sun is shining. It's all me me me with him, if you see what I mean."

Of course, Cate could hardly give the idea the serious consideration it merited, things with her feelings being as painfully plain as I've elsewhere mentioned I understood well enough that they were, but I don't see there was anything so very amusing in my conjecture.

"But Nicolas," she managed at last, but with a motherly air that is that blight of any would-be young lover still yet savvy enough to admire the complex bouquet that is a mature if yet still becomingly deceptively-girlish-to-all-outward-appearances woman (Cate is younger than Modest: twenty-eight to his round twenty-nine, and only just turned that mere months before my arrival. The miniature gulf of a little over ten years dividing us was further dramatically abridged by my relative maturity [suffering of the kind my loss had caused me is apt to age one with great haste] and her extremely youthful good looks [not a wrinkle or grey hair that does not become her]). "You're reading Modest all wrong. He doesn't take the same interest in a person as other people take in a spring day. He takes the same interest in a spring day as he takes in you." (I thought better of pointing out her musings seemed to me completely circular and nonsensical, but I trust it will be amply evident to my reader why they did.)

"And it is not the leech-like self-gratification you describe as being a person's pleasure in a fine day," she went on with feeling, quite caught up in the impossible hyperbola of her enthusiasm. "It is rather, as you say, a pleasure in your being, in *your*

being Nicolas. Nothing is spirited away by his kind of regard. I think it's your Olympian good looks," she added and winked, plainly trying to put a friendly twist things which was altogether as bad as the matronly effect, and how I cringed and how bitter it was to see that implied compliment (Olympian! Hardly a Modest word!) sapped so suddenly of all its would-be sweetness. True, there was some small satisfaction to be had in the idea that gangly old Modest envied my physique (in which respect I have, I recognize, been singularly fortunate in exhibiting none of my placid *Papa's* flaccidity. A somewhat frail boy, I presently find myself little shy of being a man of really quite fair health), an idea so far from what I had observed of Modest's perfectly platonic regard that it simply hadn't occurred to me. Oh, but what was a cup of a rival's envy to the holy grail of a love object's heartfelt praise? And, as I say, the comment had quite the opposite of the bolstering effect it would certainly have achieved had it only been said *sans* that unsavoury jocundity. I can only hope that then, as many a time had done the trick with *Maman*, a certain manner of discreet detachment did not fail to stir her sympathies and remorse the remainder of our walk home.

But be all that impenetrable circuitousness as it may or may not be, I maintain Modest's ability to be made, by such marginal works as walking, to forget himself so utterly as to forgo the attentions he so habitually pays his constant companion, well, I call that an unusual if not entirely unsavoury idiosyncrasy, and one I can hardly be expected to have held with. Happily, lapses of the kind were only occasional and the greater part of the time one could feel perfectly convinced of his utter engrossment in one's self.

Curious though these observations are, in terms of reader interest, my first meeting with Peter must supersede anything I might relate about my dealings with his

brother. On that fateful Sunday morning, then, I had, as I hope to have indicated, “fallen behind” Modest, the distraction of whose altogether insular contentment had conspired with his overlong stride (liable to propel him along at a frightfully untenable rate, as I have not infrequently been in a position to attest), and that other singular habit of his of proceeding from A to B with unrelenting directness, to transport him fully a half block from my side, where, presently, I perceived him returning a violently enthusiastic greeting by oncoming traffic with nothing more outwardly evident of recognition than a slight increase in his already exceptional pace.

I had been out of lively society a good week and, feeling it, as I have said, only judicious to keep a finger firmly implanted in the common pie, as it were, I hastened to join the duo before the intriguing figure escaped me. I had, of course, seen photographs of Peter; my study of the man upon learning I was to be sent to study with his brother was in every respect thorough and happened to have included the perusal of several posters advertising concerts of his music (oh, how keenly did I see it would prove profitless for me to attend these!), many of which featured representations of the composer. In particular, a recent likeness of him, dressed in dated formal attire and glowering at the camera, made him appear impossibly old (his hair, by a trick of lighting one supposes, looks much whiter than I found it was) and discerning and staunch. Not at all the man I apprehended on the street: a swollen-looking figure with ruddy complexion and bulging eyes. He wore a rather glaring yellow shirt, silk as it proved, beneath a tweed jacket patched at the elbows and cinched in slightly feminine style at the waist over which amplitude it was perforce left undone. As I submit, struggles with an implacable muse

had advanced his apparent age by no more than ten or fifteen years. He was, in fact, only thirty-eight, ten years Modest's superior.

It is also perhaps as germane as it is opportune to establish that I had recently been shocked to discover that I am ever so slightly myopic. However, fashions being the abomination they are on the island, insofar as I found no frames fit me (and indeed, a marked few Olympians wore spectacles, if you see what I mean), and, further, insofar as I was not often to be found without the company of good, sound, far-sighted company, I am in no very great danger of doing injury to myself in the absence of corrective lenses and so forgo wearing them.

And so it was that I could hardly have been expected to recognize the man for the eminent figure he was *tout de suite*, for it was not until I was almost upon Peter that I made the above observations, themselves seemingly calculated to throw me off track (the conviction that Modest had been accosted by a stout female of which variety the island's stock is awfully replete was complicated by a grisliness about the chin, which proved, on closer inspection, to be the primordial beginnings of a beard).

But I hadn't long to stand about and stare in ignorance (incomprehensibly, the man, as by now I was all but certain he was, was foraging about in either ear. What could he be looking for in there and was it quite the proper time for such searching?). Modest, compelled by Peter's powerful presence to recover himself from his absentminded sauntering-off-of-his-own-accord, straightaway made the requisite introductions.

"Nicolas, this is Peter, my brother."

Again, the full, slow, exceptionally embarrassing enunciation. More so for that I noticed (the auspiciousness of the occasion affected my remaining senses to no such very

great degree that their unusual sensitivity was altogether impeded) that I had not been introduced to Peter. As I deemed it unlikely the “Nicolas” addressed to myself sufficed for strictly sufficient introduction, I surmised that Modest had had occasion, sometime previous and without my presence, of discussing myself with Peter, no doubt not failing to detail the fact of my deafness, and, I mean, what must the composer have made of that? What could he have made of it but that his brother had as a charge someone who could possess no affinity with himself, being categorically prevented from appreciating his art.

“Not so! Not so!” I wanted to cry out directly the wretched idea struck me. I too had had piano lessons as a boy, any number of endlessly tedious piano lessons, the upshot of which was a certain ability to read sheet music which had been resuscitated into fantastic life on many a night in the weeks before leaving towards picking up Peter’s uplifting if note-laden compositions. “Picking” them up! “Relishing” them more like! “Being ravished” by them (!), for no single activity so little resembled endlessly unthinking study than imagining the sound of the notes that slid under my index as it passed with feverish haste up and down the register! Indeed, it seemed to me that I of all people had an uncommon affinity with the composer. In divining what those dizzy towers of notes must sound like, in ascribing them tone, volume, duration as I imagined that here, surely, Peter means for a *ralentissimo*, was I not *creating* the composition in much the same fashion as its originator? With only the piano transcriptions to work with, I had even to orchestrate the bloody things in a backwards process no less delicate and difficult, I fancy, than their derivation from final symphonic form. Oh, the “first movements” I fancied I heard! Oh, the “first movements” I seemed almost to have made!

Full, ripe, rank with every emotion, the zenith and nadir of every emotion the that deeper feeling of human souls are made witness to, nay, are so constituted solely to suffer!

Given an hour odd of this, the petty bickering with *Papa* at the dinner table felt juvenile indeed, and any vestigial resolve to remain in Paris had all but lost its force with me.

All this I wished ardently to convey to Peter from the outset and, previous to meeting him, believed I would—oh, with the impossible certainty of youth persuaded by the sheer strength of his enthusiasm to think that the kinship between those of deep feeling must penetrate the isolation that is their collective (or respective, just as you see fit) lot(s). It was a matter of comportment, I had thought, of contorting one's all but faultless features so as to express not only the mature respect and keen admiration one quite honestly felt, but the thoroughgoing sympathy. Surely Peter would see, would *recognize* a self-same nature, a twin soul, one truly in tune with his singular sensibilities and one, moreover, who felt them as expressly: a fellow lone spy, as it were and as if from the self-same pinnacle, on the plight of humanity, equally moved by it and quite unable to think of a more sublime way of mining it than just as I gleaned he had done in this or that composition.

“At last!” I felt convinced it must dawn on the celebrated artist like a thunderclap. “A confidante! A perfect contemporary, for all his appearance of a young Olympian!”

Oh, zealous youth, charmed youth! What won't Disillusioned Man risk to recover thy spell, thy raptures of blind certainty, those dizzy heights which double as the seat of great art! Although I am not the first to have said as much, you may well believe I say it with a feeling *soit* beyond, *soit* behind my years.

Peter's reaction to me was, shall we say, *different* than all that I had imagined. "Indifferent" more like. I will not say that I was "disappointed," or even "piqued;" the privilege of subsequent propinquity has seen initial misapprehensions all but forgiven and forgotten. Indeed, nothing could seem more blindingly obvious to me now than that, ever oppressed with inner concerns of a higher order surely than mere common courtesies, the artist could hardly have greeted me otherwise than in what only seemed a contemptible manner; I was, to all outward appearances, a veritable child, all the more hastily dismissed for being, as I was, and am, more lithe and finely dressed than Peter's rough and tumble nephew, Bobbie (I had yet to admit the futility of my Bohemian finery, my rough silk jodhpurs, Irish linen peasant blouse, crocheted vest of the type that kept the poorest Indian children from starvation and idleness, and Chinese slippers costing two francs in a wonderful greengrocer full of such fantastically cheap fancies. Although these were the height of practicality for an afternoon *en plein air* at an unpretentious café along the Seine or an evening of card-playing and dancing at *un atelier*, there were abysmally few island sorts one felt a need to impress favourably and my apparel was no match for the coarseness and rain associated with life in that place).

Peter cast me a cursory glance from chin to Chinese slipper as if the head counted for nothing and the *cachet* of all things Chinese was perfectly foreign, or so his expansive gesture of acknowledgment or dismissal seemed to intimate. Clearly he was distracted and I'm convinced he didn't *really* see me at all, at first, for all my evident earnestness appeared completely lost on him. He cleared his throat or grunted, *tout de suite* refastening on Modest.

“Yes. Yes, yes. About Alex’s then.” The facial outcropping was thickest to either side of the mouth, longest overtop, compounding (or do I mean “confounding?” Bloody foreign language. I leave it to you) the chore of reading lips that were an angrier red, but thinner than his brother’s. Happily, with Peter, action speaks louder than words and one needn’t attend to his every expression to appreciate whither his anxious thoughts now tend. A glance straying again and again to Nick R—’s front door, for ready instance, told of his readiness to see what hidden pleasures the night had on offer.

“Yes, I’m coming,” Modest assured him, “for a short while. Nicolas is the young man I mentioned who’s come from Paris to study here. I hope he will consent to join us up island. You’re welcome if you’d like, Nicolas. It’s a lovely village on the coast, very small, where our sister Alex and her son Bob—”

“Bobyk won’t be there,” Peter weighed in, wagging his head mournfully and fiddling with something in his coat pocket.

“No, I know, you’re right, he’s on the spring fishery. But Cate and Anatol are coming—”

Well I had met Cate and needed no further persuasion of her virtues as a fellow traveller, or the superiority of their improving quality over that of my mere studies with Modest. And, of course, I was still all eagerness to improve my acquaintanceship with Peter.

“I’d be delighted!” I said, with a slight excess of enthusiasm or volume, perhaps, for Peter jumped as if bitten, swinging his great gaze round and fixing it on my face this time. I was gratified to note in his an expression of no little interest.

“Little Kolya.” Inquisitiveness dramatically hauled his heavy eyebrows heavenward. “Yes, I remember now. How old are you?”

Unfortunately, his “little Kolya” (“*L’ile* hole, yah”?) threw me and I could make nothing of what he was trying to say. We both looked at Modest expectantly.

“Nicolas reads lips, you remember.” To me he explained, “Kolya is a diminutive for Nicolas. A term of endearment,” he added, upon which impression a great compliment had been paid me, my slight frown naturally immediately quit. Peter turned slowly back and smiled uncomfortably at me.

“How old are you?” This time I succeeded in plucking whole the words he now ground out with obscenely laboured pronunciation.

“Almost seventeen,” I said sharply, if only to set the right example.

“Nearly seventeen,” he repeated, still meditatively, as if to say, but for his own benefit entirely, “as old as all that.” The consequence of these ruminations to his subsequent expression, however, was favourable, it all but coming up to speed.

“Well, that’s fine. Not so little after all, hm? Yes, that’s fine.” He winked, it seemed, at my hair. I smiled broadly by way of confirming that, no, by no means was I so little after all.

“Well, that’s fine then. I think, why not come in my car?”

Modest took it upon himself to intervene. “I’ve told Cate and Anatol we might like to come with them, on Saturday. I have some work, and Nicolas and I must do a bit extra if we’re going to take the time off—”

“Nonsense. It’s only a couple more days. And he’s a young lad. Waste of childhood, studying all the time. You don’t want to study, do you my boy?”

Well things were not yet so familiar with Modest and me that I knew what was the most ingratiating way to respond in his presence. I satisfied myself with a wink I thought Modest unable to witness. Peter laughed heartily.

“That’s my boy! Fine! That will do nicely indeed!”

“Your car has only two seats, Peter.”

Peter looked put out with his brother for a moment.

“I know that. I know. It was only a suggestion.”

I was very much torn. The idea of a car ride with Cate, some of which to be spent, it is entirely possible, beside her in the back of Anatol’s sleek sedan, had much to recommend it. But the opportunity to be alone with Peter, to get the goods, as they say, on the famous man, proved a powerful draw to me. Besides which, Cate, I had come to appreciate, was a regular with Modest, whereas it had taken a whole week to meet up with his brother. More importantly, of course, I was not insensible of the idea that a conference of souls must supersede the whimsies of the heart. Peter had to be the clear winner.

“I could go with Peter.”

“There you are!” Peter triumphed, beaming at Modest. Then quite suddenly, inexplicably he become very sheepish, rooting with renewed zest in his coat pocket. “I mean. What I mean is. Perhaps you’d better go along with Modya. Yes, I think so. Yes. For the best I think. And it’s only a couple more days.” He threw me a hasty look of apology. “He won’t be happy, you know, unless you martyr half your youth to the rot between the covers of a tome. Ha ha,” he laughed abruptly. “But only a couple days extra,” he consoled himself tetchily, damping with a sweaty paw the worn leather satchel

he wore. "Yes, *then* we'll have deserved to really cut loose, hm? Yes, I think so. Yes. What's the time, Modya?"

