Mimosa Flowers for Grandmother’s Grave

By David Shrayer-Petrov

That morning, Solomon worked in animal care. It wasn’t even noon, but 300 white mice had been infected with tuberculosis bacilli and put back in their cages. Solomon was at a turning point in his animal experiments. If successful, the new method of treating TB could enter clinical trials. There was cause for hope. For a minute, Solomon allowed himself to be distracted.

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Commentary
from the sweetly pungent atmosphere of the animal-care facility. He was no longer irritated by a tremulous ray of sunlight, pecking in, like an orphan, through a bottle-glass window. Solomon pretended not to notice Kat'ka, the orderly, who reeked of undiluted alcohol. He was daydreaming. Thank God, the money he had saved up would be enough to buy a dozen stray dogs. He would get the dogs from street drunks who were ready to sell their own soul. Solomon needed the dogs in order to conduct the last experiment before the new method could go to clinical trials.

You may wonder about the connection between Solomon's dreams, the saved-up money, and the planned experiments on dogs. There was a very specific one. In Leningrad's Institute of Tuberculosis, where Solomon was working on his Ph.D., they didn't use dogs for experiments or normally keep them in animal care, and no funding for it was available. Which is why it would have taken Solomon at least a couple of years to overcome various administrative hurdles—and delayed his dissertation defense by several years.

“Solomon! Hey, Solomon. You deaf or something?” Kat'ka the orderly had ripped him away from his reveries. “You're wanted urgently on the phone.”

Solomon removed his rubber gloves, untied the checkered brown apron, shed his white coat and surgical cap. In the receiver he heard Aunt Betya's sobbing voice. His Auntie Betya, his father's unmarried older sister, lived with her mother. Solomon's grandmother.

“Solomon, come quickly! Mama's not doing well,” Aunt Betya said.

Something happened to grandmother, grandmother's not well, not well, not well, faster, faster, faster, the chain gear of words turned in Solomon's mind as he rushed out of the institute's gates on Ligovsky Prospect and grabbed a taxi, as he swallowed with salt tears all the cars, buildings, public gardens, and bridges flashing by in the taxi windows.

FINALLY the taxi left behind the little park at the corner of Zelenin Street and Chkalovsky Prospect. On warmer days she would sit here on a bench, surrounded by lady friends of many years who regarded her as their elder. Indeed, Solomon's grandmother had no equal in terms of her wisdom and composure—and the truthfulness of her heart. But she wasn't there anymore, and the park itself, overcome by vernal anticipation of change, had lost its snowy pureness.

Instead of the snowdrifts, tall fluffed-up pillows. And on the pillows, grandmother's large face, furrowed and cinnamon-hued, with a beautiful straight nose, solidly shaped eyebrows, a high forehead encased with snowy hair. Except that grandmother's eyes, always engaging, shining with a special light of caring for the person she was speaking with—because this person was a living, dear, and inimitable human being—except that these velvety-brown eyes, set in a mosaic of wrinkles, were now closed.

Solomon leaned over to kiss his grandmother's cooling cheek and the corner of her eye from which the tiny rays of kindness emerged.

"Grandmother, what's wrong? Can you hear me?"

Grandmother probably could no longer hear him. But her soul, having exited her body of almost ninety years, had not yet left the room and was saying goodbye to the people and objects she so loved: Aunt Betya, sons and grandchildren, her husband's portrait, the family album, the Book in a gilded binding, the TV set and the armchair; everybody and everything.

Even though Solomon had always lived in a different apartment on the Vyborg side of Leningrad, since his early school years he had been accustomed to visiting grandmother two or three times a week at her apartment on the city's Petrograd side. It's hard to say what was the dominant factor in their friendship. Was it the pity she felt for her grandson, who grew up with a living father yet without one? Unlike the other children who were growing up in functional families, Solomon grew up in the street, amid gang members, and was always getting into trouble. Or did fear for her grandson trump pity? Or could it be that all these things paled in comparison with the unceasing likeness of character between her grandson Solomon and her elder son, Isaac? Her Izya, whom she hadn't seen in over forty years. Her elder son was also a daring seeker after the truth, who suffered from injustice and lack of freedom. He experienced the same burning hatred and unconditional love. He—her Izya—had been the best horseback rider among the boys of Kamenets-Podolsk, where their family was from, and
he had also scored the best goals and had been the most devoted friend. It was he, her elder son, Isaac, who came home one spring day and said: “Farewell, mama. Papa, farewell. Farewell, sister Betya and you, my brothers. Be happy. I’m leaving for Palestine to build a new life.” He was only sixteen at the time. He mounted a horse and later, in Odessa, boarded a ship and disappeared beyond the Bosphorus.

