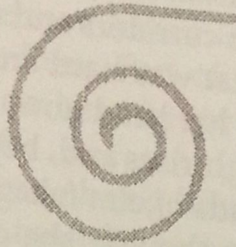
SWEDEN



Margareta Ekström

Margareta Ekström (b. 1930) is a significant Swedish poet, novelist, and short story writer. Born into a literary family, Ekström studied sociology, psychology, and religion, as well as literary history. Since 1960 she has worked as a critic and writer. Unfortunately, as with many Scandinavian writers, little of her work has been translated into English. Her collection of short stories Death's Midwives *(1985) speaks to her sensitive rendering of female characters, often children and elderly women. Ekström is especially interested in how mortality limits but does not define human experience. Her characters are often situated, to quote Ekström, on that "razor-fine edge between buzz and silence, struggle and immobility." Her short story collection* The Day I Began My Studies in Philosophy and Other Stories *was published in English translation in 1989.*

Death's Midwives

When she lost her hair she finally began to cry. It fell out in tufts; her hands were full of it. Bewildered, she passed her hand over her head and felt its familiar shape. Her ears resisted, they bent resiliently. Her forehead felt damp, her nose more pointed. I'm going bald, she thought. And then she began to cry. 1

She was now sixty-four years old, and she calculated that she hadn't cried for twenty years. Not like this, she thought when she finally sat up in bed and turned the tear-drenched pillow over to the cool side. This wasn't angry crying, it was crying that came from deepest exhaustion, crying that originated from the deepest roots of sorrow. Her whole body took part, and it left her thinner and weaker, frail and broken. Anything could happen to her now. She was defenseless. She had been shaken by forces stronger than those she herself used to call upon when angry, upset or occasionally hysterical. 2

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After a short nap she looked up at the grayish-yellow ceiling. There was a crack that looked like the Gulf of Finland. A damp spot represented Leningrad. She had just returned from a trip and she was about forty. The museums had unwound their corridors and shown her their paintings. She was only forty then, and what was hard and painful in her stomach was, of course, the child. Turning her head now, she saw the view she had also seen then: the candy-pink high-rises and, beyond, the park with the blooming chestnuts, the green clouds of elm foliage, the yellow maple blossoms. It was all so distinct that she thought she could smell them. But she had already been deprived of fragrances a long time ago. Something was growing and pressing: would she perhaps give birth through the ear?

The walls were silent, and they listened. She had asked to be spared from a painting with two red tulips in a ceramic jug and a black book lying coquettishly askew in its bottom right corner. Sometimes she searched for the hole where the hook had been. She could see it very well after making the effort to find her glasses. It had become a nail on which to hang her thoughts. As long as I can see the hole, she thought . . . And then she imagined how she would in her most difficult hour fix that black dot with her eyes until she was engulfed by the millimeter-sized tunnel and finally enclosed by the wall. Like so many other struggling bodies who with one weak and trembling sigh had been devoured by those walls.

"Isn't there some tonic I can use for my hair?" she wondered when the day-nurse came. But unfortunately the nurse didn't join in the game at once, hesitating for an awful moment while smiles of pity, surprise and almost reproach passed over her familiar rosy face. The girl was too young. Wouldn't she be scared, later, when the time came?

Finally, she collected her wits and said: "Why, of course, Mrs. Malm. I can ask the doctor if you'd like."

"No, thank you, I can do it myself," she said tiredly. Her playfulness was over. First so many lies, then these ice-cold showers of truth, truth and more truth. She couldn't stand them anymore. It was too late anyway to become conditioned.

She hadn't touched herself for a long time. She remembered fruitless rubbings and ticklings, hour-long work-ups without even an echo of pleasure. Just a stubborn effort to make something happen to cause the dry lips to become damp, to feel a smile in her middle.

Now she thought of her vagina as an empty inkwell, forgotten in an uninhabited summer cottage. A pen dipping into it would splay and squeak and slide against the shiny walls and the rust-colored residue in the corners.

In moments of fright she would sometimes wind a strand of her thinning hair around her index finger and bite the knuckles of the other hand, as she had done when a child. By the white or inflamed red marks she could then, the next day, read the depth of her dread.

"It's all part of the picture," the spunky midwife had said, while press-

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ing her stomach. It was her standing expression: it's part of the picture. Part of the picture, as well, were the swollen varicose veins, the heartburn, the water breaking too early, the unbearable pain, and finally the struggling little boy, held up by one foot, screaming and dangling, with vernix, umbilical cord and the little red sex. Part of the picture was also laughter and tears of joy and, alongside her, the newly bathed infant who with shiny eyes captured her for life.

12 She had felt more like someone being born than someone giving birth. She had been enclosed in the tunnel, there was no way back. When the pain pressed its utmost and she doubled up like a jackknife, and her urine sprayed all over the starched hospital gown, and the paper basin it was destined for was crushed in a hand which no longer obeyed her, then she had looked at the window. Five stories. One jump.

13 Now she lay in the other wing, on the same floor. But the thought of crossing the room and trying to see if she was strong enough to unlatch the window nauseated her. She wanted to save her strength. She wanted to continue. Despite the pain. And her mind laughed at this illogic, this instinct of self-preservation which was self-devastating, and her laughter turned into a grimace. There was little room for the intellect in this sorrowful business. Just as little as the other time when he was to be pressed out, caught and cut free in order finally to be able to look at her.

14 By means of many ingenious small movements and stratagems, she was able to get hold of her purse and to take out her diary. After the entry "K.S.," which was the name of the hospital, six weeks ago, there was nothing but empty pages. She had kept good notes before, but now it seemed completely unnecessary. In one pocket she had put the farewell letter to her son. She took it out sometimes to read it. It made her smile because it was for him, but actually she should perhaps cry since she would probably never see him again. She would change a word, add something, some sort of nonsense, something that would make him laugh. She remembered the interminable love letters to his father, the joy of writing them and reading them again and again before mailing them. The joy of awareness and of self-expression. The feeling that all was crystal-clear between them, that nothing needed to be searched for, suspected or interpreted from looks or gestures. Then, after that total, overwhelming effort, there had been a slow downhill slope, a dilution, a growing indifference which attacked both of them like a mutual consumption. By then, their son was eighteen years old, and they found no reason to pretend. They drifted apart and both forgot their love. She tried to remember how it had felt, but could only evoke the certainty of their friendship, possibly respect, and their independence from each other, which was just as complete as if they had been born in different centuries. It wasn't indifference. They kept in touch. They cared. But it was no longer necessary.

