

## Grigory Sluzhittel

### Savely's Days

*To Hermione, Plato, and all my friends who have passed on*

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*Will you remember our halcyon days? Will you remember*

*how every day we greeted the sun on the Yauza,*

*and waved him off from Bol'shaya Polyanka?*

*Will you remember how we, unhurried,*

*sauntered along Bauman?*

*Will you remember our tails*

*waving in unison down Basmannaya?*

*Will you smile, as you did when the first ray*

*fell on the golden dome of Nikita the Martyr, and dazzled*

*your emerald green eyes?*

*Will you remember Pokrovka, Solyanka, Khokhlovka?*

*Lord, is that all still out there somewhere?*

*Is that all still out there somewhere?*

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I.

### THE MANSION

*If I had occasion to bear another child, I would want to entrust his fate to this institution.*

*Entry made by Clementine Churchill in the Golden Book of the Clara Zetkin maternity hospital.*

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I will concede that from the very beginning I was marked by a feature rarely found among my kind: I beheld God's world even before I came into it. Well, not the world; more precisely, those temporary lodgings known as the maternal womb. What shall I say that it was like? It was ... it was like being inside a warm, pulsating orange. Through opaque mica walls I could make out the silhouettes of my sisters and brother. At that point I wasn't sure that they weren't me. Bearing in mind that I hadn't actually been anyone yet. Although what this thing might be that was not even me, I struggle to explain.

From somewhere far away, a rumble was reaching my ears. I thought it was an unfriendly rumble. From time to time I would try to block my ears with my paws. Again, I should be more precise. I tried to block what were then my ears with what were then my paws. This was a stage, to be honest, in which my paws were hardly different from my ears, and my ears differed very little from my tail. There was little at that time that distinguished anything from anything else. Everything was uniform and warm. Everything was everything. A wonderful lack of distinguishing features. Nothing knew itself and nothing had any kind of name.

Of course I didn't realize that I was growing. I thought that my accommodation was shrinking. It was a time of unbroken fun, and if I'd been given the right to choose, I would most likely have opted to stay. Although having said that, I've often felt—despite having in fact been born—that I never really left that first warm shelter. That's all by the by, though. For some reason, He needed this earth to be trodden by four more paws, for this world to be watched by yet another pair of eyes (eyes that could see, as I've already said, before their time), and for the trillion and first attempt to make some kind of sense of all this to be made by—OK—a small, but highly effective, tangle of feline brain cells.

I think I may have run ahead of myself<sup>1</sup>. Let me describe the circumstances surrounding those first few weeks—the very sunrise of my life.

Mummy was delivered of me, my brother and my two other sisters in June. The birth was easy and fast. When she felt that her time was at hand, she climbed under the tarpaulin-covered Zaporozhets and prepared to wait. The old banger had been standing in the same place for many years. The asphalt under the wheels had subsided, and the tarpaulin cover was worn through in places. The car had no steering wheel, no seats, no headlights, no ashtray, no pedals, no window handles, nor any other internal organs. It just stood there, chewed and robbed, like the corpse of a wild animal in the forest. Where was its master now? Anywhere at all? That's what my mom was thinking, waiting for her contractions to start. There was a sprinkle of summer rain, but before it was done, we were born.

The world did not tremble at my coming. Bells did not ring out in the heavenly heights. Ah—while we're on the subject of the heavenly heights. The peatlands outside the city burned that summer, and a yellow smog stretched across the sky. It was the only sky I knew, though, so it seemed beautiful to me. And out of this fog emerged the outline of my mother's face.

Mummy had a beautiful name: Gloria. She was very young. She had short, smooth, dark grey fur. There were points set in her blue eyes that grew large and turned black at times of anger or danger. A white line slanted over her right eyebrow, conferring on the whole of her being an expression somehow tragic. Her whiskers were long, not shortened—Mummy always knew how to look after herself, even in the most difficult times. She gave each of us a good sniff and licked us thoroughly clean. She wiped off the afterbirth and moved each of us in turn into a banana box that she'd got ready earlier. We stuck together like fruit drops, and lay wilting in the sun and mewing quietly. My box! My cradle, lined with poplar down, smelling of mouldy Chiquita bananas. A receptacle of childhood dreams, aspirations, fears, and all that and all that. Taking advantage of the fact that I

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<sup>1</sup> It is a recurring fault of this tale that it frequently runs ahead of itself and, conversely, just as frequently offers up inappropriate maudlin nostalgic retrospections, to the detriment of both plot and common sense.

could see, I stole a march on the other kittens and chose a favourite teat (left, second row), immediately latching on to it. Mum gently pushed me with her hind paw and asked, 'Can you see me, son? Can you see me?'