"Half past."

"I must be off. Half past one, is it?"

"Yes."

"I must be off. Class at one thirty. Come round with Kolya for dinner tonight. Will you? That's right. Ring Alexey and have him make dinner for four."

For a while we watched his progress down the sidewalk in the direction he had come. He carried his broad shoulders behind his hips, as if recoiling from the inevitable advance. His gait was the absurdly tight-knit waddle of a fat, church-going type of female, but slightly irregular with Peter, as if he were concentrating, as one used to, on not stepping on the cracks, not to break your mother's back.

Peter was inordinately fond of his mother, Alexandra Assier, who had been tragically taken from him when he was a mere lad of fourteen. Bobbie once wondered aloud (in that obtuse, unselfconscious way he has of occasionally simply bleating out any clearly ill-considered fancy that pops into his largish head as unexpectedly as a crop through frost) whether Peter's being knotted to the apron strings mightn't be responsible for his sexual proclivities. But Bobbie's perfect inability to grasp the fine nuances of an artistic temperament we must excuse as the inevitable result of his sheltered upbringing in the island's wilds. If he gave it half the thought that I have, he would see how confoundedly circular is his reasoning. I mean I ask you! Is Peter gay because he doted on his mother? Is it not altogether more probable that he doted on his mother because he was gay? I mean. Besides, Bobbie has lived the entirety of his sixteen years with only

his mother, his father being some transient sort, a blue collar halfwit one is no doubt right in supposing, one of countless vagrant spectres in Alex's hellion past (I took to her immediately; what she lacks so overtly in delicacy of feeling, she more than makes up for in a ribald and fantastically diverting earthiness; she'll give anyone a whack on the rump in jest, even Modest). To follow the furzy bent of Bobbie's thinking, he himself must have an "unusual" (p. 23) attachment to his mother, upon which outstanding piece of logic the brute as good as punched me in the shoulder, laughing as he did so.

"Sure," he was forced to admit. "Except that I'm not gay."

Oh yes, a perfect natural that one. Perfectly innocent of two and two I call it. An overgrown child is all. I can't think what the attraction is.

And that's Peter. Or was.

Granted, I don't know what I would do if *Maman* died.

Chapter Four: Peter and Me, the Authoritative Article

It is a nice question how important one's associations are to the formation of one's character—whether and to what degree we are influenced by those we come into contact with. Nature vs. nurture, if you follow me. It is the opinion of this author that nature is all, the influence exerted by others of no account to a soul sensitive to, and confident in, its uncorrupted make-up. And happy it is for the reader that I hold as much, for my conviction in this matter stands between a tidy narrative of my association with the title character and an unwieldy series of digressions into the lives and persons of anyone in more or less close contact with Peter held together by that flimsiest of threads: shrewd chapter titles. Such, I fear, would not make for pleasant, to say nothing of informative, reading. But the odd reader—he who has only just joined us, for example, dipping haphazardly into “Chapter Four” of the handsome volume he spotted momentarily at rest on the seat of an armchair while his host busies himself with drinks and, upon returning with these and noticing his friend's engrossment, declares, “Oh that, it's really rather good. Hard to credit the author was only seventeen . . .”—indisposed to let things stand on my testimony alone need take but the most cursory of looks at Peter's pedigree to satisfy himself that nurture played little part in his genius.

Peter's immediate family, I have had occasion to learn, comprised seven siblings, besides himself, six of whom survived birth. The daunting Zinaida, who tormented with callous indifference his tender adolescence after the family's expatriation, was the daughter of Ilya's (Peter's, and Modest's, father, as the cleverer kind of reader will not

fail to recall) first *alliance*. Maria, of the unfortunate last name Keiser, was anything but a tyrant, dying, in a fantastic display of meekness, in giving life to her daughter. If my sense of nature over nurture holds true, which, naturally, I feel it does, Zinaida's totalitarian impartiality—she paid her littlest brother minus one (the twins were not yet born) none of the special attentions he had been used to receiving from nanny Fan and which were the due of a brilliant and, as one might well expect, uncomfortable infant—was in inborn rebellion to her mother's mildness.

In the photograph, Maria is small and wiry and I do not think this the effect of the black and white film. She stands on the pier at dawn to see Ilya off on his first fishing stint (an employment for which I presume the “not particularly” (23) intelligent Ilya was singularly ill-suited and it was not long before he'd wrangled a management position in the mining industry that had been his mainstay previous to coming, or leaving, is you prefer). And, although she smiles and toasts the camera with a mug of something restorative, and although her square fingers looks surprisingly mannish, and although, in short, she gives every impression of vigorous good health, the blanket swathing her beach ball front (among the few pictures to have escaped Zinaida's moratorium on people snapping her gloomy likeness) and that very coat of Modest's being slung about her weirdly square shoulders cannot conceal the inner ill to which her flesh was ultimately heir. In sum and to put it in plain figurative language, she was a coat-hanger with a constitution of jelly and gave birth to a girl as dull as a doormail on the outside and all barbed wire within. I trust I make myself and my convictions in these things quite clear.

For her part, Zinaida was born a spinster (you know the type: hooked beak, lips like a thin dried worm cloven in twain, eyes slithering this way and that on the dank side

of their slits when not dully concentrated on ghastly hands with all the lumps, bumps and lack of definitive pigmentation of skeleton shrimp. In fact, Zinaida is a stout girl of ruddy complexion with masses of black hair that she wears half up, as if incapable of deciding, but her apparent indifference to certain members of her family (I call calculated spite); she married young, to the very middle-aged director of a hoity-toity private school up island and swiftly killed him. (I exaggerate for effect; he died from no rarer an affliction than heart failure, alone, in his single bed, separated by the width of another single bed from hers! You'd scarcely credit such people were still in existence, would you?! Be that as it may, I found the island in many ways a last bastion of an altogether Victorian ethos: all weak chins and bootstraps by which to pull oneself up, as if the world offered no readier pleasures. And the cult of tea! Rampant! No picture of island civility—a caricature of civility to be sure! To request a *café au lait* at “Smitty’s” was to beg a look so full of blankness as to make you quite embarrassed to be seen in the place, however slim to negligible the chance of that, people of substance being a decided minority on the island—was complete without its wretchedly cozied tea pot, just as a Russian may hardly be considered a Russian if seen at any appreciable distance from his gleaming samovar.)

But I digress.

Ilya (stout like his daughter, white haired in the couple of photographs I managed to see, a countenance no doubt alleviated of its general yobishness when animated by the sight of nickel-riddle rubble in which such a man likely took great pride. He drove a company sedan, tan in colour, the which Peter later bartered to acquire his used Karmann Ghia. There is little more to say about this character) remarried. Alexandra Assier had

been born in Quebec, but raised from the age of five in the big city separated by that unmitigated gulf from the island. Peter fancies she still had her accent (the Quebec one, not the city one, which I consider unfortunate, but which Peter's raptures suggest he is not of a like mind on the matter, which just goes to show and prove my point, to wit: there's no accounting for taste). Modest fancies not, but as he was only four when she died, it is a pretty question, as I trust the implication is (or isn't), who you are going to believe.

Alexandra Assier's father had been a shipping magnate, that unlikely spectre made to materialize with such reckless abandon in the trashier, more modern variants of literature as if the creators of Fictionland were particularly pleased with the mould—how well it answers the sticky jam of maintaining a modicum of romance (that cadaverous kernel now sapped of sentiment and shot through with sentimentality, but yet which alone generates all interest if not any sense to be had between gunplay and wordplay) while jettisoning its outmoded foils, to wit: class impediments and the like. In him, one had recourse, again and again, to the gem of a much- and expeditiously-maligned bourgeois class; no Faustian attention-whore here, the shipping magnate's personality defects (he is a "towering figure" of "pure ambition," "stern," "independently wealthy," very often "away on business") are sufficient for his job as an impediment ultimately surmountable by young lust, but are of a fundamentally and conveniently peripheral nature; all monotonous "storming" and "[pouring forth of] the sweat of his brow" is obligingly done on the outskirts of the story and quite beyond the pale of our sympathies.

But I get carried away with myself.

In fact, the above describes Alexandra Assier's particular father not at all. He was tall and moustached but was otherwise as affably feeble as so many secondary characters of this report. But hastening on once again with the meat of the "matter," however clichéd, it is a fact that Alexandra Assier's father was the CEO of something that made him rich and brought him often to the docks, often to set sail therefrom for points unknown such that Alexandra was a good deal of the time at home with her mother and housemaid when she was at home at all. She was, of course, educated at a private boarding school—blight of the educational species, as I have been given by very dear drop-outs to understand—whose hours of operation were something draconian like six a.m. to nine p.m. How she contrived to conserve through such continual education the artless innocence Peter insisted illumed her angelic heart and informed every lissom gesture is beyond my ability to imagine.

It is certain that the ferocity of Peter's feeling for his mother was uncommon in a boy of four and was only aggravated in a boy of fourteen by her premature death (she contracted a common cold, of all likely pieces of ill-luck—the very unlikely culprit that a certified [?] coroner [?] was [incredibly] to warrant vouchsafed Peter's pass into the next world, and one is wont to wonder if the *malaise* one feels safe in hazarding was the true cause of the son's death [viz. suicide] did not also take its toll on the mother; that is, she likewise shared his nervous melancholia and submitted likewise to its deadly effects. For, while the impossible intricacy of nature's design—that is, the boorish science of genetics which stand so seemingly innocent of any semblance of any notion of any higher, to say nothing of The Highest, order of nature—leaves no end of black, gaping room to doubt, the mystery of the Lord's ways brokers no such nonsense and it is no

wonder, therefore, that the spirit animating the one divine soul equally animated the other, by his accounts, saintly one, with whom he felt himself in such violent affinity. Twin *natures*, you see? I find it worth repeating how, here as everywhere else in this, the greater part of his life story, *nurture* can be seen to enter into Peter's disposition not a jot).

But, here again, those doubting Thomases among my readers—that minority less moved by sensibility as it is dominated by sense—may be satisfied that they need take neither Peter's soaring exaltations nor my humble but, I should have thought, entirely sufficient word for it that the foregoing is an accurate picture of Alexandra Assier. He may further rest assured I have it on good authority that she was a "spindle-slim" girl whose "heart" of gold was marred only by a "tempestuous temperament" (pp.s 24, 79, 347). When not unburdening her great store of motherly cares to whichever house servant had the decency to stop fooling about with a duster and listen, she was afflicted with moments of blackest dejection and, reluctant to overtax her family's natural sympathies, took it upon herself to confine these bouts of biliousness to an attic-cum-nursery-cum-sewing-room at the extreme reaches of the house, upwardly speaking. Feeling a mood come upon her, she would rise in a stately yet plainly put-out manner from the tea-cozy with whose embroidered embellishment of their old palatial house her fine needle had been duelling into existence. She would call a toddling Modest to her side and, with his delicate grip in her grasp, mount the steep white stairs to the small white room.

Apparently Alexandra Assier outlived the absence of her natural good nature in a wooden rocking chair, consuming thin, mentholated cigarettes, her sullen attentions fixed

on her pointy pumps or the little lip of stockinged skin pushed to run an unsightly race around the confines of their tight black border. That she would snap at Modest if she chanced to find him, at his station on the floor, busy with a makeshift occupation and not training his sympathetic gaze on the beleaguered little figure she cut in the corner. Modest seems to take for evidence that his presence was somehow a comfort to her. Whether it is not altogether more likely that the susceptible soul could not see the use of adding to her burdens the worry inevitably proceeding from having left one's most infant child minus one in the sole attendance of thoughtless subordinates and adolescents preoccupied by daydreams at the window seat or by vague attentions to the orchestration's narrow vocabulary of Mozart and the like (both of which activities favoured by our young composer I will have a chance to make more if brief mention of presently, which is to say a little later in the natural course of this narrative), I leave it to the conscientious reader's discretion to conclude. And one can quite see her point about diversions invented by chance and the occasion of an immature mind left at play in the dust: no end of potential dangers there. Left to its own devices, a child is bound to do harm, to itself and anything unfortunate enough to fall within the circumference of its devastating influence (I use the word in the sense of "reach"), to wit: innocent cabbage whites thoughtlessly divested of the origami magic keeping them aloft, which sorry spectacle makes for a case, and only one small one, in point.

Naturally, I have chanced to see the attic room in question, seeing as Peter continues to preside over the house of his exiled boyhood. And a greatly uncomfortable affair it seemed to me, its steep A-frame acting a vice around one's shoulders and, beyond a foot-wipe of hedging footprints, the litter of ages sprawling beneath a veil of

dust as white as talc in the grainy daylight sifting through cloudy glass. Here a precarious staircase of piano books; there clothing of a long-lost generation and arcane stench; everywhere plush toys sapped of their stuffing, the one button eye left remaining made, by the tired tilt of their heads, to regard a matted swatch of their own fleece; in the corner, the fossil of a rocking chair, as white as ash and impossibly hard, to look at it.

One evening, having returned from a festive supper at Nick R—s’ and settling my stomach with a nightcap to Modest’s *tisane* (herb “tea,” if you prefer, but, really, insofar as “variety is the spice of life,” why not make the distinction when one’s vocabulary allows it?) I impulsively asked what all that stuff in the attic room was. Modest quickly put to rights his evident surprise (really, I find nothing barring that Peter should have showed it to me himself. Besides which, I feel sure the reader will be interested to know that I was on such intimate terms with the dear composer by May that I felt myself to have been granted a veritable *carte blanche*, in his house as with his life). Modest smiled with unaccountable grace (nor, might I add, was I disposed to find in my question any cause for such mirth, bemusement or even slight semblance of mild contentment) and gave an indulgent little shrug. “Things from school. Letters from his governess, Fanny. Peter likes to keep things about.” “Fanny” sounded entirely strange, coming from him.