15 The nurses came and went. The nuisance of the rounds was diminished to the bare essentials. Mostly, she was left in peace. Sometimes she asked

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for sleeping pills and got them, but never many at a time. They overestimated her desire to take a shortcut.

16 Some of the nurse's aides were talkative. They would tell her of neighbors who didn't take off their clogs in the house, of foreigners who bought the wrong things at the supermarket, of children who complained about their mothers working. She listened, her head supported by two pillows, and tried to smile. A girl whose name was Brita lent her a turquoise chiffon scarf to cover her hair. "That looks good on you!" she beamed. But it didn't make her want to take out her mirror from the pocket of her purse.

17 When she was pregnant she had also been transformed into an inert being without exterior. Everything took place inside her, in her veins, in her womb, her head. She had closed her eyes to keep out the outside world and she had mumbled to the midwife: "Excuse me for closing my eyes, it seems so impolite." But she had wanted to concentrate on what was happening inside her body, and on the child struggling in the narrow tunnel.

18 Suddenly the oxygen mask had been pressed against her mouth. Someone had raised her head and said, "Take a deep breath, take a deep breath! Deeper still!"

19 And when she protested—no, no, she didn't want any help—they had answered that it wasn't for her sake, but for the child's. But this time they had fooled her. She had taken deep breaths thinking about the child, but they had only wheeled her into the intensive care unit, where she woke up with needles and tubes. Naturally, she thought, deep inside I knew that it wasn't for the sake of the child now—not now—he's more than twenty years old and needs neither my oxygen nor my blood. Still, out of sheer obedience, she had taken those deep breaths.

20 She leafed through the diary backwards. There. That's when it was. She made a mark with her thumbnail. That's when she breathed out of sheer obedience. Otherwise she wouldn't be here now, and her thumbnail would have been like ashes that had annoyingly fallen on a white sheet someone living near the south cemetery had hung up to dry. Not much had happened after that. She had been taken back to her room, and the lab results had become worse and worse. She knew this because she felt a tiredness that was deeper than any she had experienced in her life. A dullness, an indifference. "I'm turning to stone," she thought. "Molecules move more slowly, form different patterns. Nothing can move me. That jump through the window is an impossibility, and soon my thinking will stop as well."

21 She read a little in *Memoirs of Hadrian* and wondered whether Marguerite Yourcenar was still alive or, if not, what her death had been like. When she was younger, she had been curious about death. She had never seen a relation die. Nor any death by accident. Perhaps the blood-covered man in the cigar store on Tegner Avenue was dying, but she had had her little boy outside in the car, and had hurried off to protect him from the sight, and herself from his difficult questions.

22 She knew nothing of what lay ahead—just as little as she had known

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about childbirth when she was here before. A record with advice about relaxing was the only thing a friend had had time to give her on that day before she was hospitalized. Breathe deeply. Relax. Don't be so tense. Let your limbs go limp and loose. Perhaps she should listen to it again now?

23 She remembered the storm waves of her contractions. How, like at the seashore, you could see them from afar, as they mercilessly came closer. She had made herself dull, heavy and indifferent, allowed the pain to wash through her as though through someone else. And she had felt how it had "worked," how everything had opened up, how the child had come closer to his life. Never before had she been so close to death. Not her own, not a personal death. But so near the border between life and death. She had thought, quite clearly: "Now I know more about death than I did before," and all the while she had been lying there creating life.

24 The midwives had come and gone. Some went to lunch. Others worked part time. And a nurse's aide had told her about her children's new teacher. About how much fun it was to watch the children relate to each other. It isn't really fun until you have two. She had thought about what it would be like to have two men. She'd had two once, and until the complications it had been lots of fun. Unusually much fun. But she hadn't been especially interested in how they related to each other.

25 Otherwise, she didn't think about her body more than she had to, right now. She was happy when she could urinate without a catheter. But her mouth was dry. The damp washcloth dabbing her lips was a pleasure, as was the sip of orange juice which she could wash around in her mouth and then spit out obediently. "It's like being a wine-taster," she had tried to tell the consulting physician, but her tongue wouldn't co-operate, so she had to remain silent. Why tell jokes? Was it so important for her to make a good impression? So courageous on her deathbed. "You have no idea how witty she was despite knowing she didn't have long to live!"

26 "I can tell this isn't your first baby, Ma'am," the nurse who shaved her pubic hair had flattered her that night in the basement where she had also had her enema and the blood tests. It was her first baby, and she had felt proud of being so composed and reasonable, so cooperative.

27 But wouldn't she have moaned and screamed if she had given birth lying alone in a ditch? And now, were she to lie on an Alpine slope, the victim of a plane crash with only space and death ahead . . . how would she behave? What would be her facial expression, what screams and curses would she address to the grass, the stones and the distant clouds?

28 They are arranged like iron filings over the earth, the smoke-gray clouds. Each of them is filled with so many microscopic iron particles that they are forced to submit to the earth's magnetic pattern. She remembers the creation myth which she had read in its scientific version, and she remembers her great joy about these poetic facts. Maybe the earth changes its rolling rhythm when all the trees in the northern hemisphere suddenly get leaves and so offer increased resistance to the wind? And perhaps the rolling

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speed increases again in the fall when the branches stick up naked into the sky?

This was better than Isis and Osiris, better than Ask and Embla and Ygdrasil—or were they all equally distant from the truth, the same story in different versions?

