

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-17

Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 June 1986

I had hoped that this would be my next-to-last newsletter, but as the number of days left in Moscow diminishes and the objects to be carried home multiply, I realize that this may well be the last one. In it I would like to introduce a relatively young--aged 35--writer, whose short stories have begun to gain attention here. The translation is mine, and I follow the story with a brief comment on the writer.

In case this is indeed the last newsletter I manage to produce, I would like to thank the Institute for its support of my family and me during our two years in Moscow. Thanks, too, to the many people who have written with encouragement, comments, and suggestions.

Sonia:

Pat'iana Tolstaia:

A person lived--and then was gone. Only the name remains--Sonia. "Remember, Sonia used to say..."; "that dress looks just like Sonia's..."; "you keep sneezing and sneezing, just like Sonia..." And then even the people who used to say those things died, and all that remained in the mind was the trace of a voice, disembodied, as if coming out of the mouth of a telephone receiver. Or suddenly there opens up out of nowhere a sunny room, like a bright and lively photograph. Laughter around a table set with food; and hyacinths, it seems, in a small, glass vase on the tablecloth, hyacinths that also nod and curl their rose-colored lips. Hurry up and look, before it fades away! Who is that there? Anyone there that you need? But the bright room shivers and grows dark. The backs of people sitting at the table are already as transparent as gauze. Their laughter disintegrates and fades away into the distance with frightening speed. Just try to catch up with it.

No, stop, let us have a look at you! Sit the way you were before and say your names in order! But it is futile to try to snatch at the memories with coarse, earthly hands. A cheerful, laughing figure turns around towards you; it turns out to be a large, coarsely-painted rag doll, the kind that falls off the chair if you don't prop her up on the sides. On the senseless forehead are drippings of glue from the fibre wig. The little, light-blue glassy eyes are attached inside the empty skull by an iron wire with a lead-ball counterweight. What a witch! And yet all the time she acted as if she were alive and loved.

Nancy Condee, a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs and Assistant Professor of Russian at Wheaton College, is studying contemporary culture and cultural politics in the Soviet Union.

The laughing crowd has flitted away. Having trampled on the rigid laws of time and space, it twitters to itself once again in some inaccessible corner of the world, eternally imperishable, elegantly immortal. Perhaps it will turn up again at some bend in the road, at the most inappropriate moment, and, of course, without warning.

But since you are like that anyway, live the way you want. To chase after you would be like trying to catch butterflies by waving a shovel. But it would be interesting to know more about Sonia.

One thing is clear: Sonia was a fool. No one would ever argue about that property of her being, although there is no one left to argue. Invited for the first time to lunch in the distant thirties, now coated with yellowish haze, she sat like an idol at the end of the long, starched table. In front of her sat the napkin, rolled into a little cone-house, the way people used to do back then. The little pond of bouillon cooled off. The idle spoon lay on the table. Sonia's horselike features, the virtue of all the English kings put together, froze.

"Well, Sonia," they said (they must have added a patronymic, but it is now hopelessly lost), "Well, Sonia, why aren't you eating?"

"I am awaiting the pepper," she would answer sternly, moving her icy upper lip.

With the passing of time, however --when it became clear that Sonia was irreplaceable in the kitchen during the pre-holiday bustle; that she was an excellent seamstress; that she was willing to take other people's children on outings, even to watch over their sleep while everyone else, the whole noisy bunch of them, set off for some urgent merrymaking--with the passing of time, the crystal of Sonia's foolishness began to show other sparkling facets, exquisite in their unpredictability. Like a sensitive instrument, Sonia's soul would apparently tune itself to the mood of the gathering that had cosseted her yesterday. Having stood about gaping back then, she could never manage to switch over to the present. If, therefore, at a funeral banquet, Sonia would cheerfully shriek, "Bottoms up!", this was only because the birthday parties of not-so-long-ago were clearly still alive in her memory. At a wedding, on the other hand, there wafted from Sonia's toasts the odor of yesterday's funeral bread, with its little coffin-shaped jelly candies.