Howsoever well-meant, but, the reader must agree, infuriatingly uninformative Modest’s portrait of his brother’s personal habits, his commentary may be of service to this narrative in suggesting to my mind a natural segue into a brief account of what I gleaned was Peter’s educational history. Peter was a messy boy. That is, he was a mess and in more ways than one. He was, one might say, and indeed I think it more than likely I have elsewhere already found occasion to say, an “uncomfortable” child: mooching

maladroitly about the house; complaining of vague, shifting pains wracking his robust pudginess; unable to apply himself to the seemingly simple tasks of fetching a cup of tea for Ilya or cracking his own boiled egg; railing at the (above mentioned) window seat against the disruptive revels of siblings and friends and irrepressible puppies without, and all this all but alone (Peter condescended to take his beloved Modya firmly in hand such that the minor was privy to partake, from the corner of the window seat in which he was stationed, of this great interiority. The degree of Modest's elation at this sign of favour from his superior and so awfully exceptional a boy may well be guessed at); crying, a lot.

In dress, Peter was a sight: buttons undone, hair awry, socks a'sag, pullovers riddled with soup tracks, trousers free of their neat creases and refreshed with rhinoceron wrinkles by midmorning break. In manner, he was a fright, lashing out with energy if an idle sensibility was plagued by mere sense (when a vociferous whimsy for a gilded baby elephant was nowhere to be found satisfied beneath the Christmas tree, Peter went a week without speaking or consuming the wares of Cook, in which beloved subservient he had confided the wish, along with involved instructions as to its being communicated to people in quarters best suited to its timely realization. He survived off pots of banana yoghurt whose purchase he insisted on overseeing from the dizzy heights of a shopping cart's *pannier* and his dangerous heft be damned. The elephant, of course, was a non-issue; Peter was moved by forces of retribution quite beyond the mean grasp of clawing reason and it was the principle of the thing to which Peter now clung. Indeed, true to future form, his tenacity in this ploy was as fast as he felt his hurt was deep and it was a full three days before he condescended to eat his favourite borscht [saddle-bagged, one can't but imagine, with the inexorable rubble of rude black bread] and did so only upon

Alexandra Assier's sworn assurance that it was not the fruit of Cook's kitchen. Which, of course, it was, and I call it very sad that the man of principle should have his principles undermined by those he may be so constituted as to be disposed to count on. Small wonder, says I, that he developed those rather anxious tendencies which, by the age of ten, he had).

Being a stropky child (as even anyone of less than moderate intelligence will tell you the most deep feeling of us are), Peter's lamentable (which is to say, constantly, clearly and strongly articulated) insistence, at the difficult age of four, that he be allowed to join his older brother Nick T (the which denotation I trust distinguishes him sufficiently from Nick R—, however trivial a role he, Nick T that is, has to play in our story) and cousin Lydia at their living-room lessons with Fan was sagaciously yielded to (precise page references elude me at present. One might do worse than to assume such things appeared towards the beginning of things, but, then again, perhaps they came to me entirely otherwise—anecdotally, for instance—and I call it happy for the reader that I've rendered them here, thereby saving him digging out so-called "primary" sources).

To continue then: to Fan's delight, her new pupil proved a natural—a versatile if highly strung instrument to play upon. Although Peter's self-neglect in appearance and self-forgetfulness in manner was mitigated not a jot, his loftiness of mind and profundity of soul struck out as undeniably as his hand shot up. I quote (at length this time [and with page references quite in order, as the dubious reader is at perfect liberty to verify for himself], the discerning reader will excuse me; the happy recovery of the swiftly and no less carefully transcribed materials notwithstanding, insofar as it is perhaps the case that a man may best be known and most fairly judged by his own words, I choose to err on the

side of caution) from the surprising scholar's new world letter (at the age of tennish, scant months, one may presume, before the twins' appearance on the scene on December 14th of that year. Peter, as the habitual reader of biographies will no doubt be dying to know, was born ten or so years previous to the writing of said letter. In a frosty month of winter, if I'm not very much mistaken, which, for those readers who, for their part, indulge in such innocent dalliances, likely makes him a Capricorn. It only stands to reason. This same sort of reader may draw his own conclusions as to the full significance of that reasonable conjecture . . . !) to the much-missed governess who doted on him as he so ardently wished Alexandra Assier would: "Only books amuse me. Re-read *Christmas Eve* recently, but now I have nothing to read . . . how can I get . . . *Télemarque* or *The Letters of Mme de Sévigné*; . . . I should also very much like *The Spirit of Christianity*. . . . But I can understand nothing" (Page 24). (It is unclear whether Peter gained so unbelievably sound a handle on English in the few months the family had been settled, or whether the passage was not more likely translated and stealthily improved from its childish Russian original at a later date by some hidden hand. However, it is unquestionably indicated [by the quotation marks appearing in the source and which I've not forbore to replicate here] that these are more or less Peter's very words and, drawing the reader's attention to the unlikely maturity of the expression and the soberness of the pass-times, I take this occasion to note that the passage evidences the very man I knew and loved through and through).

Nor was Peter's musical prodigality far behind his upstarting hand. I find remarkable (and, of course, not surprising at all) the story brought to my attention somehow or other of when Peter fussed with such feeling that he was finally allowed to

sit on the stairs and spy, through the vast black entryway intervening, the grown-up party going full bore in the living room (it is again unclear whether this was in Peter's house or back home in that foreign and native land; I would guess the latter, as a governess, named, it might be relevant to note, "Fanny," appears later in the anecdote and none of this class have been associated with life on the island in my reliable experience. Coupled with which, as I feel sure most would agree, the biographer of a man of his particular bent is perfectly justified in placing the first wild rearing of musical talent earlier rather than later in his subject's life. Inasmuch, I feel we could do worse than to put Peter at about five here, his love for Alexandra Assier matured by fully that many years).

How Alexandra Assier danced! How her bosom flushed! How her willowy figure swayed in the thick clutches of Ilya's business associates to one of several "intelligently chosen" (i.e. not by "not particularly" Ilya, one presumes. 20 and 23) tunes in the repertoire of the (above mentioned) orchestrion (a music box sounding like an orchestra as far as I can make out; being no longer in fashion, I have had no direct experience of the thing. Music aficionados reading these personal recollections with an eye out for insight into Peter's compositional character will doubtless be eager to learn that said "intelligently chosen" (p 20) repertoire included "*Vedrai carino* and other excerpts from *Don Giovanni*, and numbers from the operas of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini. All his life Piotr Ilyich loved Mozart above all other composers, and . . . stated that it was because of Mozart that he had devoted his life to music. He always recalled with gratitude the orchestrion [if it is of any interest, I (the author of these recollections) find an earlier technical definition describes the thing thusly: "a large music-box with stops enabling it to approximate the sounds of several orchestral instruments" (p. 20)]

that had passed him into Mozart's exquisite world of sound" (pp. 20). And may I be allowed to corroborate just how exquisite that world is (or was, as they case may tragically be) and avail myself of the reader's subsequent sympathies to play, as Oedipus played and, what may be more fitting still, as King Lear played, the doleful tune of that most painfully astute adage: you don't know what you've got till it's gone! Oh, the bliss of bountiful innocence!).

Later that evening, having been coaxed between the good clean linens with no fewer than three hot-pink Maraschino cherries of which lacquered monstrosities Peter is inordinately fond, Peter's behaviour is reported with characteristic pedantry to have run thus: "...Fanny went to his room. He was sitting up in bed, feverishly and confusedly crying. When she asked what troubled him, he replied: 'The music, the music!' The music had long been silent, and she waited for further explanation. 'Oh, the music!' he repeated. 'Save me from it.' He indicated his head. 'It's there, in there,' he explained. 'It won't let me rest.'" 21.

While said rather sober reporter attributes no especial significance to the episode—indeed, he would use it to illustrate that his brother's musical talents were, if extant, latent and ill-formed and "no more notable than Nikolay's or Ippolit's or Anatoly's (Alexandra Assier had a grand total of seven children on top of Zinaida: [in descending order, of arrival not accomplishment] Nick, Peter, Alex [the earthy fisherman woman and mother to baby Bobbie], Ippolit, Anatol and Modest [the "angelic" (see above for page ref.) twins], and another girl, who might belong somewhere else in this list as I find no dates ascribed to her, and who appears to have died at birth, which is rather sad. In any case, one is appreciably dumbfounded that the fabled Alexandra Assier

should have preserved through such an onslaught anything like the admirable figure on whose memory Peter dotes with such evident relish. One may equally well be excused for doubting that the “[kindly]” (23) but rather dim figure of Ilya should have had it in him) resigned plonking on the keys of a Saturday morning” (19).

This passage clearly wishes to suggest that all male offspring were encouraged in the musical arts. Equally clear is the reporter’s (oh, but let us call him what he claims to be, to wit: the author’s) omission to include himself among those numbers, which itself suggests a variety of conclusions, some of which are more well-founded and altogether likely than others. For the record, I have never heard Modest play the piano, nor, I might add, the piccolo (a flute is a different instrument again, I was corrected), which he was forced to admit was his instrument of choice.

The passage is interesting in one further respect: that word “resigned” (p19). Has not the author all but confessed outright that no member of the roll call of boys was particularly eager to practice “of a Saturday morning?” (p 19). No member, that is, *of the roll call*. Notice the strict absence of Peter’s name from the list. The obvious fact of its constituting a comparison with this last, most gifted, most venerable family member aside, I find in the oversight conclusive indication that Peter was not among those “[reluctant] to practice” (p. 19). Evidently, he was, therefore, “eager ‘to practice’ (pp. 19),” which only goes to show my intuition, to wit: far from only potentially extant, Peter’s love of, and, likely as not, his “latent and ill-formed (pp 19) ” talent for, music were very much extant.

In point of fact, I confess that I see nothing in the passage to establish beyond reasonable doubt that Peter’s innate talents were “latent” or, for that matter, “ill-formed”

(p 19, 19). And what, a reader after my own heart will be wondering, does “ill-formed” (p19) mean anyway? I hardly know myself what to make of my interpretation of Modest’s lines. I mean, I ask you. And I mean, arriving at long last at the heart “of” the matter, who are mere mortals to hear, let alone to appreciate, let alone to judge, let alone to tacitly undermine the modes of expression of the pinnacle of artistic genius? The pan flutes of angels must needs (needs must, if you prefer) be mangled by such simple souls; the swansong of spirits must needs (ibid.) be misrepresented, so great is the gulf dividing us and howsoever the bass notes may yet be relied on to reach e’en unto the very depths of deeper feeling hearts (such as, I’d be willing modestly to submit, my own), there to pluck shivering chords of pure sympathy. Need I say more?

“Of a Saturday morning.” 19. Is not there a keen suggestion that someone (my suggestion here is Peter) was diligently practicing his much-relished musical pursuit (one can well imagine Fan having to disengage, claw by claw, the feverish child from his heart’s passion) Sunday through Friday? Surely no one would argue the justice of a day’s rest in the long work week? Well, as to that, I can engage no greater authority than Genesis for the final word! Quite!

No, nothing makes sense to me but that an important, nay, widely considered *the* most important composer that his nation, if not the world, has produced, ever, both began his studies early and enjoyed them thoroughly and I hereby revise the forgoing idea (gleaned from, it would seem, quite mistaken sources and trustingly included in “Chapter Two: In the Beginning. . .”) that Peter was a late bloomer who worked like a dog to acquire the technical proficiency for which he is renowned. The reader who chooses to accompany me along the Occam’s razor of my intuition about this may have the similar

satisfaction of feeling himself now quite commiserate with the brother with whom this narrative, after all, seeks to associate itself.

Chapter Five: Family and Friends, Necessarily a *Précis*

Of Alex; her habitation in a fishing village; her livelihood in that industry; her earthy ways, the which account for her status as single mother and her singular popularity; her, if not to my mind particularly handsome or deserved of so much attention, not overtly threatening son Bobbie (“I prefer Bob,” he says with infinite characteristically infantile simplicity) etc., I have written. It remains to be related my delightful holidays in their midst and in those of Peter, Modest, Cate and Anatol. These so-called “delightful” stretches sit as a string of precious pearls separated by more or less endurable durations of endless studying, walking, admiring Cate etc. (life on the island is narrow in scope, which seems to suit some more than others and the questionable notion that “it takes all kinds” we once again avail ourselves to leave to the discerning reader’s discretion).

It will be convenient and easier than not to combine this memory (or pearls thereof, viz. my holiday-making) with the story of Peter’s last little while, or, more precisely and within the scope of these annals’ interests, the stories issuing from my affiliation with the man such as were deposited, at this time and much to my enrichment, in my anecdotal bank and have, in these confines, compounded interest and accrued ever the more value ever since.

Modest did not, as he might have been expected to, raise further objections to my going with Peter for the ride (unendurably protracted. The reader contemplating a visit to the laying of these scenes by way of hair-raising and, so far as I could see, perfectly

superfluous twists and turns to skirt the endless, stagnant-looking “mountain lakes” must forthwith consider himself fully forewarned. I mean to say, what is a body of water for but to bridge? But, alas, to even the most ephemeral of exiles of that outpost, to wit: myself, is driven home the incredible fact that the dubious charms of so skirting the edge (of good taste esp. etc.) is just the sort of thing that these islanders go in for, the reader must forthwith find himself forewarned in this regard equally. The less said about the dank hell of old growth, the better; covering (never has that word so earned its crust of literal bread) the remoter nine tenths of the island, it is, for all intents and purposes, solid, the road cutting a constricted and provisional course through its hoary depths in a suspect progress north. Neither light nor air nor prospect of charm was permitted to penetrate this grim sub-terrain such that one would certainly be excused for thinking the canopy was the surface of the earth and the islanders were an impossibly prehistoric race of wall-eyed moles).

It soon proved that the lightning precipitousness of Peter’s brilliance could not accommodate itself to the gentler pace, so naturally adopted by his younger brother, required for me to grasp what is being said and to deliver even a half-conceived rejoinder. After a hopeless half hour “discussing” Romanticism (upon whose precepts we aimed, let it be said, to agree wholeheartedly), the traffic let up and presently we were zipping over the pass at speeds frightful to any but a solidly constituted young man and one on the look-out for fast-times (i.e. myself, especially given a fortnight with Modest, and even equally calm Cate; although first cause of my racing heart, she roused precious little else to action, practically speaking). Moreover, Peter’s air of effortlessness was liable to persuade such a one (as myself) that he was perfectly at his ease piloting vehicles like a

kamikaze. And, indeed, I see no reason not to freely admit that the pace was infectious, the sensation of liberty seductive, so much so that I hardly questioned Peter's choice of country and western to which static strains we progressed for another half hour before the station was cut off with a petulant flick. Conversation turned on (or shall I say, "returned to?") the subject of love.