'Yes, Mummy,' I answered. 'I'm not going to lie. I can see you very well. I might even say—perfectly.' I started sucking milk more vigorously than before. Mummy fell to thinking. 'Cats don't do that.'

I took another swallow, wiped my lips on Mummy's soft undercoat, and replied, 'Yes, Mummy, you're quite right. Cats don't do that. I think nature has ordered it thus so that a personal exception once again proves the general rule for all cats.'

'Are you sure, my son?'

'No, Mummy, I'm not at all sure.'

When I'd had enough to drink I lay down on my side and, in my turn, fell into thought. It's not good for a cat, even if it is only a few hours old, to go without a name.

'Mummy, what's my name?'

She had a think, and said my name was Savely. Why did she call me Savely? I don't know. Probably in honour of her favourite three percent fat cottage cheese Savushka, which she tucked into the whole way through her pregnancy. This cottage cheese was carried out into the alleyway behind the ABK store by Zina, one of the cashiers. My mother said that it saved us from dying of starvation. As a token of gratitude to the cat-loving woman, she called one of my sisters Zina and the other one ABK. My brother, though, had no time to be called anything at all, because ... When all is said and done, he didn't even have time to realize that he'd been born. And possibly, from his point of view (if he had one), that's a good thing. Because when you're so close to one edge of nothingness, the other edge of it isn't so terribly scary. After all, fear is an inkling of impending loss, and if you don't yet have anything, there's nothing to fear. I think my mother understood that, and it prevented her son's death from being a tragedy for her. She turned for help to a squad of moles who did funeral work, and they committed my brother to the earth in the garden, by the big poplar. The life of a cat is brief. Fate has a habit of rubbing us up the wrong way.

My life began in the old merchant district of Taganka, in Shelaputinsky Lane, on the high bank of the Yauza. Our box had found room for itself at the old Morozov mansion. That's right: my famous namesake—merchant, theatre-goer, suicide—was a scion of this very line. By the beginning of the new millennium, the nineteenth century building had frankly gone to seed; it was in a state of complete disrepair. On the facade hung ragged builder's netting, and the windows were black with soot from roaring fires. A pair of rooks had taken a fancy to the attic. There was a little round window on the pediment, carefully supported by two plump Cupids—one at each side—and when the rooks stuck out their beaks, they looked just like a family locket. Here and there, where the relief had survived, there raced a skipping group of nymphs. Chasing after the nymphs—and completely unable to catch up with them—galloped two wild satyrs. One of the satyrs had long ago lost its head and its reed pipe, and one of the nymphs had lost a foot and a knee in the race. The cheerful story of the relief somewhat contrasted with the use to which the building was put. In the Morozovs' time, it

was an almshouse for people of all classes. In Soviet times, it was the Clara Zetkin maternity hospital. The mansion was surrounded by a thick wrought-iron fence, and oaks stretched their branches through the bars, like hungry prisoners reaching for a bowl of gruel.

The mansion had a large fund of stories. For example, the moles used to say that in the eighties, a young student from the Surikov Art Institute, one Belakvin, started to visit the abandoned building (the school was just down the road, in Tovarishcheskiy Lane). The student set up all his clobber—tripod, easel, palette—and spent half a day transferring his impressions of the picturesque ruins onto canvas. It is difficult to say how successful his career as a draftsman was. What I can say is that by the end of the noughties he, already a plump, elderly man with a tatty beard, had for some reason decided to appoint the ruins of the maternity hospital as his permanent residence. Something drew him here. Tugged at him. What was it? With the passage of time, I came to understand: sooner or later we become like the thing we love. The young artist was so fascinated by decay that he decided to turn his own life, too, into ruins. The moles say that somewhere in the mansion he found his eternal rest. His remains were never discovered, though, so the moles did not get the chance to bury him.

I began to understand the world around me. Now dawned that happy age when you first start accumulating stuff. Pebbles, blades of grass, matches, scraps of light and music, dreams, visions seen when you're just dropping off, dust, fluff, flames and darkness. All this was carefully collected, stacked, and settled on the muddy bottom of my consciousness to fill my storehouse, to create my identity, to confirm me. My worthless treasury, my phantom wealth. And what did I know then of the future—that the time would come when all that remained of my hopes was the campfires burning themselves out on the hills? All this was later, though, later.