When she was still actively alive she used to complain about each day that passed without new knowledge, new ideas. Now she wondered dully what it had all been for. It was dullness, rather than anguish. A disgusting lethargy. Even what she could manage became impossible, the very desire was cut off at the roots. She tried to remember the child, the child's father. The two bodies she had loved most. Straight shoulders, angular joints, firm jaws, looks that warmed her and gave her light. But it seemed unreal. Less real than the brown medicine bottle and the small iridescent medicine cups that one could stack in long flexible chains to rattle when there was nothing to listen to on the radio.

How long would this go on? And death, a relief? Can nothingness relieve? Relief from what?

"I have lived a good life, better than almost any I have heard of, and better than I could have hoped when I was your age," she had written in the letter. But between the lines he could perhaps read that no matter how good it had been, now in retrospect it all seemed horribly unnecessary, and so his life was unnecessary, as were the copulation which had created his little body, the labor pains and her pushing him out to life, air and his own breathing.

No, not that. To have borne him, to have succeeded in getting him out whole, that could never feel unnecessary. There was the limit to her skepticism, and she was a common she-fox, a natural female bear, an entirely genuine cat mother. The baby was in her belly and had to come out. The baby had to be licked. The baby needed milk, and tenderness and warmth, and to lie as close to her as though still inside the darkness of her belly. This was beyond what was necessary or unnecessary. It simply was. And she cherished this idea and held onto it. Sometimes she took out his picture—in it he was twelve years old, ephebically beautiful and mischievous—she would hold it for a long time in her hand and hoped to die that way.

She was in the tunnel, and there was no going back. But she wasn't put on a high iron bed, nor was she restrained, and no one listened with a stethoscope to her stomach and then said comfortingly: "I'll stay here now until it's over."

Until it's over. Then she would be two people. She had never imagined dying in childbirth. The baby kicked and wanted to come out. She had protected it for nine whole months and she wouldn't let it down during the last nine hours. And yet she had never been so close to death, since it was across that border the child had to go in order to live.

Now it was her turn. And she asked the girl Brita how long her shift was. "Until six, as usual," she said. "See you tomorrow morning!"

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Tomorrow morning? No, oh no, would it take that long? But her body wanted it to take that long, and preferably a little longer.

Now, as then, flowers arrived from friends. Flowers from the child's father. They glowed with all their colors and withered. She herself glowed with fever and withered at the same time. She and the flowers were alike: cut off from their natural root systems, nourished with cold fluids which were pumped directly into the circulatory system. She saw the tulips: their stems full of water, they stretched, despite knowing that they would die. The lilac leaves didn't bother to pretend. But the five-pointed little flowers with their drop of sweet nectar in the middle bloomed one by one, and she asked a cleaning woman to give her some—yes, to pick them off, so that she could suck the little stems as she had done in the summer, long ago. She would have liked to ask the consulting physician to whistle with a lilac leaf between his thumbs, but probably he didn't know how and he was embarrassed enough as it was. And she was embarrassed herself. Confused and ashamed. How would she manage her death?

With the baby, newly bathed and dressed, in her arms, she had felt ashamed too. She had made an ironical face at his father and said: "This is like an ad for baby powder!" She had been wheeled through interminable corridors, and the little one slept in its white cocoon in her arms, his wrinkled cheek so close that she couldn't keep from caressing it. It was all so new. And her breasts which had lain so flat in their bra cups and rested in young men's hands, now they were suddenly to become troughs for the little pig who slurped and ate. She had loved nursing him and would most likely have kept on for a year if the DDT scare hadn't become so acute that mothers were warned about nursing.

I'll fall asleep, she was thinking. And when I wake up it'll be over. Nothing is working any longer. Even the pain has almost stopped. The pain has died before me. Just like my sense of smell, my hearing, my sight. I have been left behind, I am the last in my own funeral procession.

Then the older night nurse had sat down close to her bed, and had taken her hand, saying: "I'll stay until . . ."

That's what it was like. Some midwives left before life came. Others stayed to keep watch. I'll stay now until you die, one body says to another. And one of them will get up, straighten her hair and go home to clean her house, do her shopping, have intercourse, weed the garden, borrow books at the library, and go through the envelopes of grocery receipts, while the other will remain. Dead still. All alone.

Then she began to talk. With her thin voice she tried to explain and disentangle. Like a child, she begged for better grades, for a longer vacation.

But the heavy-set woman in her forties took out her knitting and the lamp shone on her brown hair where a few white strands gleamed.

She tried to read by the pale glow of the night light.

"Even water is an enjoyment, and now in my illness I must partake of

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it sparingly. Yet even when I struggle with death, when they will mix it with the last of the bitter medicine, I will make an effort to savor its freshness on my lips."

But the book fell, and she was too tired to think about it. A harsh light fell on her closed lids. Someone pulled off the turquoise scarf, she whimpered as if in her sleep. *Memoirs of Hadrian*, a hard cultured voice said, and she understood that they were putting away her belongings. She was to suffer through the last of the contractions completely naked and almost bald.

"A hand to hold when you die," his drunken voice echoed. He was nineteen and newly graduated, the same as she. They had been hugging and drinking on the couch in her dormitory room and in her honor he had executed a death-defying balancing act outside her window.

No, no hand to hold. She hadn't wanted the child's father when the little one came. I'd rather be alone with the pains. You can come afterwards and share in the pleasure. No, no, no, it isn't for your sake, it's for mine. I'm the one who has to go through it. I want to be alone!

The bed was so wet suddenly. But when she said: "My water!" the stupid aide just came with a glass of water. She grasped for words, for memories, for signs which would be understood. It all was so new for her. She felt bewildered and uncivilized. A bitter satisfaction went through her: today had brought new knowledge, new ideas.

"There, there, take it easy!" And a broad, warm hand patted her cheek, stroked the back of her hand.

Just as before, she was their lawful prey. She remembered unknown women who patted her big, hard, pregnant belly. She had reminded them of something wonderful. What was the knitting woman beside her thinking about, now that she had come to the armhole?

"Is he all right?"

"Sure, just take it easy, you're doing fine. You're four fingers now. You're dilating just fine." A friendly Finn had his finger deep inside her and gave her a report from the life on the other side of birth.