Isaac knew how much grandmother loved mimosa—the flowers of spring. Middlemen used to buy them in bulk in the south and bring them up north. Like a last kiss, he sent her a bunch of warm yellow flowers from Odessa on the eve of his departure.

That faraway spring had long passed. The summer after it had fired away. Then autumn and winter had followed suit. Then spring came again, but no one in the house—neither grandfather, nor Aunt Betya, nor their brothers—had the heart to remove Izya’s wilted mimosa twigs from the room. This is what Solomon’s kin began to call them: Izya’s flowers.

Isaac’s letters began to arrive from the Mandate of Palestine. He grubbed up tree stumps, dried out swamps, irrigated deserts. Izya would send them letters and photographs. A halutz, he was bringing that ancient land back to life. In some pictures he stood among the Bedouins, proud witnesses to the land’s past declines and victories. Dozens of letters over a decade. Isaac had become a grown man, but his eyes, the same as grandmother’s, still shone with youth.

Then came the trying prewar years and the terrible war. It was nearly impossible to maintain contacts with her elder son. Everywhere she went—in Leningrad, where her husband had moved the family in the 1930s, in the closet of a room that grandfather and grandmother rented during the wartime evacuation to a remote village in the Urals, and back in Leningrad following the victory and grandfather’s death—everywhere, at her bedside, in a tall silver goblet she kept the desiccated twigs of Isaac’s farewell mimosa.

Grandmother was lying in her spacious bed, head resting on a white pillow. Behind the pillow, the backdrop of a dark-brown headboard framed the view, as though this was no longer his dear living grandmother but her frozen, sorrowful portrait. Aunt Betya brought in a tea tray, and all of them, the family members who were already there, had some tea at the round dining room table. Grandmother lay beside them, so that one could make oneself believe this was not forever, not for eternity, only temporary.

It was as though grandmother was just tired and had fallen asleep, and the family members didn’t wait for her to wake and were having some tea.

Then Solomon’s father arrived, and his father’s younger brother a little later. In half-whispers they talked, mostly about the way grandmother was in life. Solomon found this all bewildering, since each word was simultaneously truth and understatement, some rough assemblage of grandmother’s image through their joint efforts. He knew for a fact that grandmother was and would always remain exactly what she had meant to him. Only his heart and her heart conjured up this double vision: Nobody in the world understood him as she did, and therefore he didn’t love anybody in the world the way he loved her. They were frank with each other, like two inseparable friends who did not know competition or envy. Nothing could stand between them: separation by distance, difference in age, intrigues of the jealous others. Nobody could undermine their friendship, and the age difference shielded and protected their bond from quotidian jabs and blows.

Grandmother lay beneath grandfather’s framed photograph.

Aunt Betya kept offering tea to those just arriving or getting ready to leave. She had always been slight, unprepossessing, unimposing, although behind her beige exterior and willingness to stay in the shadow of her brothers and parents, there lived a moral depth and impeccable purity of character. It was she, Aunt Betya, who had volunteered in 1941, trading her beloved pediatrics for the cruel craft of military field surgery. During the war, grandmother and grandfather would get triangular letters from Aunt Betya. With her field hospital she traversed half of Europe, from Karelia all the way to Vienna. She came back adored with the epaulets of the captain of the medical corps, an order of the Red Star, and other decorations. She came back home, once again to treat young kids and to remain in the shadows of her unquiet family, its members dispersed around the world. And somewhere in an open field, her only one had found eternal rest, he to whom Aunt Betya was...
the most comely of all, the beloved. After the war, Aunt Betsy always shared a home with Solomon's grandfa-
ther and grandmother, genuinely regarding her nieces
and nephews as her own children. Not everyone in
the family cared for Aunt Betsy's gentle bluntness. Not
only Solomon himself, but also his father, who was
constantly preoccupied with his marriages and fami-
lies, or his father's younger brother, an associate pro-
fessor who was comforted by his success and position,
would have chosen to hear grandmother's wrathful
tirade instead of enduring Aunt Betsy's soft-spoken
words of scorn, which went straight to the heart.