Back to the present ... Yes. The world graciously accepted me. Indeed, the women washing their windows seemed to confirm this global acceptance, welcoming me with wide, sweeping movements. A musical motif could be heard from the balcony of the house opposite. The allegro from Antonio Vivaldi's concerto *L'amoroso*, in fact. The chap who lived on the fourth floor, a widower and misanthrope called Denis Alekseevich, listened to this concerto from morning to evening. I think he had a low opinion of the world he had had occasion to come into sixty-four years previously. His view of our great country was that it was gone, gone, gone to the dogs. He loved music, though. He set up his old Vega 117 record player on the balcony and pointed the speakers out into the street. The sound of music filled the area, and Denis Alekseevich held the quite defensible view that the music served in some way to ennoble the hopeless souls of the Shelaputins. It was truly the anthem of my childhood. That's me! Here, listen for yourself. A little bit, the very beginning:

*[Lines of music follow]*

Gorgeous, isn't it? How I loved that music! I built my life according to the proportions of *L'amoroso*. During lunch, I alternately pressed my right and left paw against my mother's breast in the rhythm of the allegro, and through came the milk, now in a long, lingering *legato*, now in short *staccato* bursts. During lessons I spun round after my own tail in time to the concerto. I jumped over cracks in the asphalt, trying to land on the unbroken bits. As I grew stronger, I taught myself to steal up under Denis Alekseevich's window, all the better to hear the strains of his music, and at those times it seemed to me that even the pigeons had settled themselves on the wires in the order of the notes of my favourite opus.

Mum did not like me sloping off like this. Public transport respectfully bypassed our little street, and cars were seldom to be seen—but that simply made the sudden appearance of one all the more dangerous. Mum would chase after me, grab me by the scruff of the neck, and drag me back to the box. While she was carrying me, I swayed to and fro in the air. The blue of heaven became the green of the grass, and the green of the grass became the blue of heaven. Then a quick somersault, and there I was, back at the bottom of the box.

I soon learned how to turn punishment into entertainment. Once in the box once again, I pulled the upper flaps tight shut, made lots of holes in the walls, and sat down to watch the outside world. The sun's rays permeated my darkened residence from all four sides. I took unspeakable pleasure in being and not being at the same time. A coolness sponsored by the former bananas drifted in from the corners. I put my face up to the hot rays and sneezed. Through the holes I could see my sisters grazing peacefully on the lawn, and teenagers setting fire to the fluff caught in the gully running alongside the pavement. The world with all its goings-on pleased me, calmed me, and promised to accept me on my own terms. I was thinking, isn't this pleasure in life like a preliminary advance, the promise of a subsequent reward? Or punishment? These two are essentially the same thing when what is at stake is the question, will there be anything at all—will there be a great hereafter ... or not? And will what it is make much difference?

'Sava! Cats are fragile, defenceless creatures,' Mum told me. 'Sharp claws and teeth give us an advantage only over those who are weaker than us. Before the might of mechanized transport, we are nothing. Don't tempt fate. You do NOT have nine lives! Don't count how many of them you've already used up. Sava, be brave, but be careful and sensible!'

'Mummy dearest,' I replied, 'May I contribute to this discussion by saying first that life is not a single unity, and second, whatever life is, it drains away day after day, like water out of a leaky basin. After all, we do not start our lives anew each day. Someone presses a key, and we obediently continue to sound. And then we slowly fall quiet. How long will my fermata be? How long?' I addressed my question to the empty air, as my mother had disappeared and no one heard me ...

Ah, these elision marks. Blessed were the days when the writers of the past studded the pages of their stories with dots, leaving the reader wondering whether he was dealing with a typesetting error, censorship, or if the author had simply forgotten what he wanted to say.

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At night-time, after gruelling physical workouts and mental exercises, snuggling up to my mother's tummy and nibbling my sister's tail, I thought, 'What happiness to have a family, albeit incomplete (naturally enough, the question of paternity, as in most cat families, was never raised). To have a Mummy and two silly, but beloved sisters. To have your own shelter, albeit with leaking slats. To have walls—OK, cardboard, but your own! Walls, shot through with the smell of rotten Chiquita bananas. A simple bowl of cottage cheese. A saucer of running water. How many families are so much less lucky than we are!'

I then thought about those who supported our fragile lives. Who fed, watered, and generally looked after us. After all, like the glow of a long extinct star, the broken mansion still continued to perform the functions of a hospital/almshouse. We, for example, were born here, and a small, but caring staff made looking after us their concern.