She had hoped that he would remember and send her stocks and snapdragons. But instead the flowers had come from her colleagues at the university. What did they have to do with her giving birth?

Nosegay. Buttercup. Fleetfoot. Happy lark. Mother's little Oedipussycat. And she had promised they would marry soon, as soon as he got a little bit bigger. And at three months he fell asleep on top of her in a wide bouncing bed in England, she also fell asleep and dreamed that he was inside her, but only with his tiny little penis, and it was a sweet, happy union, very far from incest and pornography. And yet, she hadn't been able to tell anyone about it.

The queer knitting woman stuck her needles into her, one after the other, purl one, knit one, and the knit one's had barbs. She turned slowly to her side, but there were new tubes that got in the way. A voice echoed

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in a loudspeaker and footsteps ran. Footsteps ran away with young bodies, away from her immobility.

At last she worked herself to the surface, she had dived too deeply from the cliff into the black water. Her mother and father smiled at her in their blue bathing robes and the rock smelled like sunshine and tanned skin. Her whole body shivered, and she had blue gooseflesh. They had to rub her warm, but she continued to shiver. 58

Then, she was suddenly sitting in a back yard. The book on her lap was *Memoirs of Hadrian*. An oak spread its greenery over her like a parasol. Through an open window she heard his voice. It prattled and babbled, it expounded and explained. And he couldn't say "s." She made an effort to stretch her neck and look up. The sun shone in through the window. The chestnuts on the horizon bowed to an imperceptible breeze. Their scent did not reach her. The knitting woman had fallen asleep. The light hit the shiny intravenous bottle, which reflected blindingly. 59

All she saw was the sunshine bouncing against the nursery window, and his voice babbled on, and when she made an effort to somehow see his face the sun struck her with its double-edged axe. 60

Like the whirling of balls of fluff and music on a cotton piano. Whispering and shuffling, moving and covering. Tubing disconnected, clothing removed, before the stiffness makes it more difficult. Like a shadow play, this whole thousand-headed hospital which is slowly sinking into the darkness of a new day, while a ray of light is laughing in the window and a child talks and talks about life. 61

Translated from the Swedish
by Eva Claeson

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the imagery of "Death's Midwives." In what ways are the images interrelated? How are the images of birth and death sequenced?
2. What does the character come to understand about the meaning of her own life and death?
3. Loneliness and communion are the two polarities of human experience that Ekström explores in the story. Find instances of how the author juxtaposes these conditions.
4. In what ways does the author transform the conclusion of the story into the sense of a new beginning?

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Tatyana Tolstaya

Tatyana Tolstaya (b. 1951) is a gifted Russian writer who comes from an illustrious literary family. Her grandfather was Alexsey Tolstoy, an important novelist of the 1920s and 1930s, while the great nineteenth-century novelist Leo Tolstoy was a distant relative. Tolstaya studied philology, has worked as an editor of Oriental literature, and recently has been a visiting lecturer in Russian literature at several American universities. She published her first volume of short stories, On the Golden Porch *(1989), in 1983. The work was widely acclaimed for its effervescent style and its skillful juxtaposition of illusion and reality. Tolstaya has said that she writes about the ordinary individual who meets with the disappointments of life. Her literary interest is in the person "who was not taken to the holiday celebration." Her stories, though dealing with disillusionment, do not leave a sense of bitterness. She has the gift for depicting reality in a life-affirming manner.*

Fire and Dust

Where is she now, that lunatic Svetlana, nicknamed Pipka, about whom some people, with the nonchalance of youth, used to say, "But I mean, is Pipka really human?" and others, exasperated: "Why do you let her in? Keep an eye on your books! She'll walk off with everything!" No, they were wrong: The only things assignable to Pipka's conscience are a light blue Simenon and a white wool sweater with knitted buttons, and it was already darned at the elbow anyway. And to hell with the sweater! Much more valuable things had vanished since that time: Rimma's radiant youth; the childhood of her children; the freshness of her hopes, blue as the morning sky; the secret, joyful trust with which Rimma listened to the voice of the future whispering for her alone—what laurels, flowers, islands, and rainbows had not been promised to her, and where is it all? She didn't begrudge the sweater; Rimma herself had forcibly thrust Svetlana into that little-needed sweater when she threw the insane girl, half dressed as always, out into the raging autumn one cold, branch-lashed Moscow midnight. Rimma, already in her nightgown, shifted impatiently from one foot to the other in the doorway, pressing her shivering legs together; she kept nodding, advancing, showing Svetlana the door, but Svetlana was trying to get something out, to finish what she had to say, with a nervous giggle, a quick shrug of the shoulders, and in her pretty white face black eyes burned like an insane abyss and the wet abyss of her mouth mumbled in a hurried dither—a hideous black mouth, where the stumps of the teeth made you think of old, charred ruins. Rimma advanced, gaining ground inch by inch, and Svetlana talked on and on and on, waving her hands all

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about as if she were doing exercises—nocturnal, night-owl, unbelievable exercises—and then, demonstrating the enormous size of something—but Rimma wasn't listening—she gestured so expansively that she smashed her knuckles against the wall and in her surprise said nothing for a moment, pressing the salty joints to her lips, which seemed singed by her disconnected pronouncements. That was when the sweater was shoved at her—you'll warm up in the taxi—the door was slammed shut, and Rimma, vexed and laughing, ran to Fedya under the warm blanket. "I barely managed to get rid of her." The children tossed and turned in their sleep. Tomorrow was an early day. "You could have let her spend the night," muttered Fedya through his sleep, through the warmth, and he was very handsome in the red glow of the night-light. Spend the night? Never! And where? In old man Ashkenazi's room? The old man tossed and turned incessantly on his worn-out couch, smoked something thick and smelly, coughed, and in the middle of the night would get up and go to the kitchen for a drink of water from the tap, but all in all it wasn't bad, he wasn't a bother. When guests came he would loan chairs, get out a jar of marinated mushrooms, untangle rats' nests of sticky tinned fruit drops for the children. They would seat him at one end of the table and he would chuckle, swing his legs, which didn't reach the floor, and smoke into his sleeve: "Never mind, you young people, be patient—I'll die soon and the whole apartment will be yours." "May you live to be a hundred, David Danilich," Rimma would reassure him, but still it was pleasant to dream about the time when she would be mistress of an entire apartment, not a communal one, but her own, when she would do major remodeling—cover the preposterous five-cornered kitchen from top to bottom in tile and get a new stove. Fedya would defend his dissertation, the children would go to school—English, music, figure skating. . . . What else could she imagine? A lot of people envied them in advance. But of course it was not tile, not well-rounded children that shone from the wide-open spaces of the future like a rainbow-colored fire, a sparkling arc of wild rapture (and Rimma honestly wished old man Ashkenazi long life—there's time enough for everything); no, something greater, something completely different, important, overwhelming, and grand clamored and glittered up ahead, as though Rimma's ship, sailing along a dark channel through blossoming reeds, were on the verge of coming into the green, happy, raging sea.