And now Aunt Betsy, slumping her chin onto her
fists, waving off stray tears and dipping pieces of cook-
ies in her tea, started telling them about grandmother's
last night. In the evening, Solomon had been to see
them. Usually grandmother liked to play a game or two
of dominos. She would get unaffectedly disappointed
when she didn't have the right chips to add on to the
black zigzag traversing the table. Grandmother pursed
her lips, lowered her eyes for a split second, and then,
like a swimmer before leaping into the pool, took an
unknown black chip from the bazar. She picked it up
with two fingers, as if this weren't a domino chip but the
neck of a live crawfish, the only spot at which one could
grab the unclean creature. She would swiftly pick it up,
bring it to her eyes, and proudly add it to the lineup. Or,
if she didn't get the right one, she slammed the useless
chip on the table. On her last night, Solomon, as always,
had offered to play dominos with grandmother. She
had agreed, but played with some reluctance, without
excitement; this time both winning and losing left her
indifferent. And when Solomon told her and Aunt
Betsy some amusing anecdotes about Kat'ka the or-
derly, grandmother only frowned: "Ah... a shiksa."

An oppressive premonition wouldn't let grand-
mother be. Suddenly she remembered that March 5
was nearing—the day of Yossele's death. She called
Joseph Stalin this. "Yossele and I are the same age,
you know."

Around nine in the evening, Solomon had said
goodbye to grandmother and Aunt Betsy. On the way
home, he still had to pick up his young wife, a philo-
logy student at Leningrad University's evening college.

Grandmother had had a fretful night of sleep.
At three o'clock she woke up, asked for water, and
then dozed off. Delirious, she spoke in her sleep,
something she had never done before. At first Aunt
Betsy couldn't make out her words, but grandmother's
speech grew clearer and more articulate. Words
arranged themselves into sentences, and sentences
were conjoined into a meaningful conversation.
Grandmother talked to somebody, called for some-
body, seemed anxious about something. Aunt Betsy
heard the name of her father, Solomon's grandfather.

Solomon's grandfather had been in the milling
business. The family liked to reminisce about those
antediluvian times. On Fridays, grandfather would
return home from the mill. His brichka usually raised
such dust that a mile away from their house a small
milky cloud would ascend to the pristine sky over
the steppe. The yard guard dog, Polkan, would tear
off at the approach of the brichka, and the children
were ready for stories about the never-ending gyra-
tion of the gears set in motion by the water falling
from the dam. Sometimes things got out of hand and
grandfather wouldn't come home for several weeks.
During floods it sometimes happened that the dam
would be plucked away by a fierce stream possessed
by a daughter's desire to return to mother ocean and
merge with her primordial element. They had to put
up a new dam. And time and again the water would
triumph. To give up the family business? This would
have been a sin. One had to feed his family and return
the grind to the peasants who brought to the mill the
grain grown by their unending labor.

After addressing her husband, in her sleep grand-
mother spoke to her children. First to Solomon's father,
whom she lovingly pitied the most but also scolded
more often than she did the others, for his convoluted
family life. Then she thanked Aunt Betsy. She chided
her youngest son for talking her into severing the cor-
respondence with Isaac, who was living in Israel—the
year was 1950, and one couldn't be cautious enough.
Then her eldest son, Isaac, entered her night visions;
those may also have been her moments of clairvoyance.
She didn't part with her firstborn son until she drew her
last breath. Grandmother thanked Isaac for those fare-
well mimosa flowers smelling sweetly of tears soaked
with sea, spring, and separation. She thanked him and
begged his forgiveness for not having replied to his let-
ters, for having been the one to cut the fine thread that
had kept them connected. Grandmother spoke with Isaac as if she had finally been reunited with him and was now confessing her heart to him, who for almost twenty years now had had little news of his mother, father, and siblings in Russia.

Gradually her visions lost their architectonics. Unhindered by anything but a link to the mystique of life and death, her eternal consciousness had surrendered itself to chaos. Once again Solomon's grandmother began to recall the story of the mimosas, almost as though she wanted Isaac to see how dried-up and scrawny the twigs had become after those forty years. But something prevented her from locating her talisman, and so grandmother summoned Solomon and asked him to help her find Isaac's mimosas. As she passed on, two dearest names, Isaac's and Solomon's, were merged in a moment of farewell clarity. Aunt Betya, the pure soul, repeated the same account without concealing or embellishing anything.

When Solomon arrived at the Jewish cemetery and entered the old sanctuary, the service had just started. He placed the flowers on a bench close to the rear wall. The rabbi, who stood at the bimah, all clad in black garb, was solemnly speaking the words of the funeral rite. Solemnly and sorrowfully, Solomon didn't understand the ancient prayer, yet he felt benevolence falling upon him and bringing relief. He stood beside his father, Aunt Betya, and his younger uncle, staring at his grandmother's casket. The service ended. The rabbi motioned at the staff, and the roof of grandmother's final dwelling was nailed in forever. It was all over.

Not thinking of where he was going or the flowers in his arms, Solomon followed the casket. From the Neva, a gust of piercing wind carried streams of wet, cold air. A silent small crowd walked after the casket. Men ahead, and women a bit behind, helping Aunt Betya.

