

Through the Dark Woods

Unedited sample translation

Auteur

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I.

Your letter really overjoyed me, it showed that you're not angry, that, without knowing the reason for my departure ten years ago, you have forgiven me and, perhaps, have come to believe that there were reasons and that these reasons weren't completely vapid, that they had nothing to do with you, that I loved you, loved you ten years ago and now too--that I shall love you forever. "Overjoyed" is, of course, a hopelessly weak word, even with the attempt to qualify it with "really." Your letter came as a shock to me. All at once, the unbearably heavy load of guilt I had felt before you was lifted from my soul, it'd seemed unredeemable for these ten years, but now, suddenly and so easily, it had been forgiven by a single letter from you, my little boy, forgiven by the kind son of an evil father.

What did you write about in your first letter that stunned me so much that, having read it once, I understood nothing and could recall nothing, which meant that I had to read it a few more times simply so as to calm down, to believe what had come to pass, and to accept--accept your gift, an undeserved gift, but therefore a gift longed for all the more?

What had you decided to tell me in the first letter ever exchanged between us in our life--a letter written after a separation of ten years? What was the very first thing an abandoned fifteen-year-old son was aching to tell his father?

My memory has retained very little. And not only because of how stunned I was at first, but simply because twenty years have passed since I received that very first letter of yours and a great deal has been erased by time, the father and executioner of all memories. And, most importantly, not only did I *not* reread this letter when you were killed precisely ten days later, but, losing my mind because of this absolutely unbearable pain, the pain of losing my own child, the pain of losing you, my beloved son, after a ten-year separation and, at the end of it, the unexpected joy of ten days of communication, ten days of happiness that couldn't possibly be more concentrated, the happiness of regaining my son, instead did everything possible to stay sane, to reduce the pain to a scale the heart could accommodate and the consciousness bear, this was so as not to be incinerated, so as to survive in the most literal, rather than allegorical sense--and, for this, among many other things, it was necessary to prohibit memories, to prohibit my memory's return to that which was most precious--and, therefore, most murderously painful, to the point of annihilating one's consciousness. That very first period left almost no memories, with the exception of the constant pain that wedged itself into my memory, the pain that didn't leave me for a single minute all day or all night, the pain that

became the essence of my life, so I did a decent enough job of hiding memories from myself, of shielding myself from memories, of destroying memories...

It was for this reason that I did not reread your letters, not the first one, the most important and exciting one, and not those that followed. I don't even know if I still have them. Can you imagine? Only now have I understood how powerful fear is--an echo of and brother to that primordial fear. The pain is still so alive in me that, through the course of all subsequent years, right up to the present day, I still can't bring myself to not only read your letters, but to even see if I still have them.

You wrote that you had charmed your teacher with your natural charisma and unexpectedly gotten high marks on the most difficult test. I remember this because, despite the tension of the moment, I laughed: here's why, it was precisely by way of the inexplicable forces of natural charisma that I, your father, the recipient of a full scholarship at a Moscow institute, had gotten high marks on tests for my whole life, in my own time, to put it otherwise, I was a straight-A student who got the best grades at the end of every semester, even though, in practice, I was a hopeless, intractable, ardent lazybones and ignoramus.

This resemblance caused me to laugh and warmed me: my blood, my soul... Oh, how many surprising and stunning things you would have been able to live through thanks to your natural charisma, my beautiful little boy, my wonderful son.

And it was likely this that you were most genuinely proud of, even if you described it briefly and sparingly: you were already driving pretty well too, my strong, my manful son, even if, for the sake of modesty, you added: I still can't quite manage to park in reverse.

Oh, that's no biggie, is what I thought reading the letter back then, that'll come in time, you'll learn. But, as it turned out, you had no more time left, not just for the honing of your parking skills, but also no time left for breathing, laughing, fixing your hair, loving, drinking water, being loved, lying in the grass at night and watching emeralds pulsate in the black sky...

I don't think I remember anything else: your natural charisma and driving.

I'm pretty sure you only wrote about your insane state of agitation at the prospect of writing this first letter in a later missive.

Life as a series of defeats.