2

In the meantime, life was not quite real, it was life in anticipation, lived out of a suitcase, slipshod, lightweight—a pile of junk in the hallway, midnight guests: Petyunya in his sky-blue tie, the childless Elya and Alyosha, and others; Pipka's nocturnal visits and her outrageous conversations. How hideous Pipka was with those black detoothed stumps—yet lots of people liked her, and often at the end of a festive evening one of the men couldn't be accounted for: Pipka had whisked him away while no one was looking—always in a taxi—to her place in Perlovka. That was where she holed up, renting a cheap little wooden shack with a front yard. At one

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time Rimma even worried about Fedya—he was flighty and Pipka was crazy and capable of anything. If not for those rotten stumps in her hurried mouth, it might have been worth thinking about not allowing her into the family home. Especially since Fedya often said mysteriously, "If Svetlanka would just keep her mouth shut, you could actually talk to her!" And she was forever trembling, half dressed, or dressed topsy-turvy: crusty stiff children's boots on bare feet in the middle of winter, her hands all chapped.

No one knew where Pipka went, just as no one knew where she actually came from—she had simply shown up and that was that. Her stories were outrageous and confused: It seems she'd wanted to go to drama school and had even been accepted, but in a market she met some pickled-garlic merchants and was gagged and taken off to Baku in a white Volga with no license plates. There they supposedly ravished her, knocked out half her teeth, and abandoned her, naked, on the seashore in a pool of oil. The next morning, she claimed, she was found by a wild mountain man in transit through Baku; he carried her off to his hut high in the mountains and held her there all summer, feeding her melon from a knife through the cracks in his shack, and in the fall he traded her to a visiting ethnographer for a watch with no hands. Still completely naked, she and the ethnographer, who called her Svetka-Pipetka, which is where she got her nickname, holed up in an abandoned watchtower, dating back to Shamil's time, that was covered with rotten Persian rugs—the ethnographer studied their patterns with a magnifying glass. At night eagles defecated on them. "Shoo, shoo, damn you!" Pipka would act it out, racing around the room with an indignant expression, frightening the children. When winter came, the ethnographer left to go higher into the mountains, and at the first snowfall Svetlana descended into a valley where the people calculated time by the lunar calendar and shot at a schoolmarm through the school window, publicly marking the number of casualties with notches on a post in the center of the bazaar. There were more than eight hundred notches; the Regional Department of Public Education couldn't manage—several pedagogical institutes worked exclusively for this valley. There Svetlana had an affair with the local store manager. But she quickly dumped him, finding him insufficiently manly: Instead of sleeping as a Caucasian horseman should, on his back in a *papakha* fur cap with a sword at his side, fiercely displaying his wide, muscular shoulders, the local store manager would curl up, snuffle and whimper in his sleep, shuffling his legs; he explained in his own defense that he dreamed of gunfire. Toward spring Pipka reached Moscow on foot, sleeping in haystacks and avoiding the high roads; several times she was bitten by dogs. For some reason she went through the Ural Mountains. But then geography gave her even more trouble than her private life; she called the Urals the Caucasus, and placed Baku on the Black Sea. Maybe there really was some kind of truth in her nightmarish stories, who knows. Rimma was used to them and hardly listened; she thought her own thoughts, surrendering to her own unhur-

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ried daydreams. Almost nobody listened to Pipka anyway—after all, was she really human? Only occasionally some newcomer, enthralled by Pipka's nonsense, by the disgorged fountain of tales, would exclaim in joyous amazement, "Boy, does she ever lay it on! A thousand and one nights!" That was the type Pipka usually carried off to her semifantastic Perlovka, if it actually existed: Was it really possible to believe that Svetlana was employed by the owners to dig troughs around the dahlias and that she ate fish-bone meal along with the chickens? As always, during a simple gathering of friends, amid the noise and chatter and clatter of forks, a dreamy somnolence overtook Rimma, marvelous dream-visions real as life appeared, pink and blue mists, white sails; the roar of the ocean could be heard, far off, beckoning, like the steady roar that issued from the giant shell gracing the sideboard. Rimma loved to close her eyes and put the shell to her ear—from those monstrous, salmon-colored jaws you could hear the call of a faraway country, so far away that a place could no longer be found for it on the globe, and it smoothly ascended, this country, and settled in the sky with all of its lakes, parrots, and crashing coastal breakers. And Rimma also glided in the sky amid pink, feathery clouds—everything promised by life will come to pass. No need to stir, no need to hurry, everything will come all by itself. To slip silently down dark channels . . . to listen to the approaching roar of the ocean . . . Rimma would open her eyes and, smiling, look at her guests through the tobacco smoke and dreams—at lazy, satisfied Fedya, at David Danilich swinging his legs—and slowly return to earth. And it will start with something insignificant . . . it will start bit by bit. . . . She felt the ground with her legs, which were weakened by the flight. Oh, the apartment would have to be first, of course. The old man's room would be the bedroom. Baby-blue curtains. No, white ones. White, silky, fluffy, gathered ones. And a white bed. Sunday morning. In a white peignoir, her hair flowing (time to let her hair grow out, but the peignoir had already been secretly bought, she couldn't resist) . . . Rimma would stroll through the apartment to the kitchen. . . . The aroma of coffee . . . To new acquaintances she would say, "And in this room, where the bedroom is now, an old man used to live. . . . So sweet . . . He wasn't a bother. And after his death we took it over. . . . It's a shame—such a wonderful old man!" Rimma would rock back and forth on her chair, smiling at the still-living old man: "You smoke a lot, David Danilich. You should take care of yourself." The old man only coughed and waved her away, as if to say, Never mind. I'm not long for this place. Why bother?