Suddenly, from behind the turquoise dome a bright sun slipped out, setting alight the stone crypts surrounding the synagogue. Grandmother's pine-yellow casket and the yellow mimosa flowers in Solomon's arms, and also the yellow sun of those days approaching Passover—everything had merged into a single graceful chant. Up on a birch tree, wrapped in a white prayer shawl striated with black phylacteries, a tomit twittered like a carefree balalakha. Everybody walking behind the casket felt relief after the chill and semi-darkness of the sanctuary. Solomon thought that it wasn't the casket that was preparing to transport his grandmother to another world, but a sparkling gold chariot getting ready to soar into the sky. This was only for one shining moment.

The casket was carried between the black fences crowding their sight. Behind one of the fences stood a tall marble pyramid—grandfather's gravestone. Next to the gravestone, on top of the dark, tramped-down March snow, there lay fresh clumps of soil—sand and clayish loam mixed in with dry stems of last year's flowers. And past the verge of the freshly dug soil, a bottomless cold opening showed black. Solomon stood, leaning on his grandfather's gravestone and hugging the heap of yellow mimosa flowers. For the first time now he had irrevocably understood that this bottomless pit and the sand and loam piled over the
dark March snow were the last trappings of his grandmother's earthly existence. Now for the second time since that terrible shock when Solomon had first laid his eyes on the dead grandmother, he screamed like a wounded beast, toppling onto the casket and kissing the wooden lid. Tears started pouring from his eyes. He didn't try to take himself in hand, only lifting up his glasses and shaking off the tears. And again and again the impossible and finally recognized woe wrested from Solomon new sobs and inconsolable tears. They recited the Kaddish. The casket was lowered into the ground. The grave was filled. Solomon's father carefully removed the heap from his son's embrace and began to cover the sandy and clayish ground with the gold of mimosas. Solomon didn't see any of this. Hugging him, his father removed his son's glasses, then helped him to the car.

AND THEN came the morning of the next day. Solomon opened both sides of the window. The unclouded sky struck Solomon with its saturated blue radiance. Everything was illuminated, yet nothing sparkled the way objects sparkle under bright sunlight. Trees amazed Solomon with their unusual shapes and the locally unseen, foreign lushness of their verdure. What's more, the inner courtyard of Solomon's building, where he had grown up and where every little stone, every stoop had been fused in his memory with some special event or adventure, was now an alien, unfamiliar courtyard. Even the yardkeeper, Uncle Vanya Klyuchnikov, wasn't standing under the overhang of the communal laundry room. He was nowhere to be seen. In fact this wasn't his native yard, not a yard but some tidy space, framed by wondrous trees and flooded with a never-ending, otherworldly blue radiance. Solomon felt so fine and peaceful—felt he didn't even desire anything, as if his whole life he had been striving to wake up on this soothed and soothing morning all colored over in cobalt blue.

Suddenly, in the middle of the plane, the earth started bubbling up. He saw green saplings. Then branches, a trunk. Finally, a whole tree had been born in the center of this dark blue expanse. The tree gently swayed its branches, like fingers playing with strings. And indeed Solomon heard an unearthly music. It was Mozart. Symphony No. 40 in G minor.

"I will never forget you, darling.... Please remember me, my love...."

From where did these words come, words that Mozart didn't choose but were perfect, because to Solomon they unlocked the melody's secret meaning?

"I will never forget you, darling.... Please remember me, my love...."

The tree rhythmically swayed its branches as they were filled with golden warm flowers. It was a mimosa tree. The tree with grandmother's beloved flowers.

Just ahead, a tall and stately woman stood under the tree. Her eyes were gorgeous and sorrowful, and they peered into Solomon's heart. The woman resembled his grandmother, but she was much younger—Solomon had only seen her this way in the family portraits from before the Revolution.

"I will never forget you, darling.... Please remember me, my love...."

A man on horseback approached the tree. He dismounted and came up to her. He was a youth who looked to Solomon like both himself before he went into the military and his Uncle Isaac who had disappeared beyond the Bosporus. The woman broke off a blossoming mimosa twig, embraced the rider and gave it to him. Now in one hand the young rider held the reigns, and in the other, leashes to which bright-orange fluffy dogs were attached. A whole pack of blazing dogs. The rider mounted and urged his horse on.

"Wait for me, Uncle Isaac," Solomon called out, but his voice couldn't catch up with the spirited horse.

A pack of dogs, all golden like mimosa flowers, dashed across the morning's saturated blue, and the rider disappeared. And the woman, who looked like his young grandmother, gazed with sadness into Solomon's eyes as she sang:

"I will never forget you, darling.... Please remember me, my love...."

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