"I saw you at a concert with a beautiful woman. I've been wondering, who is she?" Sonia would ask a panicking husband as she leaned across his frozen wife. At those moments, Iev Adol'fovich, always the joker, would purse his lips, raise his bushy eyebrows up as high as they would go, and shake his head, making the light catch his tiny glasses: "Death lasts a long time, but stupidity is forever!" And so it was. Time only confirmed his words.

Lev Adol'fovich's sister, a sharp, thin woman with a snakelike elegance about her, also once got herself into an awkward situation because of Sonia, and dreamt of punishing her. Gently, of course, to give everyone a good laugh, as well as for her own little amusement. So they took to whispering in the corner, Lev and Ada, thinking up something witty.

Anyway, Sonia sewed...So how did she dress? Appallingly, my friends, appallingly! Something dark blue, striped; things that didn't suit her at all. Just picture to yourself: a head like a tarpan or some other kind of wild horse (Lev Adol'fovich's observation); under her jaw, the enormous hanging sash of her blouse stuck out from the stiff lapel-shutters of her suit; the sleeves always too long. Sunken chest; legs so fat they looked as if they belonged to another body set; pigeon toes; shoes run down on the sides. But her chest, her legs--that isn't clothing...It is so clothing, my dear. It could be considered a kind of clothing! With those specifications, you particularly have to think through what you can wear and what you can't. Her brooch was an enamel dove. She wore it on the lapel of her jacket and never parted with it. Even when she changed into a different dress, she always stuck the dove on to it.

Sonia cooked well. She turned out magnificent cakes. And then those, you know, entrails, kidneys, udder, brains--it's so easy to ruin them, but when she made them, they always made you lick your lips. So that was always entrusted to her. They tasted good and were always a basis for jokes. Lev Adol'fovich would purse his lips and call across the table, "Sonechka! Today your udder has absolutely astonished me!" And she would nod joyfully in response. Ada would say sweetly, "And I am simply in ecstasy over your sheep brains!" "You mean calf brains," Sonia would smile, misunderstanding. And everyone would be happy. What a delight, eh?

She loved children, that was clear. You could go on a vacation to Kislovodsk, leave her in the apartment with the children--live in our place for a while, all right, Sonia?--and, on your return, find things in excellent condition. Everything had been dusted; the children were rosy-cheeked, well-fed, had been for walks every day, and had even gone on a tour of a museum where Sonia worked as some kind of curator or other. These museum ladies lead boring lives; they are all old maids. The children had managed to get attached to her and were always disappointed when she had to be passed along to the next family. But, after all, you can't be an egoist and use Sonia all by yourself. She could be needed by other people as well. In short, they managed; they set up some kind of sensible rotation system.

So what else can be said about her? Well, that's about it. Who remembers all those details now? After fifty years, almost nobody is left alive, you know. And how many really interesting, genuinely substantive people there are, people who have left behind concert recordings, books, monographs on art. What lives they lived! Each one of them could be spoken about endlessly. That same Lev Adol'fovich was essentially a scoundrel, but the

brightest of people, and in some sense a dear soul. You can go ask Ada Adol'fovna, but then she is something close to ninety, and--you yourself understand... Then there was some kind of incident with her at the time of the Leningrad blockade. Something to do with Sonia, by the way. No, I don't recall. Some kind of glass, some letters, some joke or other.

How old was Sonia? In '41--after that her tracks disappear--she must have been about to turn forty. Yes, that should be about right. Then you can just figure it out from there, when she was born and all that. But what kind of significance could that have if no one knows who her parents were; what she was like as a child; where she lived; what she did; and who her friends were, before that day when she turned up out of the blue and sat down to await the pepper in the sunny, festive dining-room?

It should be taken into account, however, that she was romantic and lofty in her own way. After all, her bows; the enamel dove; other people's eternally sentimental verses, bursting inopportunely from her lips as if spit out by her long, upper teeth; her love of children, what's more, of any children--the traits are part of one and the same picture. A romantic being. Did she ever know happiness? Oh, yes! Definitely, yes! That may have been all she knew, but she did know happiness.

And what do you think?--Life tends to set up such jokes!--she owed that happiness utterly and completely to that snake Ada Adol'fovna (what a shame you did not know her in her youth; she was an interesting woman).