4

How lovely it was to float and meander through time—and time meanders through you and melts away behind, and the sound of the sea keeps beckoning; time to take a trip to the South and breathe the sea air, stand on the shore stretching your arms and listening to the wind. . . . How sweetly life melts away—the children, and loving Fedya, and the anticipation of the white bedroom. The guests are envious; well, my dears, go ahead and

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envy, enormous happiness awaits me up ahead—what kind, I won't say, I myself don't know, but voices whisper, "Just wait, wait!" Petyunya, sitting over there biting his nails, is envious. He doesn't have a wife or an apartment, he's puny, he's ambitious, he wants to be a journalist, he loves bright ties, we should give him ours, the orange one, we don't need it, happiness awaits us. Elya and Alyosha are also envious, they don't have any children, they've gone and gotten a dog, how boring. Old man Ashkenazi sitting there, he's envious of my youth, my white bedroom, my ocean roar; farewell, old man, it will soon be time for you to leave, your eyes shut tight under copper coins. Now Svetlana . . . she envies no one, she has everything, but it's only imaginary, her eyes and her frightful mouth burn like fire—Fedya shouldn't sit so close—her talk is crazy, kingdoms rise and fall by the dozens in her head all in one night. Fedya shouldn't sit so close. Fedya! Come sit over here. She's spinning her yarns and you're all ears?

5 Life was happy and easy, they laughed at Petyunya, at his passion for ties, said he was destined for a great journalistic future, asked him ahead of time not to put on airs if he traveled overseas; Petyunya was embarrassed, and he wrinkled his mousy little face: What are you talking about, guys, let's hope I make it through the institute!

6 Petyunya was wonderful, but sort of rumpled, and, moreover, he tried to play up to Rimma, though only indirectly, to be sure: He would slice onions for her in the kitchen and hint that he, frankly, had plans for his life. Oh-ho! Rimma laughed. What plans could he have, when such incredible things awaited her! You'd be better off setting your sights on Elya, she'll dump Alyosha anyway. Or else Svetka-Pipetka over there. Pipetka was getting married, Petyunya said. To whom, I'd like to know?

7 It was soon discovered to whom: to old man Ashkenazi. The old man, feeling sorry for Pipka's little feet in their children's boots, for her frozen little hands, distressed about her nighttime taxi expenses, and all in all succumbing to a teary, senile altruism, conceived the idea—behind Rimma's back!—of marrying that vagrant who blazed with a black fire and of registering her, naturally, in the living space promised to Rimma and Fedya. A scene complete with sedatives ensued. "You should be ashamed, shame on you!" cried Rimma, her voice breaking. "But I've got nothing to be ashamed of," answered the old man from the couch, where he lay amid broken springs, his head thrown back to stop the flow of blood from his nose. Rimma applied cold compresses and sat up with him all night. When the old man dozed off, his breathing shallow and irregular, she measured the window in his room. Yes, the white material was the right width. Light blue wallpaper over here. In the morning they made up. Rimma forgave the old man, he cried, she gave him Fedya's shirt and fed him hot pancakes. Svetlana heard something about it and didn't show up for a long time. Then Petyunya also vanished and the guess was that Svetlana had carried him off to Perlovka. Everyone who ended up there disappeared for

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ages, and when they returned they were not themselves for quite some time.

Petyunya showed up one evening six months later with a vague expression on his face, his trousers covered to the waist in mud. Rimma had trouble getting anything out of him. Yes, he had been there. He helped Pipka with the work. It was a very hard life. Everything was very complicated. He had walked all the way from Perlovka. Why was he covered in mud? Oh, that . . . He and Pipka had wandered around Perlovka with kerosene lanterns all last night, looking for the right house. A Circassian had given birth to a puppy. Yes, that's what happened. Yes, I know—Petyunya pressed his hands to his chest—I know that there aren't any Circassian people in Perlovka. This was the last one. Svetlana says she knows for sure. It's a very good story for the "Only Facts" column of the newspaper. "What's got into you, are you off your rocker too?" asked Rimma, blinking. "Why do you say that? I saw the puppy myself." "And the Circassian?" "They weren't letting anyone in to see him. It was the middle of the night, after all." "Sleep it off," said Rimma. They put Petyunya in the hall with the junk. Rimma fretted, tossing and turning all night, and in the morning she decided that "Circassian" was a dog's name. But at breakfast she couldn't bring herself to increase the lunacy with questions, and, anyway, Petyunya was glum and soon left.

Then all of a sudden Svetlana had to move her things from Perlovka to some other place right away—figuring out the geography of it was useless; it had to be by taxi, of course, and for some reason Fedya's help was absolutely essential. Hesitating a bit, Rimma let him go. It was ten in the morning, so it wasn't very likely that anything could . . . He returned at three that night, behaving very strangely. "Where were you?" Rimma was waiting in the hall in her nightgown. "You see, there were a lot of complications. . . . We ended up having to go to Serpukhov, she has twins in the Children's Home there." "What twins?" Rimma shouted. "Tiny ones, about a year old, I think. Siamese. Their heads are joined together. Karina and Angela." "What heads? Are you out of your mind? She's been coming here for ages. Have you ever noticed her having a baby?" No, of course he hadn't noticed her having a baby or anything like that, but they really did go to Serpukhov, and they did drop off a package: frozen hake. That's right, hake for the twins. He himself stood in the cashier's line to pay for the fish. Rimma burst into tears and slammed the door. Fedya remained in the hall, scratching at the door and swearing that he himself didn't understand anything, but that they were called Karina and Angela—of that he was sure.