"So, my boy, do you have a little *copain*, as they say in France?" Or this is what I came to understand was being signified by "Oh playboy, you have a pizzle moping away in pants?"

The raised eyebrows I almost immediately divined as the inquisition they intimated; the wink I thought markedly sleazy, even was one willing, as, in my innocent awe, I was, to construe the query as friendly joshing, the gargantuan intimacy of which intended only to convey the other's phenomenal sense of comfort, familiarity and sympathy with your person.

The by-now impenetrable beard only abetted misunderstanding. While mysteriously grave and dignified in a portrait perhaps, up close, I did not think the outgrowth suited our composer. There was about his wet, red lips all the indecency of a rabbit's worried skin where a patch has been shaved and cosmetics tested. But, at last and in spite of my interlocutor's embarrassment and impatience at having to repeat himself, I stumbled upon the thing's right spin and blushed in turn.

"*Copine*," I suggested shyly.

"What's that?"

"A girlfriend."

"What?"

It dawned on me that Peter had not not understood the word, he had not heard it.

“*Copine*,” I yelled over what must have been the throbbing engine, if the incommensurable pulsations reaching me through the seat of my pants were anything to go by.

“What’s that?”

“*Copine!*” I screamed.

“Yes, yes, I heard you. I’m only asking what that is. You will excuse me if my French is not up to native scratch; I blame the island’s asinine education.”

“*Pardon. Je m’excuse. Copine.* It means girlfriend.”

“Oh.” Peter looked confused. The expression (or do I mean “impression?”) persisted some minutes and I couldn’t for the life of me think what was going through his head.

“Not *copain?*” he ventured at last.

“No. *Copain* is boyfriend.”

“Ah,” and his tremendous eyebrows wriggled in some species of private mirth. Some minutes later, he explained that he had meant, of course, *copine*.

“No,” I vouchsafed, relieved things looked at last to be back on track. “No *copine*. It is hard when one—”

“Ah hah!” he whooped. “Perhaps I was on the right track after all, hm? Is it a *copain* you have then?” And up went the shag on his brow and down palped the lid over an eye that, cocked at no less than ninety degrees to the road rapidly unravelling beneath us, suddenly struck me as a particularly globulous, watery, fishy sort of eye.

“Non! Pas du tout! Je ne suis pas comme ça! Ça veut dire . . .” I groped. At just this juncture, a passage from one of the books stacked by Modest’s bedside came back with unbelievable timeliness—an, I presume, idle *tête-à-tête* between the rather unsympathetic central subject and the far more vibrant and likable secondary character Rex, as the playful penman had dubbed his tyrant of reader interest. While it is of no undue importance, it adds prettily to the verisimilitude of this account to relate accurately, when possible, what were my thoughts, then and elsewhere; I have had occasion to sneak another peek at the book and, if my rapid transcription is not entirely faulty, I can assure the reader that the passage ran thusly:

“And why, pray,” asked Albinus shyly, “do girls bore you so?”

Rex explained quite frankly.

“Well, that’s only a matter of taste, I suppose,” said Albinus, who prided himself on his broad-mindedness. “Of course, I don’t condemn you. It’s a thing widely spread, I believe, especially among men of artistic temperament. In a shopkeeper, it would repel me, but in a painter, it’s quite different—quite likeable, in fact, and romantic—romance coming from Rome. Nevertheless,” he added, “I can assure you that you lose a great deal.”

Although the exact details of precise page number, author, etc. escape me, such (as the fastidious reader need only consult the volume [“Something in the Dark” as I believe the title ran]) to satisfy himself) were my thoughts exactly.

But let it be said, for this record and irrespective of all spurious censure to follow, how unconditionally I admit that, as an enlightened young man of the old world, I can have nothing against homosexuality. That said, as just such a hyper-sensitive soul and

notwithstanding how paradoxical it perhaps seems to the spurious, I equally wouldn't want to tread on the more or less erroneous toes of persons who did (not have nothing against homosexuality) by leaping to a like mistake, especially in view of the eminence of those persons, by whom I mean Peter.

Of course, as it turned out, I might have saved myself the bother of so hedging where he was concerned; however, I then considered it best to cover my bases, as they say, and hastened to assure my companion of my complete neutrality on the subject of sexual orientation and my perfect suspension of judgment regarding that unfortunate leering quality of his regard of me (this fixed, with a regularity distressing to a young man less worldly and more thin-skinned about these sorts of signs of sociability than one such as myself, in the vicinity of my finely corduroyed lap), howsoever the bent of my initial eruption, delivered in haste, mind, and, moreover, in the heat of the moment, might have lead him to conclude the contrary.

“Not that there is anything wrong with being like that,” I hazarded. “Many people, distinguished people, certain Catholics among them even, maintain quite firmly that it is perfectly fine. Only, of course, it is not fine for me. That is, I mean, it is a matter of personal preference. Wouldn't you agree? I, for instance, like girls. *Copines*. Oh yes, very much I like them. I have had many *copines*.” To smooth any ruffled feathers still further, I adopted what I hoped was a rueful, knowing tone, much in what I suspect had been the manner of Peter's inquiry. My reward was to witness the transformation of Peter's physiognomy as it advanced through the stages of startledness, (mild) irritation, (slight) ennui, and back to a (slightly unpleasant if friendly) suggestive smirk, one eyebrow beached quizzically on the upper recesses of that self-same great

brow, the newly wetted lips like the sucking pink wound at the heart of a sea anemone entoured by its thick, sticky filaments. Peter took the opportunity of a momentarily debilitating wave of nausea to pat me confidingly (or do I mean “confidently?”) on the upper thigh.

“A little lover are you? Like to play, experiment a little? I understand you perfectly, my boy. I was young once myself,” he added, quite superfluously I couldn’t help thinking.

The greater part of that confoundedly long drive was noteworthy in no other respect. Peter periodically picked country and western heartstrings from the ether and as abruptly snapped them off. He checked and rechecked the security of the seatbelt around my hips. He wet his lips. He mumbled trifles I could not make out. At last, with three of four hours remaining, he did the wholly unlikely thing of stuffing earplugs in his ears. I have since come to appreciate that it is part and parcel of Peter’s artistic sensitivity, this habitual wearing of earplugs the greater part of the day. He sleeps with them in (Alexey, whose room is adjacent to his own, is an ardent and symphonic snorer, Peter complains); he walks in town with them in (“The racket of those air brakes is insupportable; how any man can hear it and keep mind and soul together is beyond me,” he yells, and the mystery of his strange searchings on that first meeting is shed, if not like a cat’s origami ears [and I do think that is carrying the thing too far], then like the skin of ghosts hung out to dry. I’m entirely in sympathy I’m sure).

If it is not out of place in a story about my relationship with Peter (which, I think the reader must agree, it is not), I might add as a side note that my enlightened views on homosexuality were illuminated still more brightly by my close association with Peter.

Far from distressed by his affectionate, nay amorous attentions, I soon became accustomed to, even took a certain healthy pride in the surreptitious satisfaction he obviously derived from my mode of dress (Parisian fashions are more form-fitting than the monotonous fleece potato sacks one sees rooting around every dank cranny of the island's "great" outdoors), as from tousling my blondish locks when sleep finally beat out all other stimulants to be had of a night at Nick R—'s.

Indeed, our intimacy grew such that I was privy—and I trust I may divulge this without libelity; certainly, any suggestion of disgrace will be the due of the sordid consciousness of the more thuggish sort of a reader, as the intention is, to my mind, clearly otherwise; added to which fact, intention is, as I've said now and again and will say again now, all that matters, for it is, as it has commonly been observed, the thought that counts—on more than one spirited occasion to witness the master in the initial stages of a night's amity with a student or a sailor or a young man of ill-defined profession.

After half an hour of denuding various lamp posts of adverts for concerts deemed with ultimately unanimous accord by our merry band to be utter trash, singing *à haute voix* and in the round some ditty of infinitely greater charm—"Frère Jacques" was enthusiastically taken up on more than one prompting—and reinforcing ascendancy over the offending lamp post by scaling some measure of its length, the party let be generally known its desire to be getting on to the club. Whence might have come Peter's gruff voice from deep within the cavernous grotto of a side alley, modestly recommending we go ahead without him. Which we did, I without the least compunction or sign of jealousy for, as Nick R— swore in reply to my intensely casual query, such affairs were

notoriously the work of an evening, half an evening even, the floozies being altogether too flimsy to hold the great man's attentions longer than absolutely needful.

Naturally, I might add, this last intelligence only sugar-coated the glory of his constant approbation of my own modest self, so much so that I was not immune to his (to me) sudden, altogether improbable favouring of chunky, wool-wearing, "thicker'n'bricks" Bobbie, the which unemployed youth was in attendance the entire duration of our second, July visit up island and could unfailingly be found, from dawn's first light, hard at work on his tan, as, stripped of all but his pants, socks and work boots, he chopped firewood or pretended to some other menial if "constructive" industry. In fact, in praising his nephew's gentleness with all too characteristic generosity, Modest let slip how Bob had suffered with singular good humour Peter's fondness from the point of its first blossoming, apace with Bobbie's frightfully early pubescence, some six years since. The superhuman self-control required to refrain from supplanting, *à haute voix*, in Modest's version of things his "good humour" with my "oblivion" defies description. Let me further satisfy the readers' common interest by revealing that Bobbie and I are of an age and to look at now, I believe, it would be anyone's guess who is the elder, his meaty musculature, when covered as it so often is not sufficiently, looking like nothing so much as a layer of baby fat, and his razor burn, from a distance, looking like nothing so much as a great rash of pubescent spots.

But to return to even more significant matters, although, as I have been at some, but not, I assure you, great pains to mention, I did not share the tenor and tendency of the artist's feelings, I am human after all, and a sensitive soul and a tender youth at that (or was, as yet, all those many, many months ago), and Peter's playing of new favourites and

plying these with the most transparent of coy compliments (“Now that’s a nice woolly,” says he, with a failure to note the three gaping moth holes and the badly sewn elbow patches that it would be trifling with the truth to call tact. “But is it not a bit hot...?”) drove me to a dreary confinement in my and Modest’s room until lunchtime at least. At last, Cate, that dove of peace with the, I all but feel sure, soft breast of purest white, came to relieve me, wearing nothing, as they say, but a smile, ham on ghastly black bread, charmingly boyish sweatpants and a button-down shirt of Anatol’s, although a single pearl of white paint cresting the full breast pocket bespoke another original patron again. The black bread I would have nothing to do with, of course, but, as I say and have said (relatively recently it seems to me. I feel equally sure of being backed up by other like-minded sages of the ages in the sentiment), “it is the thought that counts.” And what stirring thoughts that harbinger stirred were more than enough to dispel the least sense of insignificance accompanying being overlooked, and, as soon as I’d recovered sufficient possession of myself, I followed the cute B.U.M EQUIPMENT inscribed across her sweet *derrière*, e’en unto the brink of the docks, where Modest was patiently waiting on us to begin his walk.

Chapter Six

The evening will bring with its dulcet hues the melancholic distemper convenient to reminiscence. You will sit upon your not favourite bench—it is uncommonly uncomfortable; who would have thought to construct a garmenture for sitting out of wood, plain and unyielding wood? You ask yourself this (in this unjustifiably, nauseatingly ornate manner of “yours”) forgetting, in the leviathan levity that is, as you would have it, “convenient to disregard” (pah!), that the streets of your exalted Paris are battalioned with no softer than iron and stone. “But there are trees,” you start up. Oh, because you are incensed and empty-headed. Yes, that is you, the long and the short of it. And are there not trees, one with even a modest sampling of his sense might inquire, on the island, on this of all islands? “Yes,” you venture as bluntly as a butter knife (as anticipated, you’ve learnt positive nothing about rhetoric for all the efforts made on your behalf. Still, you are worth a chuckle. One frail chuckle like the pathetic fizzle at the terminus of a wet paper match and that is all, the book covers close and would quash you quite within but why press skunk cabbage, why press a fly trap? A heel and hunk of turf will prove more thorough and infinitely more satisfying). But, “Yes,” you are bound to admit, and yes, I am bound to say, sheepishness suits you a sight better than your best false modesty and your truly erroneous pride.

But the bench too is convenient and convenience is paramount, to one such as yourself. In moments such as these, with your spine shattering and the sludge that remains stoppered between your ear holes held together with the Cello tape of need for an

excuse—"Excuse me, excuse me." There is no excuse for you. Does life, do you think, need you at all? But I forget myself. Of course you don't—I doubt not you are wont to fancy that a child (that squidgy, spangled excuse, squealing to what you would like to believe is your rescue) does nothing that is not perfectly convenient to its will and youth is a sage. Let me tell you here and now, Little One, there is no such thing as Youth, only immaturity in which arrogance you abound, and if there is anything worthy in the oblivion which allows a child to act on first impulse, it is that he has impulse. He has will and he'll walk a mile in the rain for a sweet while you sit, ever so blankly, ogling nothing and thinking less. You might notice your shoes need polishing. You might be counted on to go so far as to conceive that, if you left them as good as on top of his own in the workshop vestibule, he'll polish his and yours both while you carry out the elaborate pretense of writing something clever in the space he's cleared especially for you, child that you are, and how smart you'll look then! But listen to me, Smallest of Fry: spangles are but sequins badly bandaged on satin and not silk. Your child is the harlot you are and you are just a john and the pimp of your whims. You don't know yourself at all.