They got together, the entire bunch of them--Ada, Lev, Valerian as well, Serezha probably, and Kotik, and someone else--and worked out a hilarious scheme (since the idea was Ada's, Lev called it "the adder's little scheme") that worked out perfectly. The year was something like '33. Ada was in her very best form, although no longer a girl: a delightful figure, a swarthy face with a dark-rose blush to her cheeks; first in tennis; first in canoeing; everyone listened to what she had to say. It even made Ada uncomfortable that she had so many admirers, whereas Sonia had nobody (what a scream! Sonia--admirers!). And so Ada suggested that they think up for the poor thing a mysterious, lovestruck calf, someone madly in love, but for various reasons unable to meet with her in person. A marvelous idea!

A phantom figure was immediately created, dubbed Nikolai, burdened with a wife and three children, and lodged for correspondence's sake in the apartment of Ada's father. At this point there resounded a chorus of protests: what if Sonia finds out? What if she pokes around at that address? But this objection was overruled as inconsequential. In the first place, Sonia was a fool; that was the whole point of the joke. In the second place, she ought to have some conscience; Nikolai had a family, and would Sonia really want to take it upon herself to destroy that? He would spell it out for her, plain and simple--Nikolai, that is. My beloved, your unforgettable features have forever imprinted themselves on my wounded heart ("Don't write 'wounded' or she'll take it literally and think he's an invalid"), but we are never, never fated to be together--i.e. sense of duty towards the children, and so on and so forth--but feeling, Nikolai goes on--no, even better, true feeling--it warms his cold members ("How's that, Adochka?" "Quit interrupting me, you fools!") like a guiding star and some kind of luxuriant rose or whatnot.

That kind of letter. He could have seen her, let's say, at the concert hall, admired her delicate profile (at this point, Valerian simply fell off the sofa guffawing), and so wanted to start some kind of lofty correspondence. He had enormous difficulty finding out her address. Implores her to send him a photograph. So why can't he set up a tryst; after all, the children wouldn't get in their way? Ah, but he has a sense of duty. But it doesn't keep him from corresponding with her? All right, let's have him be paralyzed. To the waist. Hence the cold members. Listen, quit fooling around! If necessary, we'll paralyze him later. Ada sprinkled the stationery with cheap men's cologne. Kotik pulled a dried forget-me-not, rose-colored with age, from their childhood herbary, and stuck it in an envelope. Life was a ball!

The correspondence was passionate from both sides. Sonia, the fool, took the bait immediately. She fell in love so hard that you couldn't drag her away. It became necessary to restrain her ardor. Nikolai would write about one letter a month, and that put a damper on Sonia, with her raging amour. Nikolai outdid himself in verse; Valerian had to sweat over that. Some of them were real pearls, God knows: Nikolai compared Sonia with a lily, a liana, and a gazelle. He compared himself with a nightingale and an antelope, and furthermore simultaneously. Ada wrote the prose parts and generally oversaw the project, reining in her more adventurous friends, who would advise Valerian, "Write her that she is a gnu. You know, like an antelope. 'Sonia, my darling, my goddess-gnu! I'm down in the depths when I'm without you!'"

Yes, Ada was at her height. She quivered with Nikolaian tenderness and revealed the depths of his lonely, tumultuous soul. She insisted on preserving the platonic purity of their relations, while at the same time hinting darkly at destructive passions, the consummation of which was impossible because the time, for some reason, was not yet ripe. In the evenings, of course, Nikolai and Sonia were supposed to raise their eyes at an appointed hour to one and the same star. That was absolutely essential. If the participants in this epistolary novel happened at that moment to be nearby, they tried to keep Sonia from opening the curtains and furtively stealing a glance at the starry heights. They would call her into the hallway--"Sonia, come here a minute...", "Sonia, there's something I have to talk to you about..."--and they would revel in her anxiety. The cherished moment would draw near and, while gabbing away about nothing, she ran the risk of missing Nikolai's gaze, located in the environs of some Sirius or other, or what's-it-called...well, anyway, you have to look south in the direction of the Pulkovo Observatory.