Is it possible to imagine a defeat for a father that is heavier and more criminal than the death of his own child--a child he didn't protect, didn't give up his own life for? Or, in my case, a child from whose life the father was absent--absent for ten years of silence, then also physically absent during ten days of communication, then, finally, not there on that terrible night.

I was told the story of one father, a South African doctor, whose little son, having climbed high up into a tree, fell from the tree before his father's eyes, then crashed down to the ground and perished: afterwards, he no longer felt himself to be a man, this person, this father. That's precisely how I felt after your death: by failing to protect you, by neglecting to fulfill my most important task as a father and a man more generally, I'd lost the right to call myself a man.

"I am not a man..." This wasn't the primary thought and pain at the time, but it was one of my defining reflections, one of the most tormenting, one that was as shameful as was humanly possible. Protecting or saving a child, a woman, anyone at all, at the cost of my own life if necessary, seemed to me to be both my own fundamental role and, more generally, that of any man. I can't count how many times I said that such a death--a death while saving or defending--seemed to me to almost be an award, the very crown of life.

But, in reality, I hadn't even been able to protect my own son.

Not in any state to remember or even imagine what I wrote back to you. Probably some awkward BS called forth by the shock, the simple perplexity, the shame, as well as the usual fear of baring one's soul and allowing oneself to speak about the main thing from the first word on, about the only thing that you wanted to hear, the reason you'd actually written to me...

If I were writing that letter from twenty years ago today, I would have asked for your forgiveness and written how much I loved you. These were the only two things I really should have written about in that first letter of mine. My guilt before you and my love. But, instead of the main thing, in response to your natural charisma and parking in reverse, I told you about my own natural charisma and parking in reverse—more than likely, I wrote in a mode that was both sprightly and humorous. Maybe you laughed as you read my reply, hiding from yourself or not hiding from yourself the disappointment you felt at the lack of genuine words, words so vital for both of us, words that you hadn't heard from me for ten long years, but I still wasn't uttering them.

Yes, I know it's no mystery why you were going on about charisma and cars and why I was going on about charisma and cars: this is how we disguise shame, pain, perplexity, and fear. Especially when there's always so much time ahead, bottomless seas of endless time, which are more than ample enough for the eventual discovery of the right words, for the realization of their necessity. But you wrote about cars and charisma as a kid and I wrote about cars and charisma as your father. As a result of which you didn't hear from me those words that you so needed to hear. And I didn't say those words I myself needed so badly to say.

It would be very simple to say it now.

Forgive me, son.

I love you, son.

But I let the moment pass me by, I wrote about charisma, didn't think to ask for forgiveness or write about love...

Plus, it was too simple, too pathos-laden, somehow false, maybe not false, but somehow cowardly...

Which is why: I can't count, dear son, how many tests I've passed in my life thanks only to those very same forces of natural charisma.

It's only the most important one I failed.

II.

On the morning of August 13th, the most terrible day of my life, almost twenty years ago, I was sitting at my computer: what exactly was I busying myself with on that morning, what was I writing? I can't remember. And it doesn't matter.

On that morning, I received a message from your stepfather. The message was very short, I seem to recall—I think it was only a single sentence.

I haven't reread his letter since that cursed August day either and—as with your letters—I don't even know if I still have it. And I'm only realizing this now, like with your letters—the fact that I've never reread that letter, that I've never attempted to find it over all the intervening years, and that I don't even have the courage to do so now, as I write these words.

What I remember very well is how I looked at the screen, reading the sentence over and over again, my consciousness refusing to understand and accept that which it had read, to believe that which was written there: only three days before, I'd received a letter from you, in it, you wished me a happy birthday one day early, apologizing that you wouldn't be able to do so on the day itself, you'd long been planning to go to a dacha with some classmates, you'd be grilling shashlyk in the woods and swimming and wrapped up in other simple childhood joys, which are impossible to deny oneself because of the gloomy necessity of staying home and

sending a congratulatory missive via email on the day in question, a missive full of kind words addressed to one's father--kind words he didn't deserve.

Was it a cruel joke? That was my first thought, even though I knew that this was, of course, no joke. His phone number was in the message--the phone number of the man who had replaced me for you.

I don't remember the call. I don't remember how I dialed the unfamiliar Moscow number, don't remember what his voice sounded like, don't remember a single word of the awfulness that it had fallen to him to inform me of.