The bench, you go on (my god, how you do go on) in that blissful ignorance of yours, is not the only one in this godforsaken patch of sod, turning, in these dimmest, limpest months, the sickly copper colour of smoked oyster meat, the odd frost seeming a plague of mould less constant but less protean than you (I do not trust you to make sense of that, but you may trust me it couldn't matter less), but it is the only one so positioned as to take in, with no view to speak of (there is just the unappealing prospect of the paper bag house's crumbled behind and *M. Bédard's* dropsied backside as he strives, with a

broomstick and acute ineffectiveness, to batter the drain pipe free of its bung of fir needles), the last of the sun's rays to hit your quagmire-away-from-home. And you will, if the clock has threatened to sound three and you are irredeemable outside the first of several, reflect on your great good fortune. This last is a (perfectly characteristic and wholly uncalled for) fiction. For, just as you sit so as to more conveniently await time's wasting, and just as not one noteworthy thought will limp into the very limited sphere of your consciousness (not that you'd be like to be aware of any such. You don't quite get that either do you? No matter. No matter at all), not one piece of luck will venture to tickle a quickening pulse in your thuggish heart such that your thinnest of vital fluids will remain quite steady, quite unmoved, quite thin. Nor can you recall having ever had such a tickling, not one minute, mealy meal of rotten luck, Pouting Peter that you are. You are worse, do you understand, much worse than a rat—a low-down, dim-witted, sell-out, poison-addled, thieving, thieving and hand-biting and fire-stealing member of the *rodentia* family. (Oh excellent! "*Rodentia*" family [your entirely unwanted italics]. You're a natural! I mean, what a perfectly useless scrap to retain from so ostensibly studious a summer! Yes, he's wrong about that anyway. Some knowledge does little good to speak of. Oh, wrong is he? You think so do you? "No?" No, I didn't think so [we've been over this a dozen times]. I won't ask that you consider man; folly is your end of things. But for those following, I submit, might it not be more likely the case that all knowledge does little good in some hands? Does some heads no good at all? "Yes?" Shut up you.)

Of course, you have been lucky. Very lucky, some might say in such a way as to penetrate even your chowdery self with a stabbing shaft of true conviction, if only they

could dissemble as well as you and seem to be speaking about someone else (for it is your policy—a policy with nothing to recommend it but the malignant trenchancy of habit and, as I say, the as yet unmitigated self-absorption of a small mind—to hear nothing about yourself from the mouths of others. “Hear nothing!” That’s good! You like that?). You have been lucky. Yes, you have. What do you call him then? Nothing? Grist for the mill? Fodder for your folly? But, of course, you’ll have none of it anyway. You won’t listen, and when it’s all over you won’t remember a thing about him and worse, you’ll be no worse off than you started—just as deaf, just as adolescent, indolent, insincere, insipid, sipping and unconsciously intoxicated by your noxious inner child, by turns dimly, so very dimly, aglow with its doubly reflected light, by turns clawing at it in a violence of sibling rivalry just so as to feel fine, feeling touched, watching him bleed a little and cry a lot. Oh anything, anything, any manner of monstrosity if only to feel fine, refined, exquisitely sensitive and all that bosh any man of reason will tell you is nothing if not a disease, the dementia of an albino who thinks precious his precious skin. Oh, you.

On a rare visit to the workshop (he, Peter, finds the openness and sparseness of Modest’s living room oppressive somehow and imagines the lacquers are toxic, however he “adores” the smell), the composer pooh-poohs the pearl of white paint on a dark, careworn button-down shirt that goes a smock for Modest, who, one gleans, has been refreshing the windows again.

“To repaint things in white is a fool’s errand brother. I would have noticed a stain on the sill, but never that you’ve touched things up, were it not for those heavenly

poisonous fumes. No, there is nothing noteworthy in a pristine surface. One's efforts are secreted away in faultlessness and what prescient soul would do that which, to do, is to erase all sign of the pains he took doing it?"

Of course, you thought he was perfectly right. But what, the glaring black holes of this treatise must put one in mind to wonder, do you know?

You will sip at your cocktail in fugitive hope of immeasurable and immeasurably undeserved pleasure and this too shall pass, in all haste and by the wayside, along with any mass of your more, or more likely less, bright and thoroughly fleeting "ideas," unheeding of your unspoken entreaty to stay with you, coddle you, just as the chickens (immediately on the other side of the chicken wire at which you sit, your back turned on it, your seat of co-called convenience being thus disposed and moving it is just the sort of brainwave we may by no means hold you accountable for) are unheeding of your every demand they desist—what? being birds is it?—for "how," your ready, snot-nosed crabbiness, never content to leave you be, well-nigh squeals (as it streaks with a toddler's demented energy to your rescue is it?), "how," it insists yet again, "they *do go on* with their interminable pecking and flapping and brooding," etc. What it must be, never to be at peace with the world. But one thing at a time, as Modest's every industry would suggest to a more observant student, that is, any mother's son of the species excepting your sorry self; let us first finish with stripping you of the skin you are and aren't so comfortable in, Overstuffed and Weasely One. Do you understand me? Do you understand the necessity of this? I gather not. But, then, as I say, how little it matters whether you like the taste of your own medicine.

All your romantic ideas are childish and selfish, idealistic and insular, imaginary that way and limited like that.

Peter is not what you thought, not what you had hoped, not what you would wish of a Christmas eve and, strangely—oh, not so strangely, perhaps, as perfectly typical of your characteristic insouciance—that vision is not what you want, anymore.

To continue with learning, then. If you were lucky—which some particle of your oblivious self has no interest in corroborating and a misguidedly vested interest in stubbornly refusing (note the naughty stamp of the precious *espadrilles*, then note how little the universe totters)—you might note “a happy little cloud puff its way past in the azure depths of sky” (naturally, that adjective in particular will not leap to a mind [is it?] the little likes of yours. ‘Blue’ might, on a good day. I am further beholden to mention here that the “happy little cloud,” as you so vapidly, so incorrectly classify the vapour, is nothing of the kind. It is cirrus—high cirrus, lofty cirrus, cirrus full of grace, cirrus you cannot plumb with so short a stick as your attention span for all even you may see its middle is solid enough make out. And although you [and how many more like you? No, no, you may, you simply must be assured that you are nothing singular and not singular in your nothingness, for many, too many, partake of your weakness of wit] are wont to dimly distinguish indistinct edges, diffuse delimitations that give “your” cloud all the shape your confirmed myopia deigns to discern, its confines are, in reality, far fewer than these and owe nothing to your devising and everything to the untold obliques of its own design. And, although it spreads itself to fading over the upper reaches, it touches every

ethereal molecule. Do you see? *You* see something plain, something drab and something so one-dimensional as to be “happy” where there is an unfathomable Gaudian sinuousness through and through. From where you stand, or rather sit, begrudging every inch of effort towards advancement, you take for washed-out wallpaper what, were you to work your way closer, even you might discern is an indescribable [indescribable! Do you understand what I mean?] arabesque, coiling and recoiling, crossing and recrossing, skipping and tripping over itself. [“But I say,” you are entirely liable to protest, “can it do both, assume both characteristics, *be* both things in spirit?” Yes, you specter of simplicity, it can. It must. It is a human being we’re talking about after all, and will flower and will flower on the background of former selves.] And, within the tangled pattern—not hiding but camouflaged, you see—the most outstanding tigers! And—look closer now—alive between the teeth, the most beautiful butterflies, tiger butterflies such as you will be hard pressed [oh, as hard pressed as merits the reward of its discovery and the rightful appreciation of the art of that most exquisite nature; that is, entirely too hard pressed for the likes of you to likely look much into it] to distinguish, in all their delicacy, from the beasts, in all their force, howsoever it be a force you’re likely only to feel as the blow of a feather. Oh, do you see how plainly you are mistaken and, worse, will suffer no reprisal more damning than the tepid bliss of your vast ignorance, and the very greatness of this consequence will escape you too. Let this be a lesson, then, to a better man than yourself).

Let us turn, then, on your best dream. Doubtless we may trust you to misremember, misquote, misuse, abuse, manhandle and badly mangle the fragile fiction.

but to little great purpose, for I, you see, may reproduce it rightly and you must trust the monologue ran just thusly through the maze, the tunnel, the funnel of your mind's eye:

"If you had asked why I walk alongside highways, which you wouldn't, and I had answered, openly, which I wouldn't, I would have said, 'To be seen, my own bright boy, to be seen.'"

Or at least I think that's what I thought I heard him say, the line being poor and cutting me off and it couldn't be, I just couldn't see it.

His own bright boy.

As though I were part of his make-up, vital and precious, and how could that be? What do we have in common? What have we between us? Nothing. No. I'm not that kind, his kind. And I have been so wrong, so small and negligent.

Peter is not the sun, Modest the moon. Modest is the sun, Modest the real gold. Modest among us is whole, completely himself, plain as day, you see, and not the waning half—no shadow can slice him into scrap and no sparkplug and no flashlight are wanting for him to shine full on the other side of the world when, for us, all seems dark, so all is dark.

Isn't that right?

And we may only see his brother, a pale sickle sunk in the void between the spectre of stars. And that's Modest's too, so bright as to light Peter up from below the horizon. Mooning Peter. Hallowed Peter. Hollowed Peter. Is that Peter at all?

But that's Modest, isn't it? I'm right, aren't I? A sun, a living star like a perpetual motion machine, yielding, always yielding, losing none of his force after lifetimes.

Can that be?

Oh, where is he? Where is he now?

But it's evident enough it can't be me he's thinking of—immature, half-formed, two-faced and dimensionless ingénue.

And I was right about him all along. For all his reticence, Modest is not what he says and not as he appears, to me.

Wasn't I?

Is he?

Why aren't you here?

Jésus, I admit it is inconceivable you would call me "bright" or "your boy." But won't you call me Kolya? Don't you whisper my diminutive sometimes, when I'm not looking and not listening? Must I persist alone in the fool faith you do, you must, because I want you to?

It is a fantastic dream, but, you see, I'm so terribly fond and I want so much to be worthy of it.

Yes. Well.

Back in reality, one unexceptional undertaking you cannot bring yourself to credit him for is vacuuming. Of course, that he does is unquestionably clear from the workshop's uncanny, even unnatural cleanliness. The tomes are free of dust, the beetle boxes gleam and a pair of new white socks has nothing to fear from the floor, for no sawdust mines, however superficial, find concealment in its domain (to extend the metaphor), nay, not even in the hinterlands beneath bar stools and counters (ibid. "Ibid!")

“Ibid,” he says. Go to hell). But it would require a superhuman effort to imagine Modest in the act of vacuuming. I mean, imagine a person so thoroughly composed, so entirely sufficient and perfectly perfect, in dress, in speech, in manner, grappling with the inescapable tangle of uncouth hose, kicking the bullet shaped canister when it bites into his shin like an infuriating Pekinese, unbecoming beads of perspiration crowning his marble brow as he shoves this and that chair out of his roaring way.

And the noise! I doubt even you could mistake the terrible whine of a vacuum. The thunder of the gods was never so voible and you’re certainly hard pressed to picture Modest’s taut length shrouded in and harped on by that racket, the budgerigar flapping wildly in his tight cage and screeching, in terror or joy, remonstrance or sympathy, one cannot know.

Of course, Modest doesn’t have a budgerigar, but you see what I’m getting at (oh yes, I see what you’re getting at). It is not that Modest isn’t the type to clean. On the contrary, he has fastidious written all over him. It is simply that cleaning, such as it is, is in irrevocable conflict with the quiet dignity of the portrait you see him uniformly to present.

Yes. Well.

Back on the farm, as you say they say, on the very off chance you were so fortunate a fellow as accidentally to have had, for any fraction of any one of Modest’s patient and thorough discussions, your head without and out of the engrossing stuffs of which the pages of GQ are no doubt replete—scent adverts and the like, one can well enough imagine—it is not entirely inconceivable such a chaotic series of improbabilities

would put you in a poetic frame of mind. Suddenly you may have brightened (I use the word figuratively); suddenly, within the wet blanket that is your person, the wet noodle that is your spine may have stiffened to become the superstructure it might have been (if only you would listen; if only you would be moved by the better, the finer, the subtler and more thoughtful example) and uncrinked itself from that most incommodious of convenient benches and . . .

Oh, but one gets what one deserves, trusting a child with china; no sooner is its delicacy made known by your ginger transferal than the treasure is dashed to impossible pieces on the floor and there is no telling if it was once a bowl, once a vase, once a dear urn. “Hark!” your frightful readiness to adopt, nay to caricature the limpest and most unlikely postures causes you to gush, “I do believe there is sufficient and highly convenient occasion in this ‘happy little cloud’ for an *Ode!*” (and here your natural, which is to say your singularly unexamined, dispensation to glom on to Shelley or Wordsworth will be excused according to your characteristic, which is to say, questionable, credo the second: something is better than nothing. Also note, I would note the exclamations are yours, but they are not. Nothing is). Upon said ejaculation (zeal surviving under the influence), you may (influence encouraging doggedness) have fallen to raking your very grey matter for some fragment, no doubt made instantly insipid by your blind gropings, about a cloud of the powder puff variety such as you are intimately familiar with from picture books of yore (yours was a youthful constitution singularly ill-disposed to the written word when it crouched quietly on the page and was not rather interpreted for you in a repellent series of stupid, squirrely voices by your *Maman*). But no, memory speaks little that is intelligible to the likes of you and inspiration is too much

to ask of the universe, so that again it's "Now, how did it go again. . .? *I am aroused and unbuild it again. . .*"

Here, of course, your blind eye is well turned to your pastime pillaging and again to the mockery you must make of even this travesty—weaseling in on the finale, distorting the line, botching any semblance of story secreted therein, courting acknowledgment while refusing to properly acknowledge. You are completely careless and full of fault, Little Naught. You may or may not distinguish the sensation of being hopelessly stymied. Likely as not, you are fully prone to realize *ton petit verre* is only half full (ah and with what unspoken gratitude you meet such timely diversions! Excuses, Boy, call a pitchfork a pitchfork for once in your blot of a life), and this trespassing reflection will allow you to desist with further literary (?) efforts before the sensation of being stuck has a chance to wriggle free of the way of more work. "Drink," you think, and drink I say; just the muse for the masses, and as effective as any anti-Christ. Go on, I say, give it a rest, for "nothing will come of nothing" and there's nothing for it and that's you, down to the ground. You deserve one another.

But, Jesus, all this humming and hawing and doing and being, at your convenience, absolutely nothing, an annoying lump of nothing you might say and I leave you to it for no thinking creature would broker so manifestly absurd a contention; and all because you haven't the imagination or the originality or the presence of mind or the depth of character to come up with what better to do with your meager shrapnel of copycat talents. Modest was working on Peter's "Onegin" again today ("That's three days running," the limits of your mathematical prowess allow you to exclaim; your unparalleled uncouthness allows you to exclaim it out loud and at such a volume as might

penetrate even your thickness and flimsiest of depths) and, with gritted teeth, you have managed, as only you could have managed, to convince yourself that you neither notice nor keenly resent his absence. Your pout, however—your inevitable, irrepressible, infantile pout when he comes, carefully and so quietly around the side of the house that *M. Bédard* has no opportunity in the arrival to desist in his brand of, at least, lively ineptitude—tells another story again.