Gradually, the enterprise began to get dull. How much can you take, and besides you could drag absolutely nothing from the languishing Sonia, not a single secret. She didn't allow any of the women to become her confidante, and in general kept up the appearance that nothing was going on--really, how secretive she turned out to be; whereas in the letters, she burned with an inextinguishable flame of lofty emotion, promised Nikolai eternal fidelity, and communicated everything about herself, down to the last detail: what she had dreamt, what some little birdie somewhere had twittered to her. She must have sent him trainloads of dried flowers in her envelopes. For one of Nikolai's birthdays, she gave him her only adornment, the white enamel dove,

which she unpinned from her ghastly jacket. "Sonia, wherever is your dove?" "It flew away," she would say, baring her boney horse-teeth. In her eyes one could read absolutely nothing. Ada kept getting ready to do in the burdensome Nikolai once and for all, but upon receipt of the dove, she shuddered slightly and put off the murder for a better time. In the letter that accompanied the dove, Sonia vowed to devote herself utterly to Nikolai, and to go after him, if need be, to the ends of the earth.

The entire conceivable harvest of laughter had already been reaped, and the damnable Nikolai was hobbling them all like a ball and chain, but to throw Sonia out on her own, out on the road of life without her dove, without her beloved would have been simply inhuman. So the years went by. Valerian, Kotik, and, it seems, Serezha dropped out from participating in the game for various reasons, while Ada manfully, gloomily carried on her epistolary burden alone. Each month, like a machine, she hatefully turned out those torrid postal kisses. She herself had already become a little like Nikolai. From time to time in the evening light, it seemed to her that the mirror would catch the shadow of a moustache on her swarthy, rose-colored little face. And so it was that these two women at the two ends of Leningrad, one from spite, the other from love, churned out to each other letters about someone who did not exist.

When the war began, neither of them managed to evacuate in time. Ada dug trenches, all the time thinking about her son, who had been transported out during the evacuation of the kindergarten. She had no time for love. She ate everything that was possible to eat; boiled up leather shoes; drank hot bouillon made of wallpaper, since it contained, after all, a small amount of nourishing paste. December came, and everything came to a halt. Ada brought first her father, then Lev Adol'fovich on the little sled to the common grave, stoked the little stove with the works of Dickens, and, with fingers that could not bend, wrote Nikolai's farewell letter to Sonia. She wrote that it was all a lie; that she hated everyone; that Sonia was an old fool and a horse; that nothing had ever existed and you can all go to hell. Neither Ada nor Nikolai wanted to go on living. Then she unlocked the doors of her father's enormous apartment so that the burial team could find her more easily, lay down on the sofa, and piled on top of herself her father's and her brother's coats.

It is unclear what happened next. In the first place, nobody cared. In the second place, Ada Adol'fovna is not very talkative; and besides all that, as has already been said, Time! Time has devoured everything. We must add that the act of reading another's soul is a difficult task. The soul is dark, and the ability is not given to everyone. Vague conjectures, guesswork, nothing more.

It is hardly likely that Sonia received Nikolai's deathbed epistle. Letters did not make it through that black December, or else they took months to arrive. Let us think that, raising her eyes, half-blind with hunger, to the evening star about the ruins of the Pulkovo Observatory on that day, she could not sense the magnetic gaze of her beloved, and realized that his hour had struck. Say what you will, a loving heart senses such things. It will not be deceived. And so Sonia, having guessed that the time had come, was ready to reduce her-

self to ashes for the sake of her one and only. She took what she had-- a jar of pre-war tomato juice, set aside for just such a life-or-death moment--and made her way through the entire city of Leningrad to the apartment of the dying Nikolai. There was enough juice for exactly one life.

Nikolai lay under a mountain of coats, the ear flaps of his fur hat tied around his horrible, black face; his lips, parched, but his cheeks clean-shaven. Sonia sank to her knees, pressed her lips to his puffy hand with its worn nails, and cried for a short time. Then she fed him the juice with a little spoon, threw some more books in the stove, thanked her happy fate, and went off with a bucket to fetch some water, never again to return. The bombing was very heavy that day.

That is essentially everything that can be said about Sonia. A person lived--and then was gone. Only the name remains.

"Ada Adol'fovna, give me Sonia's letters!"