After that Pipka disappeared again for a long while, and the episode was forgotten. But for the first time something in Rimma cracked—she looked around and saw that time kept flowing on, yet the future still hadn't arrived, and Fedya was not so handsome anymore, and the children had picked up bad words on the street, and old man Ashkenazi coughed and

lived on, and wrinkles had already crept up to her eyes and mouth, and the junk in the hallway was still just lying there. And the roar of the ocean had grown muffled, and they hadn't gone to the South after all—everything had been put off until the future, which just didn't want to arrive.

11 Troubled days followed. Rimma lost heart; she kept trying to understand at what point she'd taken the wrong path leading to that far-off, melodious happiness, and often she sat lost in thought; meanwhile, her children were growing up and Fedya sat in front of the television, not wanting to write his dissertation, and outside the window either a cottony blizzard blew or an insipid city sun peeked through summer clouds. Their friends grew old, it became harder for them to get themselves going, Petyunya had completely vanished somewhere, flashy ties went out of fashion, Elya and Alyosha got another unruly dog and there was no one to leave it with evenings. At Rimma's job new coworkers had appeared, big Lucy and little Lucy, but they didn't know about Rimma's plans for happiness and didn't envy her; rather, they envied Kira from the planning department, who had a large, expensive wardrobe, who exchanged hats for books, books for meat, meat for medicine or hard-to-come-by theater tickets, and spoke in an irritated tone of voice to someone on the phone: "But you know perfectly well how much I love jellied tongue."

12 And one evening, when Fedya was watching television and Rimma was sitting with her head on the table listening to the old man coughing on the other side of the wall, in burst Pipka, all fire and flame, rosy-cheeked, looking younger, as sometimes happens with insane people, and smiling, her blazing mouth full of sparkling white teeth. "Thirty-six!" she shouted from the threshold and banged her fist on the top of the doorway. "Thirty-six what?" said Rimma, lifting her head from the table. "Thirty-six teeth!" said Pipka. And she told the story of how she got a job as a cabin boy on a steamer bound for Japan, and since the steamer was already overstaffed she had to sleep in a cauldron with the meat and rice, and the captain had rendered her honor but the captain's assistant had rent it; and a rich Japanese man fell in love with her on the way and wanted to arrange their marriage by telegraph without delay, but they couldn't find the right Japanese characters and the deal fell apart; and then—while they were washing the meat-and-rice cauldron in some port or other—she was kidnapped by a pirate junk and sold to a rich plantation owner, and she spent a year working on Malaysian hemp plantations, where she was bought by a rich Englishman for an Olympics memorial ruble, which, as everyone knows, is highly prized among Malaysian numismatists. The Englishman carried her off to misty Albion; first, he lost her in the thick mist, but then he found her, and to celebrate he footed the bill for the most expensive and fashionable set of thirty-six teeth, which only a real moneybags could afford. He gave her smoked pony for the road and now she, Pipka, was finally going to Perlovka to get her things. "Open your mouth," said Rimma with hatred. And in Svetlana's readily opened mouth she counted, fighting

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vertigo, all thirty-six—how they fit in there was beyond comprehension, but they were indeed teeth. "I can chew steel wire now. If you want, I'll bite off a bit of the cornice," the monster started to say, and Fedya was watching with great interest, but Rimma began waving her hands: That's all, that's it, it's late, we want to sleep, and she thrust taxi money on her, and pushed her toward the door, and threw her the volume of Simenon. For heaven's sake, take it, read a little tonight, only just leave! And Pipka left, clutching the walls to no avail, and no one ever saw her again. "Fedya, shall we take a trip to the South?" Rimma asked. "Absolutely," Fedya answered readily, as he had done many times over the years. That's all right, then. That means we will go after all. To the South! And she listened to the voice that still faintly whispered something about the future, about happiness, about long, sound sleep in a white bedroom, but the words were already difficult to make out. "Hey, look—it's Petyunya!" said Fedya in surprise. On the television screen, under palm trees, small and sullen, with a microphone in his hands, stood Petyunya, and he was cursing some kind of cocoa plantations, and the black people passing by turned around to look at him, and his huge tie erupted like a pustular African sunrise, but there wasn't a whole lot of happiness to be seen on his face either.

13 Now Rimma knew that they'd all been tricked, but by whom and when, she couldn't remember. She sorted through it all day by day, searching for a mistake, but didn't find any. Everything was somehow covered with dust. Occasionally—strange to say—she felt like talking it over with Pipka, but Pipka didn't come around anymore.

14 It was summer again, the heat had arrived, and through the thick dust the voice from the future once again whispered something. Rimma's children were grown, one had married and the other was in the army, the apartment was empty, and she had trouble sleeping at night—the old man coughed incessantly on the other side of the wall. Rimma no longer wanted to turn the old man's room into a bedroom, and she didn't have the white peignoir anymore—moths from the junk in the hall had eaten it, without even looking at what they ate. Arriving at work, Rimma complained to big Lucy and little Lucy that moths were now devouring even German things; little Lucy gasped, holding her palms to her cheeks, and big Lucy grew angry and glum. "If you want to outfit yourselves, girls," said the experienced Kira, breaking away from her telephonic machinations, "I can take you to a place. I have a friend. Her daughter just got back from Bahrain. You can pay later. It's good stuff. Vera Esafovna got seven hundred rubles' worth on Saturday. They lived well over there in Bahrain. Swam in a pool, they want to go again." "Why don't we?" said big Lucy. "Oh, I have so many debts," whispered the little one.