Only, let me get in edgewise in this record and state that the satisfaction you derive from his assiduous and, as you like to imagine it, acute concern to find out what puts you out, to smooth it out for you—betrayed by an absentminded laying of his gentle hand on your knobby knee—is indecent. Worse is your *hauteur*, criminally calculated and irreproachably performed, when he remembers himself and withdraws his hand with a jerk whose awkwardness you relish as much as you do the slight flush that deepens when he finds no friendly reassurance in your features that *ça ne fait rien*. Of course, the gesture, if it did not (as likely with you, it did not) stimulate the stubbornly concealed pride of a teenager once again privy to *Maman*'s ministrations, was as nothing; your will to see Modest broken, to shatter his frigid rectitude and have him out is everything. It is subhuman, or, if human, it is inhumane and uncivilized, pathetic and futile. You might sooner cut a hole to see what's behind the sky.

But such vain efforts and such creative thinking and your ability to articulate it sensibly, although par for the extensive course of your vanity, are beyond you as you are at the best of times (best. I do not say fondest, which in your case signifies easiest with sugar on top—*Maman* replacing with a lolly the heavy parcel you ten minutes since stamped and raged and would not budge if not allowed to transport. Your best times are

enthroned in deliberate discomfort on a bar stool at the counter of Modest's workshop, yourself endeavouring to write something intelligible if not intelligent, wrangling with English, our dual patroness rich and mean. Your struggles we share but your stubbornness defies all sense. You persistently refuse Modest's offer of a cushion. Why? Why do you insist on thwarting yourself so? Is it Modest's sympathy you are angling for? Well, isn't it?). Presently your three couple of cocktails have shot dead the likelihood, niggardly although it was, of any such efforts for the evening. Oh, but you are a brutally optimistic soul and to take life as it comes is not sufficient but it must be cut up beyond recognition and the bits improperly dissected and the viscera strewn about with dreadful levity and up you spring, although the water-weak sunshine (for which you deigned to sit at your bench just as a hideous midget sits for his portrait—with small and vain hope) is not yet done with that ill-favoured extremity of the cabbage patch, and away to the begrudgingly concealed gallon of "Beefeater" constituting but one, not especially notable lump in the begrudgingly occupied bed that you begrudgingly and with all characteristic haste made up this morning, to refresh your beverage if not yourself and see what further musings and misusings comes of that.

Do you remember the dead lamb, back on the farm? Do you rightly recall how, born in the green valley, it had contrived to stray from the teat to Gustav and Theo's territory and there found the sweetest pile of apple crush on which to gorge itself literally to death. The brothers had had a windfall from neighbours seeming to require a subterfuge for their custodial concern rather than declaring straightaway the goodness of a turn and showing themselves for who they were. Incredible though you found it, Theo

had dug out and assembled the heavy apple press and presently spent feed buckets simmered with the sulfurous stench of fermentation under this and that matt of down in the barn.

But, how profoundly its carcass terrified you—teeth bared and stomach distended out of all proportion and grown too unwieldy for the brothers, who had left it (for how long, you must wonder, would it have been left so awfully exposed had he not been present to bear it out of sight?) beside the lucky manure pile. Not that you gave a thought for the poor beast's ultimate suffering, nor the tragedy of its premature demise; only its frightful aspect distressed you. How firmly, how stubbornly and stupidly you maintained that that unfortunately disfigured lamb did not look like any lamb of your fairytale acquaintance and was, therefore, clearly not a lamb but a monstrosity—a terrifying *montgolfière*; a jeering carnival balloon needing only an impossibly sturdy stick you could not help but fail to imagine stuck anywhere but up the anus—deserved of your cowardly contempt and not your compassion.

And then came the appalling offer to remove it. Cate's truck was just there. But no, surely. Not that. There are limits, are there not? It was awful to see; it would soon be terrible to smell, but to touch it was unthinkable. I'm not equal to it, I'm sure. How all must have seen you shrink in your precious *espadrilles*. And how you quailed before the inevitable, "Do you mind very much?" (*Jésus*, how is it that you can appear not to?) and "Here, please, take my gloves" (Tatty things. What good will they do me?); and how you hedged immediately after, shying from the carrion, face averted, fearing for the state of your footwear and nothing for your soiled soul. And then, when at last the reality of it all hit home, what did, what could you have done but lie and steal, by false pretense of

caring and practical pluck, into his good graces (oh, but honestly now, what did you care about his esteem? Was it not rather to get out of afternoon lessons that you put off whining, which would have been effective, trust it, in securing your more immediate end of innocent bystander merely? Tell me, was it otherwise?). Yes, you rolled your coat sleeves. Yes, you forced your ginger grasp of two dainty forehooves to hold a modicum of weight. Yes, I do believe you even smiled, if desiccated worms curling from clenched teeth deserves the name.

Would Modest remember? All of it? Is there nothing that might supplant such shame?

Reminiscences are the things you forget to remember, wretched thieves you can't guard against, being oblivious to their presence until they have quite stolen home and your heart is in your throat and how bad you look, so often it does not bear thinking of.

You are unbearable. You are not to be borne.

You do not bear thinking of and you don't, sitting there, at your convenience, at *your* pleasure and the expense of others. You sit there without an original thought about even the simplest cloud in your head and mangle all that came in advance of you. Sitting there, you sit, more stone than stone, with its quivering particle galaxy.

You are a lump. You are "Silly Putty" in the extreme. You are a lump describing a circle and you are a hole of a person, not even half a good man. You are amoeboid but for your inability to gain, to grow. Only you steal; only you destroy, chase away the

effervescent scent with your dog-dumb huffing and drop the rare bowl and paint the intricate creature white with blind daubs.

But understand me, Ruffian, you Still So Childish Lout, all this is neither here nor there. You sit and are neither here nor there nor anything, you must presume, to the heart of him who is the heart of what you would like to call *your* book. You are nothing in his books and even you can tell, as any man of sense will be able to tell, trust it, the best bits in this chaotic cacophony, the only bits quivering with any particle, any semblance of life (and how they quiver and how they move and how they sing and how they sound only ever the right notes, those impossible, imperceptible gifts devolved on simple, stuttering we) are the quotations you pilfered from his careful compilation, his work in progress, and passed off, without thinking, as your own.

Chapter Six: Family and Friends, Necessarily Etc. Con't

But, now, where was I? You might well ask! So vast and varied is the wealth of material the intimate acquaintanceship with my idol furnished me with, it can sometimes seem a task beyond my reckoning if not my modest worth to compile, order and relate prettily but without ornament his life. I trust, with the minor exception of broadening the scope to acknowledge characters not strictly integral to my memory of Peter, I am making no very bad job of it.

Peter hates teaching and loves students. Rather than resort to quotation, I herby freely admit the quip is not mine but Nick R—'s, who some know as Peter's boss, others his drinking buddy, but who I would submit combined the qualities of both and neither, being as lazy as he was tyrannical of opinion, which last, especially when pitted against Peter's dithering obduracy (Peter was singular in his readiness to offer any number of often self-contradictory justifications in defence of an unshakable intuition) and after the first fires of zeal had done quickening the web of spidery blue veins over his temples, could be counted on to quickly lose its lustre, its progenitor taking full advantage of the opportunity thus afforded to subside into a comfortable petulance. Moreover, I am in a position to declare Nick R— a natty if theatrical dresser and, moreover, stand equal witness to his purchasing only the best spirits to have on hand for his house guests, to his financial peril perhaps, but what are house guests for? I ask you.

But as to pedagogy, Peter never left to doubt his feelings about dragging his weary, trembling, great self before a class of self-important, soulless if more or less (by

which I mean to suggest some more, some less) pretty brats. The girls in particular unnerved him. He was simply at a loss how to respond to their understandable if juvenile eye-batting inquiries whether he conducted private lessons. This reaction, so markedly unlike that of most, nay all of his colleagues, as may well have been the case, I hope demonstrates what I have said all along in this memoir, viz. the man being a cut above, a unique sort the piano transcriptions of whose famed masterpieces had been all it took to convince me, so long ago, that here, at last, was a kindred spirit and a star to cross, much to my illumination, the remains of my days.

But to go back and finish up with Nick R—: I can think of no single word to stand as his rightful signifier and sobriquet and doubt there is one. I trust the little lengths to which I have gone to sketch if not paint his portrait suffice to capture his likeness and if it has not captured likewise the reader's imagination, *peu importe*, for he is a minor enough character and I can't imagine ignoring him *au complet* matters much. I do feel compelled, before passing on to greater subjects, to amend Nick R—'s quip in one poignant respect: Peter *hated* teaching and *loved* students (my italics). For the three requisite details, in the unlikely event I've fallen short in this regard, I chose to reveal Nick R—'s stumpiness of height, his wideness of face and his wildness of hair, improving the veracity of this last fact by comparing his locks to Einstein's more famous mop, howbeit Nick R—'s was as yet brownish and more or less bonded on top by a generous basting of olive oil the which nugatory wisdom he had had haphazardly from a thin biography of Dali's Gala, after which genius' velvet suits and outlandish bow ties he had, in the reckless ingenuousness of some bygone decade, then fashioned himself, never to be recouped by the straight-jacket of strict modernity. The sensational goldfish bowtie

remained a particular favourite long after it had gone belly up. But I see I am in danger of running on with details four, five and six which, however fascinating, must be nipped in their superfluous buds if I'm ever to be finished with this blasted thing.

Although the conservatory was closed for the holidays, Peter spent an inordinate amount of time composing "Eugene Onegin" that summer. He could scarce be talked into comely cards and healthful dancing into the wee hours of three nights a week until Modest agreed to rewrite the libretto Peter had anyway nearly one third complete before despairing of his literary talents in just that time-honoured self-defeating, self-deprecating manner so customary of the modesty and faulty self-image of the man of worth, to say nothing of the man of genius.

Too, it seemed that Nick R—'s brother Anton was rubbing some hyper-sensitive nerve the wrong way, but over and above that Peter's brutally tasking, ever-disapproving mentor had condescended to conduct the *première* of "Onegin" in the big city, the particulars of Peter's angst escaped me, practically jogging to keep up with the distraught composer and his solicitous, long-legged escort (Peter refuses, excuse me, *refused* [my emphasis] to walk alone at night; appealing to his reason by pointing out the utter "Mickey-Mouseness" of the island's capital—if gangs roam these streets, you may be sure they're in for macaroni cheese by seven—is a lost cause and nothing would do on nights when Alexey turned in early but that Modest should drive down and make the short trek to Nick R—'s with him. It is perhaps not worthy of me, but I endorsed the scheme insofar as that, as I say, good host would inevitably invite us all to stay, and, after ensuring that I did not anticipate wanting a lift home [What? To that priest hole? You must be joking! But no, either I have never heard Modest joke, or I do not get his sense

of humour altogether. Cate laughs, but it is often when I'm quite sure nothing at all has been said and I think the affectation pure and charming girlishness on her part. She has a wonderfully full mouth. Almost as full as Modest's, which, while common courtesy itself when he smiles, as he does often enough, is unnaturally seductive when he is deep in thought—pouty without being coy; a ten year old boy concentrating, minus the feverish eyes; the titillating whisper of a sphinx's suggestive smile; oh, seen in such attitudes, one reads in Modest's features all the allure of enigma, as if he held some sweet mystery in the warm recesses of his hot mouth, as light as gold foil on the tongue and as precious to taste], Modest bowed out and I was left to my own devices on the threshold of another full night in which to unwind in the true sense of the word).

When lady luck saw to it that we, by whom I refer to the chummy duet Peter and I made of such an evening, did grace a *soirée*, and closing time found us back at Nick R—'s, Peter would be the last up, in Nick R—'s overstuffed chesterfield (as my makeshift bed on the adjacent couch authorized me to ascertain), looking shabby and spoiled, as if buried alive in his grey flannel suit, and senselessly worrying away to himself.

“Poor Tatiana. Touching Tatiana.”

Of course, we didn't know any “Tatiana” and the reference remained cloaked in obscurity until, a very little time later, he shocked us all with his engagement to Antonia. I was then able to put two and two together and conclude, cresting the thrilling hillock of catching someone out, that he had been slurring his words with that “Tatiana” business—not so high and mighty and immune to the sauce after all, hm!?! In fact, in retrospect and as I tried to impress upon Modest by way of well-intended consolation (I was not

convinced good sense prevailed; he simply smiled wanly if lingeringly at me), it provides some comfort to believe that Peter was able to derive some comfort from the spirit he administered to himself with such devotion. Furthermore, I maintain it does so.

But I see that it is time now to pass with opportune efficacy onto the by no means great subject of Antonia (a rat-like harpist of no less than twenty-six: dumpy haunches, stringy hair, a spotty face expressing nothing so much as blandness and that rather dully. Her last name escapes me, just as I see it did way back in incipient “Chapter Two: Etc.” *Peu importe* indeed! And *Dieu merci* if it similarly escapes the more or less opportunistic historians who come coasting on my coattails [i.e. some more than others; some, I own, are more or less blameless, their faultless records coming out to augment my own with details the likes of which I’m prevented from detailing here only by a lack of time, space and similar accumulation of notes]). Antonia is a nymphomaniac, a homophobe and a madwoman. Her mother is worse in all respects. There is little else to be said about the pair, in point of fact, and they deserve nothing like the attentions lavished on them thus far and I would readily take it all back would reader interest not begrudge me the loss. Stupendously small loss it would be, my reader may rest assured!

As the story goes, Peter’s timorous but confirmed disinclination to coach A-tonal Antonia (as I was later to quip, although Peter’s endless agonies put a damper on what I feel sure would have been corroborating guffaws. One had only to look at Antonia’s meaty digits—a match for the empty haggis of her head—to surmise that she made as poor a musician as she did a muse. But with what deadly accuracy was she able to play on Peter’s heartstrings!) was countered with a letter professing her consuming passion for the composer and threatening suicide in a general sort of way. The effect was to be, by

the sympathetically constituted, expected. Peter took the hit square in the heart and rushed like a madman to her lair, this be-spotted—to match her face—with whimpering porcelain poodles no doubt. He came away affianced and that was pretty much that.