I can only reconstruct what he said from that which came to pass afterwards.

Of course, he confirmed the insane thing I'd already read in his letter. Most likely, he uttered the very phrase that exists in all the languages of the world, the phrase pronounced to relatives of a deceased person, a phrase honed by centuries of grief, centuries of suffering, centuries of death, centuries of dead children, centuries of children being beaten to death for hours.

On August 11th, my birthday, you and your friends arrived at the dacha. On the evening of the 12th, after a late dinner, you decided to go for a walk. You were walking down a country road when a car stopped behind you. The voice of a grown-up, a man, ordered you to stop. As befits obedient, well-behaved children, you stopped and turned toward the voice; blinded by the headlights, you saw nothing, not the car itself nor the people getting out of it.

You and your friend were standing closest to the car and the people approaching you. Behind you were your friends, six kids just like you, little boys and little girls. The first man to approach you--not a single word had been spoken between them for all this time--hit your friend in the head with a bottle. If your friend hadn't tripped at that very moment, if he hadn't happened to lose his balance, he would have been killed first, killed or maimed, and as for you, who knows, maybe you would have managed to run away... But this did not come to pass: fortunately for your friend, the bottle only grazed his head, it didn't break, I don't think.

At that very moment, all of your friends realized that all of this was terribly frightening and terribly real, so they bolted off in an instant, your friend too, the one who'd just been lucky enough to escape death, the salvific forest was a little ways off--which meant that only you remained standing before those three people who wanted badly to kill somebody that evening.

Why did you stay there?

None of your friends who ran into the forest noticed you hanging back, they didn't get what was going on. Once it was completely dark, late at night, they emerged from the forest and onto the road, but you were gone, the car was gone, and the scary people were gone, then they went back to the dacha, where the friend's dad who owned the place was asleep; after chatting about what to do, your friends decided that you, a fifteen-year-old boy, had decided to return to Moscow in the middle of the night--on a bus that didn't even run at night. At this point, everyone went to bed.

My little boy, why didn't you run away?

But this isn't the most important or the most terrible question about that night, it's only one of the most important and most terrible. After all, you could have saved yourself. You could have survived, could have escaped from all the awful things that were done to you on that night--the last night of your life.

It seems to me that you, my strong, my brave little boy, didn't run away because to stay and not show any fear to this scum was what was demanded of you by your childish, pure, and terribly ardent sense of honor, dignity, and courage, the notion of how a real man ought to behave in your position: a real man knows no fear, a real man doesn't run away even in the

face of mortal danger, and, most importantly, a real man will do everything possible to divert the killers' attention to himself so as to protect his friends, to give them the possibility of saving themselves, of running into the forest, of hiding in it as deeply as possible; a real man doesn't disgrace himself, doesn't lose his nerve, doesn't betray his friends--the friends that were sleeping peacefully as you were being killed.

My proud, my pure little boy, how alone you were, how defenseless, how monstrous was the horror that you couldn't help but feel, how wondrous you were and are and shall be forevermore in this impulse you had, impervious to the voice of reason, this gust of brilliant courage; a defenseless little boy who placed too much value on his honor, who loved his friends too much.

You managed to save them, your beloved friends; busy with you, the three killers didn't run after them.

You gave them so much, these beloved friends of yours. Each of them has long since finished high school, long since graduated from college. Each of them loves and is loved and, if they don't love or aren't loved yet, it's merely a matter of time. Each of them laughs and cries, is offended, then becalmed, kisses somebody's lips and looks into somebody's eyes, chestnut brown, sky blue, dark, light, they're waiting for a kid or not waiting for a kid, making plans for the future, falling ill, then getting well, hoping for the best, breathing, taking a stroll in the park that smells so strongly of autumn--all thanks to you, my beloved little boy, who's been reposing in the earth for almost twenty years now.

When I feel unbearably lonely and unbearably afraid, when my life force seems to be coming to an end, do you know who I turn to for help?

Yes, that's right.

To you.

And you, my magnanimous, my fearless little boy, smiling with your beautiful, your tender, your slightly sheepish little boy's smile, you extend your hand out to me: don't be afraid, Daddy, if I could do it, you can do it too.