Ada Adol'fovna rolls out of the bedroom to the dining room, turning the wheels of the wheelchair with her hands. Her tiny, wrinkled face trembles slightly. The black dress covers her lifeless legs all the way down to her heels. A large cameo brooch is pinned to her throat. On the cameo someone is killing someone else: shields, spears, the enemy, fallen in a graceful pose.

"Letters?"

"Letters, letters, give me Sonia's letters!"

"I can't hear you!"

"The word 'give' has always been hard for her to hear," the grandson's wife hisses, glancing with irritation at the cameo.

"Isn't it time for lunch?" mumbles Ada Adol'fovna.

What large, dark buffets, what heavy, silver table-service in them, and vases, and all kinds of supplies: tea, jams, groats, macaroni. In the other rooms, too you can catch glimpses of buffets, buffets, wardrobes, cupboards, containing linens, books, all kinds of things. Where does she keep that pack of Sonia's letters, the decrepit packet wound round with twine, crackling with dried flowers as yellow and transparent as dragonfly wings? Does she not recall, or does she not want to say? And what is the point, after all, of pestering a trembling, paralyzed old woman? Hasn't she had enough difficult days in her life? Most likely, she tossed the pack into the fire, kneeling on her swollen knees in that icy winter, lit up momentarily by that circle of flame. Perhaps the letters, shyly catching fire at first, quickly blackened at the corners, until they finally wound into a column of humming flames. The letters would warm, if only for an instant, her twisted fingers, stiff with

cold. So be it. Only the white dove, I imagine, she must have pulled out. Doves don't catch fire, after all.

Tatiana Tolstaia was born in Leningrad in 1951. She graduated from Leningrad State University (Department of Classical Languages and Literatures) in 1974 and began writing short stories in 1983. Her first published work appeared in the August, 1983 issue of the Leningrad journal Avrora, the same journal in which "Sonia" appeared in October, 1984. Other short stories have appeared in the journals Neva, Oktiabr', and Novyi mir. Tolstaia's puppet play entitled "Step Across the Threshold" is currently playing at the Moscow District Puppet Theatre. A collection of her short stories, conditionally entitled "On the Golden Porch," is scheduled for publication by Molodaia Gvardiia Publishing House in 1987.

As those who work in the field of Russian literature will have noticed, Tolstaia writes in the tradition of Nikolai Gogol. The idiosyncratic role played by the narrator's voice, with its apostrophes, interruptions, digressions, and conversational mannerisms, is undoubtedly the most evident of Gogol's devices used in Tolstaia's work. At times the narrator's ambivalence toward the characters--at the simplest level, for example, Ada Adol'fovna is both "an interesting woman" and "that snake"--is developed to such a degree that it becomes in fact two distinct voices in opposition to one another ("But her chest, her legs--that isn't clothing...It is so clothing, my dear").

Other features as well clearly situate Tolstaia's work in the line of Gogol's descendants: her love of enumeration and lists; her tendency to dehumanize people and animate dead objects; her choice of metaphor ("the crystal of Sonia's foolishness"); her portrayal of physically and psychologically grotesque female characters; her extensive use of stylistically colored language; her depiction of conspicuous material consumption; and her comic portrayal of romantic love.

A more contemporary influence on Tolstaia's narrative voice is Nabokov, a writer whose works have yet to appear in the Soviet Union, and whose name is not yet mentionable in Soviet literary criticism. Nabokov's works nevertheless generate more interest in the Moscow intellectual community than any other twentieth-century Russian writer, east or west. Tolstaia, like those authors from whom she learned to write, adopts an ironic and playful method of storytelling, sometimes apparently more concerned with withholding the story ("And what kind of significance could that have...") than relating it in a straightforward fashion. Elsewhere, we are supposed to believe, the narrator's memory fails ("Who remembers all those details now?" ..."No, I don't recall"). Still elsewhere, the narrator appears to be simply uninformed about the facts, another favorite device of Gogol's ("It is unclear

what happened next"). Above all, Tolstaia's story, and much of her work in general, is imbued with an atmosphere of melancholy and nostalgia that ultimately remains of greater artistic importance than the humorous recounting of a practical joke.



Nancy Condee

Received in Hanover 6/18/86