Oh, I suppose there is circulating an idea that Peter was precipitated towards this end insofar as he was moved by the subject-matter of his nearest opusonic, if that is a word, undertaking. However, I happen to have read a smattering of Modest's so-called "Yevgeny Onyegin" and can say with some certainty that I found nothing in it—just a paltry few of fops fighting as far as I could see and, Modest returning with that uncanny stealth of his, I quickly determined not to waste another drop of a rainy day on its perusal. Besides which, the keen reader will know my views on the whole notion of influence (not to be borne. The less than keen and/or the scatterbrained reader is encouraged to (re)acquaint himself with, and, I might modestly propose, be all but won over by, my aforementioned compelling views on the matter. "Chapter Three: Etc." is your man). It should be obvious by now that Peter's was not a soul made of such stuffs as to be pushed about by Pushkin; it served not to satisfy one's own purposes; it had not a ring through its nose whereby to trot out the man wheresoever one's fancies roamed. Besides which, you'd have to be completely beside yourself to mistake Antonia for Tatiana.

Besides this, there also appears afloat on the backwater of common sense the big but bankrupt idea that Peter, during that first interview, before hardening his heart and offering it to the taloned if talentless Antonia by way of atonement (to the universe, one presumes; it is beyond the limits of imagination that Antonia could provoke such penance), Peter was blindsided by a fit of injudicious honesty, vouchsafing to the vamp his most painful secret, which seemed not, however, to have hit home with A-homo A-

tonal, which only stands to reason, she being, as I trust my ready details have revealed, a perfect blockhead. Not that one would desire or condone that most un-funny phobia fibula to have been tickled by the composer's supposed revelation. Not at all, as any reader who has read any of the forgoing with any attentiveness to speak of must glean is my libel-less opinion, and any who see in me so vicious and uncultivated a spirit as to think that I think or have said otherwise is, I do not say "stupid," but "staggeringly lately arrived to the party," and is further encouraged to come in through the "In" door and return to "Chapter One: Etc." before calling a spade a spade, which I am not. Not that I wouldn't be pleased as punch to be one and be called one if I were.

But all this is neither here nor there so far as I, my subject and the better sort of reader are concerned, and I must forthwith beg off lavishing such quantz of our valuable time and remaining pages on such deeply unthrilling questions of a purely academic nature. I merely mean to point out that, although pure bred a gross homophobe, Antonia so far failed to put two and two together that one imagines Peter's confession that he could be a husband in name only met only with the non-sequiturious and plainly lust-driven, "Darling, I accept."

That is, it *would* have, had such a confession been made, which, clearly, as I see it, it was not. Clearly, such is a tale told after the fact; it is evidence trumped up to sustain the remote possibility that Peter first offered, thence offered himself in a fit of petrified mortification (mortified petrification, if you will) that Antonia would tell friends and family (who already knew only too well; nor was I so very far behind them) and disclose to the tabloids (who had long since been running the cover story, by which means I first came to be convinced of its veracity) his worst kept secret.

No, it must clearly rather be as Modest had it: that Peter somehow, somewhere and perfectly unwittingly contracted a chill and the gemstone of his constitution was not made of such hard stuffs as could counteract the germ of a common cold (Ah hah! Here, then, is the eerie and awful bookend to his mother's death that I so tantalizingly held out, carrot-style and by way of drawing the timid reader, as well as the reader glutting for the goods, on, e'en unto the very bowels of my life and times with Peter, a good many "Chapters" ago! Don't say I never gave you anything!), and let me be the first to anticipate the ("close," as they call them and as opposed to the far more genially-constituted "*laissez-faire*") reader's basic (by which I mean both "base" and "trifling") complaint that this is not at all the line I seemed to have been taking in the formative days of "Chapter Three: Etc."s composition by submitting that the blame is entirely Modest's. In my experience, the wealth of which the reader now shares, Modest has an unassailable tendency never to be wrong and one would be wise to put one's money on his dark horse. That is, as I believe I have mentioned elsewhere, I am human after all and to err is me all over and I now freely maintain that Peter's death was as accidental as ever an incident in God's great plan is. That is, I'm with Modest, and I trust that I at last join the side of right by saying so.

How Peter came to tie the noose with meat hooks there, I can find no ready reference for, saving those above-derided theories, which are, as I have just written, *theories* (my italics) and have no place beyond their more or less likelihood among the hard if imperfectly verifiable facts of the intimacy on which this record dotes with strictest sentiment.

Peter was engaged before, you know. To one *Désirée Artot*, the supposedly renowned opera singer of whom I've heard nothing, but find I may only too readily imagine: a silk-swathed, rhinestone-encrusted fleshpot endowed, with all the indecency of chance, with the alto of an angel. "She was at once matronly and glamorous," Modest doesn't so much inform us as confound us (sole evidence, perhaps, of his own errant humanity? This entirely new notion might well bear such further consideration as, with the end of my *cahier* hard upon me, I've no time for here), "and Peter, who loved occasions of high society as much as he loathed the terrible prefatory anxiety that details of dress and deportment caused him, felt comfortable at her side as by that of no other woman save his dear, departed Alexandra Assier" (pg. 34). We think he meant "preparatory," which is a word only an outmoded spellcheck or fussy academic fails utterly to recognize. That the same spellcheck fails likewise to recognize the word "spellcheck" neatly confirms the accuracy of my analysis.

But as I was revealing, Peter had just sat down to write "Ilya" (also not recognized) of his impending nuptials (to the tart, not that dotty sheep's bladder of a girl. My clarification) and to read his father's quaint if antiquated reply ("Please be sensible, son, of the very great divide between your upbringing and that of your object of ardour. While your mother insisted on instilling her children with cultivated habits of mind, Madame *Artot* germinated in another hothouse altogether. She is, first and foremost, the socialite progeny of an old strain of new world socialites; she is tantamount to aristocracy and while I can desire nothing but your happiness, I caution you, Piotr, against the moral stagnation of that frivolous caste. *Please* consider carefully and discuss the matter fully with your brother Modeste before doing anything rash. Your doting father" etc.). pg. 34.

Needless to say, *Désirée* ran off to America with a baritone (or a barrister, I cannot recall which and cannot think it matters much) and denied Peter's ever having proposed, which testimony seems a bit far-fetched. Even granting the difficulty that even I, practically kin, have in interpreting Peter's wonts, so apt is he to use outmoded expressions, fidget a great deal, stare and grow hoary beards, *Désirée*'s disavowal seems like outright contempt of court in light of her post-mortem recantation in "The Tatler," right beside a sexy *exposé* attributed to Alexey. Oh yes, every mother's son wants a piece of him now that he is no longer with us. It's all just about enough to make one despair of the human race, is it not? I ask you. In any case, I tell you the *Artot* business just as an interesting aside I happened upon. I trust I may trust the three or so details revealed in relation to this figure were enough to endow it with a liveliness well worth the read. For the record and the more fastidious reader, Peter was but a boy of seventeen at the time and I call that hard indeed; indeed, to lose two loves in the space of seven years, well, I call that "tantamount" (to use Ilya's expression of page 34) to tragedy.

Furthermore re: *Désirée*. I wonder: is there not some suggestion of significance in Peter, homosexual *par excellence*, adoring a so-called woman? I feel all but sure: there is. However, like so much of mean ol' meaning, it escapes me, or, to couch it in perhaps prettier terms, so softly does it land on bended and benumbed knee, one thinks it but a bug of some negligible description and flicks it off without looking.

Where was I again?

Ah, yes, first causes. However it came about, it came about that Peter somehow got it into his head that he could not break the hoarfrosted crab-apple of Antonia's heart

and, against all reason—my spirited pleading, Modest’s sober discussions late into the night—he married the girl.

What, then, remains to be wrapped up?

“The suicide, the suicide!” I fancy I hear the reader clamour like a kid for the hot-pink ice of a syrupy, convenience store “Slushee.”

Yes, all right, the *attempted* suicide, but don’t tell me I didn’t tell you Peter’s last swansong was nothing of the kind.

One chill night in October, we retired to Modest’s cottage after the *première* of his play “The Queen of Spades.” “His” play rather, and “recovered in Modest’s cottage” I should say, nor would I say I was alone in this ill-starred effort, although thicker skins (Anatol’s, certainly Antonia’s and, metaphorically speaking, Cate’s and Peter’s) prevailed to cover it well. It’s just that it had been so singularly dramatic. The actors, Modest calmly confirmed when, at some later date, I felt equal to asking, had been coached to overact, only not obviously, not tackily so that the thing could properly be called a farce, but—how to describe the effect?—conventionally, with expansive, stereotyped gestures and unnaturally laboured articulation, as if playing the riper sort of revenge play to a Broadway venue of colossal proportions and not, as was the typical if depressing community case, within two feet of the diminutive, largely grey-haired congregation blighting the pews of the peninsula’s non-sectarian church, lit as limpidly as the actors by glaring overhead lights. For their part, scenes were modest, but the sequined tulle and the few cardboard props seemed to glory in their hideous artificiality and, inasmuch, they stung the eyes, wrenched the heart and galled the gall.

Of course, I immediately took the exaggeration to be in deference to my handicap and so acutely did the idea embarrass me that I thought very little of its being a kind of kindness and resolved never to speak to Modest again. Insofar as I am a man of my word, it is entirely possible that I never would have had I not caught the “playwright” in conference with a geriatric at half time. Yes, he was explaining, she was quite right in discerning a certain over-dramaticization. He was going on to illuminate his enigmatic suggestion that it was a “sign of the times, a sign, I mean to say, of . . .” when the old bird tricked off to secure butterscotch lifesavers, the package to open, I suspect, with all possible din at a moment of some climactic import during the second round. I despise old people as a race, as a rule. Be that as it may, while I gleaned the method of this madness had been contrived with no thought to myself (it then chose to hit home with considerable force what a considerate gesture, indeed a kind of homage it would have been, had it been and bitterly did I now suffer the realization that it had not), yet, above and beyond the torture of watching tortures magnified out of all proportion and indeed perfect likelihood, there was something else distinctly unsettling to me about it. But what?

The ending was what capped it. Only the day before I had been furnished with the chance to spend an idle moment boning up on the original’s outcome; why Modest had seen fit to rewrite the thing so that the young hero, what’s his name, commits suicide, I could make neither heads nor tails of, so thoroughly did it smack of someone, anyone, other, decidedly, even distinctly other, than Modest. That, it seemed to me, was it. It irrevocably seemed to me that Modest, quiet Modest, demurring Modest, unassuming Modest, retiring Modest, rational above all and above all my Modest could not have

produced such a play. It is not a question of its artistic merit or success; I have little enough to say about these, having but a modest understanding of them. It is the tenor of the thing. It is that I sensed the *discrepancy*, to put it with Modestian mildness (and my emphasis, to wit: my italics), between the character of what had been mounted on stage and, from these not-so-lofty heights, indelibly impressed upon the grey matter of a few colourless heads, and that which was true to real life, as experienced in the flesh by myself. The two were the work, had the life, were the life's work, oh whatever—obviously, my point is that they clearly suggested different animating spirits; the play bespoke one kind of puppeteer in the wings while Modest spoke for himself and he whom I knew as another kind of ventriloquist's doll, to preserve the metaphor, entirely. Needless to say, I found no relation between the two and, having grown attached to the one, my rag doll, my Modest, I could not, would not be persuaded to reconcile them. I could only sense—oh, but how keenly and yet confusedly could I sense—a mistake had been made somewhere. But where? Whose?

For their part, family and friends *seemed* (I stress the word) not a jot out of joint with their Modest. They sunk with apparent ease into his easy chairs and accepted the cups of tea he was discharging with automaton servility (or do I mean “civility”? Oh, things have grown so confused. Or is it I that am grown confused? *Maman, embrace ton bébé*. But no, I see with dreadful clarity that pose will no longer do either. *A quoi ça sert?*), completing one round of the room only to begin afresh with Peter. Cate followed at a polite distance, sweetly if rather needlessly, it suddenly seemed; had it been placed on the coffee table, anyone might have reached the sugar she was offering at their perfect convenience. To me Modest was equally cordial, as cordial as ever he was, but I

suddenly felt like I didn't know him. I felt deceived in him, betrayed by him and, at last, abandoned by him—it is only natural, is it not?—and made my displeasure (my anguish! My mortification and my desperation!) known, I hope, by pointedly declining his tea-cozied ministrations.

Would I prefer a Porto?

No.

No, Porto was not what was wanted here. Absurd as it sounds, I wanted nothing more than that it was afternoon, yesterday afternoon, even this afternoon, and that Modest, my Modest, and I were alone, together, reading and discussing in quiet sobriety something perfectly sound—Pope perhaps, anything but Pushkin and his endless epistles and repeating pistols. How badly I wanted this. I regret only letting it show so plainly. I see that too was childish and devoid of modesty, that subtle sign that a man is rich in life's best lesson: to each, his own.

If only he would let himself linger on my nape again, as he does when he forgets himself. I won't startle him. I won't use his recovery for my pleasure and turn his delicacy inside out. I will delight in his cool fingers, however long they'd like to linger, feeling prized by a gift.

Antonia complained that she couldn't hear half the lines what with having to tell off an old lady who was forever shredding another spiral of jacket to reveal the butterscotch lifesaver within. When she barked her approval of the play's ending, Peter shuddered. I closed my eyes. Modest simply smiled.

Later, in sore need of stiff ones, Peter and I joined Nick R— at “Big Bad John’s,” as good a place for slumming as ever a town had on offer, but neither the opportune disinterest in proof as to the specifics of a patron’s person to wit: their exact age in years, nor peanuts whose husks patrons were all but forced to shed gaily on the floor, nor the *brassières* (of some wartime vintage that saw fit to fashion its breasts after its torpedoes) staple-gunned to the walls, nor the generous application of the one murky spirit in the pub’s grimy possession would work their uplifting magic that night. Peter resigned himself precipitously to the grave fate that lay in wait at home (Antonia had gone so far as to do away with Alexey’s services, her mother and herself contriving to fill the domestic void. Nothing would allay Peter’s distress but that Modest should temporarily harbour the manservant whom I subsequently found constantly underfoot during lessons, however his application for reprieve from military duty seemed at last to have got onto the fast track with the subject about to authenticate this or that niggardly if apparently necessary document, which was satisfying to all concerned). Indeed, Peter was so put out as to forgo or forget his fear of the dark into which he now (that is, then) ventured quite alone, leaving Nick R— and I to ourselves, to see the revels through to their bitter ends. I would have gone with him, of course, but he was in a bad way, as they say, and singularly ill-humoured. I should perhaps have called Modest.