One such was the caretaker Abdullah, a citizen of the Republic of Tajikistan, a native of the village of Parchasoy, where he still had a family of ten people depending on him. Eight of them were his children, then there was one wife and one grandmother. He was assigned by the municipality to do service in the grounds of the mansion. Every morning, Abdullah came to work clean-shaven, sat on the step behind the maternity hospital, and played dice on his own. From time to time he would take up a broom. With measured swings he cleared the paths of fluff, leaves, dead beetles, primroses, and specks of unknown origin. All this went up into the air and flew, flew.

It did not take Abdullah long to notice our box. He took a look inside and said, 'Ay, what small and very nice cats!' Then he popped down to ABK and came back with a bottle of water and a large pack of kitty-cat food. He dumped the jelly onto a newspaper, and I immediately began to eat, at the same time getting a grip on our country's political situation and the spot prices of hydrocarbons on the world's exchanges. Then I went into the bushes for a rest. The caretaker scratched my stomach with his finger, and with what tends to be called my peripheral vision I caught the tiniest flutter of reseda, hawthorn, ripening cherry<sup>2</sup> and hazel.

Our garden was remarkably tolerant to all kinds of flora. Spindle happily coexisted with meadowsweet, common touch-me-not balsam occasioned no harm at all to the eglantine, and believe it or not, irga peacefully shared the soil with the dioecious papaya. Nettles grew in a dense ring around the garden. Abdullah slowly organized dead leaves into small piles. When the shadow of stubble could be seen on his cheeks, it meant that his working day was drawing to a close. He folded his dice away in a velvet pouch and walked off, his broom balanced picturesquely on his shoulder, his free hand beating an invisible drum in time to some melody only he could hear. Abdullah fed us every morning at eight o'clock, like clockwork.

He was not the only one who provided all possible assistance to our family. Around noon a call would ring out, and we would abandon our game, gather around Mum and follow her across the street to number 45, on the corner. Shortly afterwards, Mitya Plyaskin, a cat-lover and bill poster (bless him), would come round the bend into view. His long legs ended inside trainers fastened by three Velcro straps. A cloth cap with a jutting plastic peak sat on his prematurely bald head, and on his nose were big old-fashioned glasses with curved arms. He wore grey flared trousers and a knitted waistcoat, underneath which was a yellow shirt that he never changed. Slung over Mitya's shoulder

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<sup>2</sup> Our cherries ripened a couple of months earlier than in other districts of Moscow.

was a belt, from which an old leather baldric hung slantwise. Mitya's hands were permanently clasped to his chest as if in prayer, fingers touching one another; he seemed to be thinking over some cunning plan, his mouth ajar and his eyes expressing a sense of mild surprise.

Mitya pasted posters onto the lamp-posts and walls, advertising services in the fields of delivery, hire, removal, and selling. His advert-pasting methodology deserves special mention. At first, he would spend a long time sizing up by sight the prospective location of his work. He tilted his head this way and that, made a frame with his fingers. Then things moved into the implementation phase. Mitya ran a spatula over the whole surface, scraping off every scrap of old advertising, after which he felt ready to apply some glue in the shape of a letter X. Then, availing himself of a roller, he carefully pasted on the sheet. Not a single bubble was seen, not a single crease. Last of all, using scissors and strictly following the dotted lines, he made incisions along the bottom of the adverts, making a fringe out of the row of telephone numbers printed lengthwise at the foot of each poster. The posters fluttered like this for a long time in the wind. They fluttered until they turned into the same scraps that Mitya carefully scraped off to paste new adverts in their place. The only thing was that apartments in our area for some reason did not enjoy special popularity, so to an extent, Mitya's work was meaningless.

'My little kitties! Kitties!' Mitya would cry joyfully, tapping his wrists together in a way he had. He lifted each member of the family up in the air, including Mummy, buried us in his moustaches to kiss us three times, and stroked our foreheads. Then he sympathetically pressed his hand to his cheek in the shape of a boat (in a way he had) and said, 'You're hungry.' We loudly agreed with him. Waving his hands, he hurried off to ABK. The glass door was still swinging when he was already well on the way back, at a run, carrying in his hands some Savushka cottage cheese (three percent fat) and a bag of kitty jelly.

This section cannot, of course, be complete without a second mention of the cashier Zina. In addition to the provisions with which she supplied Mum during her pregnancy and in the first and most difficult months of our lives, it was Zina who presented us with the gift of the Chiquita banana box. Without requiring compensation. Popped down to the warehouse and brought us back an empty box. And this despite how tough things were then in Moscow real estate. If you only knew how tough.

So there they are. Our three main benefactors.