15 "Quick, quick, girls, we'll take a taxi," said Kira, hurrying them. "We can make it during lunch break." And, feeling like schoolgirls cutting class, they piled into a cab, inundating one another with the smells of perfume and lit cigarettes, and whirled off down hot summer side streets strewn

with sunny linden-tree husks and patches of warm shadow; a southerly wind was blowing, and through the gasoline fumes it carried the exultation and brilliance of the far-off South; the blazing blue heavens, the mirrorlike shimmer of vast seas, wild happiness, wild freedom, the madness of hopes coming true. . . . Hopes for what? God only knows! And in the apartment they entered, holding their breath in anticipation of a happy consumer adventure, there was also a warm wind fluttering and billowing the white tulle on the windows and doors, which were opened wide onto a spacious balcony—everything here was spacious, large, free. Rimma felt a little envious of this apartment. A powerful woman—the mistress of the goods for sale—swiftly threw open the secret room. The goods were rumpled, heaped up in television boxes on an ever-rising double bed, and reflected in the mirror of a massive wardrobe. "Dig in," ordered Kira, standing in the doorway. Trembling, the women buried their hands in boxes crammed with silky, velvety, see-through, gold-embroidered stuff; they pulled things out, yanking, getting tangled in ribbons and ruffles; their hands fished things out while their eyes already groped for something else, an alluring bow or frill; inside Rimma a vein twitched rapidly, her ears burned, and her mouth was dry. It was all like a dream. And, as happens in the cruel scenario of dreams, a certain crack in the harmony soon emerged and began to grow, a secret defect, which threatened to resound in catastrophe. These things—what is this anyway?—weren't right, they weren't what they seemed at first. The eye began to distinguish the cheapness of these gaudy, fake gauze skirts hardly fit for a corps de ballet, the pretentiousness of those violet turkey-wattle jabots, and the unfashionable lines of those thick velvet jackets; these were throwaways; we were invited to the left-overs of someone else's feast; others have already rummaged here, have already trampled the ground; someone's greedy hands have already defiled the magical boxes, snatched up and carried off those very things, the real ones that made the heart beat and that particular vein twitch. Rimma fell on other boxes, groped about the disheveled double bed, but neither there, nor there . . . And the things that she grabbed in despair from the piles and held up to herself, anxiously looking in the mirror, were laughably small, short, or ridiculous. Life had gone and the voice of the future was singing for others. The woman, the owner of the goods, sat like Buddha and watched, astute and scornful. "What about this?" Rimma pointed at the clothes hanging on coat hangers along the walls, fluttering in the warm breeze. "Sold. That's sold too." "Is there anything—in my size?" "Go on, give her something," Kira, who was propped up against the wall, said to the woman. Thinking for a moment, the woman pulled out something gray from behind her back, and Rimma, hurriedly undressing, revealing all the secrets of her cheap undergarments to her girlfriends, slithered into the appropriate openings. Adjusting and tugging, she inspected her mercilessly bright reflection. The warm breeze still played about in the sunny room, indifferent to the commerce being conducted.

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She didn't exactly understand what she had put on; she gazed miserably at the little black hairs on her white legs, which looked as if they'd gotten soggy or been stored in dark trunks all winter, at her neck, its goosey flesh stretched out in fright, at her flattened hair, her stomach, her wrinkles, the dark circles under her eyes. The dress smelled of other people—others had already tried it on. "Very good. It's you. Take it," pressured Kira, who was the woman's secret confederate. The woman watched, silent and disdainful. "How much?" "Two hundred." Rimma choked, trying to tear off the poisoned clothing. "It's awfully stylish, Rimmochka," said little Lucy guiltily. And to consummate the humiliation, the wind blew open the door to the next room, revealing a heavenly vision: the woman's young, divinely sculpted daughter, suntanned to a nut-colored glow—the one who had come back from Bahrain, who darted out of swimming pools filled with clear blue water—a flash of white garments, blue eyes; the woman got up and shut the door. This sight was not for mortal eyes.

16 The southerly wind blew the refuse of blossoming lindens into the old entryway, warmed the shabby walls. Little Lucy descended the stairs sideways, hugging the mountain of things she'd chosen, almost crying—once again she'd gotten herself into terrible debt. Big Lucy kept a hostile silence. Rimma walked with her teeth clenched: The summer day had darkened, destiny had teased her and had a laugh. And she already knew that the blouse she'd bought at the last minute in a fit of desperation was junk, last year's leaves, Satan's gold, fated to turn into rotten scraps in the morning, a husk sucked and spit out by the blue-eyed Bahrain houri.

17 She rode in the saddened, silent taxi and said to herself, Still, I do have Fedya and the children. But the comfort was false, feeble, it was all over, life had shown its empty face, its matted hair and sunken eye sockets. And she imagined the long-desired South, where she'd been dying to go for so many years, as yellowed and dusty, with bunches of prickly dry plants, with spittle and scraps of paper rocking on brackish waves. And at home there was the grimy old communal apartment and the immortal old man, Ashkenazi, and Fedya, whom she knew so well she could scream, and the whole viscous stream of years to come, not yet lived but already known, through which she would have to drag herself as through dust covering a road to the knees, the chest, the neck. And the siren's song, deceitfully whispering sweet words to the stupid swimmer about what wouldn't come to pass, fell silent forever.

18 No, there were some other events—Kira's hand withered, Petyunya came back for visits and talked at length about the price of oil, Elya and Alyosha buried their dog and got a new one, old man Ashkenazi finally washed his windows with the help of the Dawn Company, but Pipka never showed up again. Some people knew for a fact that she'd married a blind storyteller and had taken off for Australia—to shine with her new white teeth amid the eucalyptus trees and duck-billed platypuses above the coral reefs, but others crossed their hearts and swore that she'd been in a crash

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and burned up in a taxi on the Yaroslavl highway one rainy, slippery night, and that the flames could be seen from afar rising in a column to the sky. They also said that the fire couldn't be brought under control, and that when everything had burned out, nothing was found at the site of the accident. Only cinders.

Translated from the Russian by Jamey Gambrell

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Contrast the characters of Rimma and Pipka in "Fire and Dust." Do they represent two different attitudes toward life? Discuss.
2. Who is the narrator? From what point of view is the story told?
3. How does Tolstaya use exaggeration as a technique?
4. Rimma believes that she is able to will her dreams. What is the author's attitude toward dreams? What is the author's attitude toward youth? What is the significance of the shopping trip? Why does Rimma eventually long to see Pipka?
5. Explain the meaning of the title. Find the different uses of fire and dust imagery in the story.

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