As it was, Modest heard Peter calling him from the beach by his cottage. As the story goes, he arrived at the mud flats just in time to see Peter far off and fully clothed, waist-deep and wading further out to sea. Really, I see every reason to suspect that he must have known Modest would come and save him and was not, in fact, advancing into the depths and a watery grave but was, actually, biding his time in wandering back and

forth, perfectly abreast with the shoreline. I also hold that he was dead drunk as, as I have hope to have shown, I consider altogether possible. There are any number of convenient outlets in which to buy spirits between “Big Bad John’s” and a dive off the deep end.

So Modest called him back to shore; so he was saved; so Modest drove him up island where he remained under Bobbie’s rejuvenating care (Alex was away with the Native salmon fishery, working her way through the local band consistent with her rapacious earthiness). For his part, Modest returned to town and arranged the divorce with Cate’s help. He would have had mine likewise but that the details were kept so hush-hush that I wasn’t completely *au courant* there was any problem to speak of.

At last, Antonia turned tail. Peter returned home shattered but on the mend. And then came the fateful day on which he failed to outfit himself with a jacket, as one would have thought only sensible in late November, and, by week’s end, a prophetic if common cold had carried him off to the other world, there at long last and without threat of further separation anxiety to reunite, as it is some comfort to still feel fairly certain, with the angelic figure of his beloved mother. Only his works, his divinely inspired works remain to comfort those remaining, kin to his soul, in this obtuse world—his “1812 Overture” and his *Lac des Cygnes*, his “Children’s Songs” and his “Nutcracker” and the summit of his supreme gift and henchman of his innermost heart, his own “Eugene Onegin,” Modest’s fine hand all but still wet on the music stand. Oh, and all the rest of it as I refrain from detailing here only on the supposition that the informed reader knows at least as much about it all as I might, and, above all, I strive not to tax his patience with what is redundant or inessential or uninteresting or old-hat, as they say.

And that, as they say, is all she wrote.

Chapter Seven: Peter's Widow

With the happy felicity of bookends or “a framing device,” as they say in literary circles with something akin, as I understand it, to mixed metaphor, let me finish with a few excerpts from Modest's Nadja von Meck letters of patronage to Peter, letters I've not elsewhere had occasion to insert but whose bulk happenstancing to be in my possession it seems to me too unfortunate not to take full advantage of; letters, I need hardly point out, wholly in keeping with this character's character as it all but uniformly impressed itself upon myself and as I, in turn and here and there in these annals, have revealed to my reader. So that here they are, these dry crusts, these bleak widow's parings, clipped with beautiful calculation, as I grant it, to play on an artist's worst weaknesses. But allow me to leave the reader to judge the “abstemiousness,” to use a Modest expression, of the ruse for himself:

HONOURED SIR:

Permit me to extend my sincere gratitude for your rapid execution of my commission. It would be superfluous for me to tell you of the enthusiasm I feel for your music, for you are doubtless used to receiving homage quite unlike any a person so insignificant, musically speaking, as I am could offer. It might, for that reason, appear to you absurd, and my admiration is something I value too highly to want it laughed at. Thus I shall make only one statement, which I ask you to accept as literal truth—your music makes life easier and pleasanter to go through.

And the more strident but no less frigidly reasonable:

Are we such strangers? Don't you understand how much I care for you, or how much good I wish you? In my opinion, it is not a tie of sex or relationship that gives these rights, but a sense of mental and spiritual kinship. You know how many joyful moments you have given me, how grateful, how indispensable you are to me, and how necessary it is to me that you should be just as you were created. What I do, therefore, is not for your sake, but for my own. Why should you spoil my satisfaction in caring for you, and make me feel that I am not very much to you, after all? You wound me. If I wanted something from you, you would of course give it to me—isn't that so? Very well, then, we cry quits. Don't interfere with my management of your domestic economy, Piotr Ilyich.

And so on in a like vein. Now I ask him, did I steer my reader wrong?

Afterword: Modest

And then, at long last, despite a feeling less of desperation belonging to me than of longing for one in whom, as I newly, happily appreciate, were concentrated all the qualities as yet beyond myself (and appreciate too how liable I was, I am, to be mistaken in this too, and it stands to reason that one should tread lightly with others), it became clear that Modest was not soon to return to the island. I returned to Paris for new year with the forgoing manuscript cradled preciously under my arm and the fact of sounds dawning on me, faint but undeniable, kept firmly under my hat. Oh, I don't know why. For the bliss, that frightful licence that ignorance doles out in spades, like so many layers of swaddling clothes.

Christmas with Cate (let me relate, but briefly, because, while perhaps not important [how strange that, in what I feel is my wider appreciation of things, I should feel so often uncertain, so often convinced that there is likely more than one way to look at them], it may have some human interest, and what else, I, for one, have come to wonder, are stories for?) had been a failure. Far from being available to any undivided attentions I might have wanted to tender in light of Modest's absence and Anatol's obsession with Petya, she seemed remote, her enthralling self not altogether present in quite a different way than that amiable dispassion I had come to exalt her for. She could fix on nothing—no, she did not feel like a walk and yet paced the house, idly fondling a book she was never to read, a fragile leaf of music she was never to play—and I could do nothing with her, for what can one do with someone whose aspect is timorous and

volatile and who didn't seem to know herself? No, the canvas of one's heart needs a solid anchor if it is to swell and be swept away by moving winds.

Paris was grey, of a shade duller, it now seemed, than the island. *Papa* and *Maman* seemed to have shrunk; the apartment on fashionable *Rue de Bac* seemed devoid of all precious glint of old world civility as I'd so often pictured it to myself and others. The railings only looked burdened by lacquers as hard as old resin; the ceilings only looked trapped and weighed down by their impossibly convoluted mouldings. At night, the city was a smear of light not so mellow as I had once thought it, and shrill with a painted laughter no cold shower could wash clean. And although I paled at the sights and sounds I made out of this desultory life as if for the first time, I more or less submerged myself in my native waters once again. Only, as to that, although I frequented the cafés and attended the salons, all was not as it was. I was not what I was. I was quiet over my *Pernod* and often wore the wool sweater Modest had made me with his own hands and precious little time. I had no longer the heart to argue religion with *Papa* and simply attended service for the cool, clean space between soft stone and the familiar feeling aroused in me by my father's willing, docile smile, to all and for all, under the great proscenium arch.

I often retired to *Les Tuileries* and practiced listening, appreciating all the quiet splendours of the world drawing near. Moth wings beating gently in my very drum—

Cate kept me abreast of Modest and I grew at last to grasp and to reciprocate, I hope, her friendship in kind. She continued with Anatol; she waited for Modest. Of course, it was she who broke the news of his death. In March. On a park bench in St. Petersburg, where he had been residing in order to collect material for his book.

Jésus, what great treasures a little year may contain.

Although I could not imagine it, could not think of Modest as otherwise than the taut string of a fit fiddle, his health had apparently been failing since his brother's death. At first I was surprised to learn that he had not been alone, but in the company of one Franklin Peters, an English student then studying at the University of St. Petersburg of whom I had heard nothing but with whom Modest had been in correspondence with for who knows how long. I was surprised to find what comfort the knowledge afforded me.

The pair had been feeding the ducks dotting the frozen Neva; I fancy I see them, snug inside plumes like some slippers too exquisite to dare wear. It strikes me as a charming scene, and the wintriness without his great coat and the warmth, as I think it, within is no discordant state in which to leave him. But I grant I cannot say that it did not appear otherwise when his heart at last gave up the ghost.

Mon Dieu.

S'il vous plaît.

I would do anything if only you'd let him be again. I'll be better than I am.

S'il vous plaît.

I followed the body home where Anatol, relapsing into his singularly senseless depths of grief, had arranged that Modest be buried (in an exquisitely inlaid casket of his own construction, bought back from its original investor) according to the rites of his brother's church. I can't think Modest would have organized it thus, but I can't think he'd have minded either, or would begrudge what one was wont to do to feel good about oneself after he'd gone.

Cate and I were left to go through his possessions. In his desk were the scores of letters he had recently asked Cate to destroy: many from his friend Franklin, the complete von Meck correspondence, Modest having naturally kept pristine his brother's responses—perfunctory thanks and verbose notes on this or that composition whose progress had been politely inquired after, Peter flattering himself, perhaps, in thinking that what worked in the ether and between ears worked as well on the page in your hands. For her part, Cate had insisted on making a copy, in the self-same slanting feminine script, of Modest's every *dictée* on the pretext of Peter's being liable to lose a letter and fall into a fit. (The offending foundling could then be discovered as having been left behind at Modest's workshop. I have it from her that justification for the scheme was forthcoming on no fewer than three occasions). At last, we uncovered the manuscript I'd rifled before, his official "Life and Letters of Piotr Ilyich Chaikovsky." For reasons I could not then own to myself, this especially I couldn't bear to look into and pressed Cate to oversee its publication as Modest had requested; she had, as I then sought to justify it, been the one to disguise von Meck's hand and must needs have a more intimate knowledge of the man's literary styling at least.

We were to ready the workshop for sale. I know not how long I was in its hushed atmosphere—minutes? lifetimes?—before I had firmly resolved to make it my home. I would pay for it somehow, and it would do me nicely. And I it, I earnestly hope.

And then, one mild night in May, I found a box and cracked the lock.

I did it messily, I am ashamed to say, still all thumbs and only the most elementary buds of adroitness about the fingers. But there inside, laying in wait, laid with care, tied with ribbon, was von Meck, a secret von Meck, von Meck in Modest's

hand, a ventriloquist's doll of his own devising and private use and untold beneficiary, and different again from the guise he had adopted for Peter's sake. Let me finish with an excerpt—how does that seem to you? Oh, because such strong sentiment moved me anew, because you should know, because the violation has been so grave that to leave it incomplete would be but to commit a further travesty.

I doubt that you can ever understand how intensely jealous I am of you despite the absence of personal contact between us. Do you know, I am jealous in the least forgivable way, as a woman is jealous of the man she loves? Do you know, when you married, it was intensely difficult for me, as though some part of my heart had been broken? The thought that you were near that woman was bitter and unbearable. And do you realize how wicked I am? I was glad when you were unhappy with her! I blamed myself for that feeling. I don't believe that I gave myself away at all, and yet I could not quell my feelings. They are not to be commanded. I hated that woman because she did not make you happy, but I should have hated her a hundred times more if you had found happiness with her. I believed that she had robbed me of what should be mine alone, what is rightfully mine for the reason that I love you more than anyone and value you above anything else in the world. If knowing this upsets you, forgive my unintentional confessions. I have said them. The symphony was the cause. Still, I think that it is better for you to realize that I am no such idealist as you picture. And then, it can't alter any part of our relationship. I want no change. I should like to be assured that nothing will be altered as I come to the end of my life. But that I have no right to say.

So, you see, the one couldn't live without the other. The sun wants something golden to make bright with its shining.

I cried at the funeral. Was that wrong, with Modest so tranquil, laid out beneath my gaze? Cate came up to the dais. She rubbed my back and whispered, "He loved you, you know."

And then I did and lamented for him the furtiveness of his touch, his gentle hand those forgotten times, and how cooled, how circumscribed his passions had been by the impossibly outsized self-indulgence of others.

Was anyone witness when I reached forward, into the casket, and compulsively took his thin, stiff body in my arms? I don't know. I didn't know what I was doing, so completely was I overcome. Trucks full of starry-eyed, spotty-faced, mealy-mouthed teens might have clipped our twin shoulders now and I would not have stirred from weeping, my heavy head coming at last to rest on Modest's dead chest like, it seems to me in hindsight, some reverse "Pieta."

If only he'd revive, wink at me. Forgive me. I must leave it at that.

Publisher's Note: the Gist thereof, as Admitted after the Fact and with but the Most
Minor Wrangling by the Author

He desired to stress the following point with the fullest, fiercest, anti-Freudian force. Those oneiric torments had nothing to do, either directly or in a "symbolic" sense, with anything he had experienced in conscious life. The erotic theme was just one theme among others, as A Boy for Pleasure remained just an extrinsic whimsy in relation to the whole fiction of the serious, too serious writer who had been satirized in a recent novel.

Notes to the Text

True bibliographic material about Peter Tchaikovsky was derived largely from the two following sources, the latter in particular:

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Preface. "Franklin . . . trees." Davenport, Guy. "The Jules Verne Steam Balloon." *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987. 109.

40. "When one reads. . . the power of an irresistible vocation." [would seem] is my substitution for "claims." Peter Tchaikovsky, diary entry, qtd. in Weinstock. 268.
41. "Now I must bore you . . . they complete each other." Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theodore van Gogh. Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. Ed. Mark Roskill. London: Fontana/Collins, 1967. 118-122.
42. "The answer is no. . . They were only dreams." Letter from Peter Tchaikovsky to Nadja von Meck, qtd. in Weinstock. 170-171.
50. "The cult of musical technique." Letter from Peter Tchaikovsky to Nadja von Meck, qtd. in Weinstock. 161.
51. "When I begin to sing . . . I am the one." Letter from Peter Tchaikovsky to Nadja von Meck, qtd. in Weinstock. 177.
58. "I have already seen them . . . angels come to earth." Letter from Peter Tchaikovsky to Fanny Dorbach, qtd. in Weinstock. 25.
84. "Only books amuse me . . . I can understand nothing." Letter from Peter Tchaikovsky to Fanny Dorbach, qtd. in Weinstock. 24.
85. "intelligently chosen." Weinstock. 20.
85. "*Vedrai carino* . . . exquisite world of sound." Weinstock. 20.
86. "Fanny went to his room . . . 'It won't let me rest.'" Weinstock. 21.

94. "And why, pray . . . you lose a great deal." Nabokov, Vladimir. *Laughter in the Dark*. New York: New Directions, 1960. 187.
111. "I am aroused and unbuild it again" A misquotation of the last line of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cloud*: "I arise and unbuild it again." Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "The Cloud." *Selected Poems*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993. 55.
111. "nothing wiii come of nothing." Shakespeare, William. "King Lear (Conflated Text)." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. (1.1.89) 2481.
135. "Honoured sir . . . and pleasanter to go through." Letter from Nadja von Meck to Peter Tchaikovsky, qtd. in Weinstock. 134.
135. "Are we such strangers . . . Piotr Ilyich." Letter from Nadja von Meck to Peter Tchaikovsky, qtd. in Weinstock. 152.
140. "I doubt that you. . . no right to say." Letter from Nadja von Meck to Peter Tchaikovsky, qtd. in Weinstock 205.
142. Publisher's Note. Excerpted from Nabokov, Vladimir. *Transparent Things*. New York: McGraw-Hill International, Inc., 1972. 60.