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What She Could Carry

St. Petersburg, 1891: a young writer with twenty-six fresh stitches in her face decides what to burn, what to keep and how to walk past the gendarmes.



RICHARD LOWE

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The clock on the landing struck eleven, and Tatiana counted the strokes from the floor. She had been sitting against the leg of the writing table for most of an hour. The towel she held to the left side of her face had been white when she took it from the washstand.

She kept it where it was and did not look at it.

The chair he had used was still drawn out from the table at the angle he had left it. He had turned it a little toward her for conversation, crossed his legs, and laid his gloves on his knee, one on top of the other.

The gloves had gone with him. The chair stayed, as if its owner had only stepped down to have a word with the dvornik.

She got up in stages. Knees first, then a hand flat on the table, then the rest of her. The room leaned toward the stove and came back.

Her left eye would not open. She had felt the blade go across the lid and down the cheek in one long pull, the way a tailor cuts cloth he has already measured, and she had felt it lift away at the jaw. She could not tell whether the eye was still an eye under the swelling, and she did not put her fingers there to learn.

On the table lay the eleven pages. He had squared their corners before he set them down. He had read the first paragraph aloud in a pleasant voice, the voice of a man reading a menu to a lady who has forgotten her spectacles, and then he had told her she would not write again.

He had said it the way a doctor names the month of a confinement. Nature had decided it. He was only passing the news along.

He had left the pages. That was what she kept returning to, standing there with the towel going warm and heavy against her face. He had not burned them or carried them off, because the pages had never interested him; the hand had interested him.

She needed thread and needle and a pair of steady hands that were not her own.

A hospital meant a clerk with a ledger. A ledger meant her name written in it. A man who had found these rooms through a name that was not hers would have no trouble at all with one that was.

Aunt Lyuba sewed for a living. Aunt Lyuba lived across the river.

Tatiana put on her coat with one arm and then the other, keeping the towel pressed in place with her shoulder while she changed hands. She wound her grandmother's gray shawl over her head and across the lower half of her face, the way the old women wore them in the wind off the Gulf. In the glass by the door she saw a peasant woman with a toothache.

Good. Nobody looked twice at a toothache.

* * *

The dvornik was in his sheepskin by the gate, his broom leaned against the wall beside him and his breath standing in the lamplight. He had let the gentleman in at nine. He had let the gentleman out again at ten, and he looked at Tatiana now with the face of a man who had been paid to remember nothing until somebody asked.

She walked past him the way her father had taught her to walk a plank between two scaffolds: eyes on the far end, weight settled. You walk as if you have already crossed it, Tanya, and the plank believes you.

The gate creaked behind her. He did not call out.

Snow had come in the evening and lay soft on the embankment, unmarked except for the runners of the last sledges. The Neva was white and still under the bridge, frozen since the end of November, with the lamps of the ice road strung across it like beads on a thread. The cold went straight through the shawl into the wound and she was grateful to it, because cold was a thing she understood.

An izvozchik dozed on the box of his sledge at the corner, his horse blanketed and steaming. She woke him by tapping the runner with her boot and gave him the Vyborg side and a street name. He looked at the shawl and the dark patch soaking through it under her eye.

"Fell on the ice, miss?"

"Yes."

"Bad ice this year." He gathered the reins. "My wife's sister broke her wrist on the Liteiny on Sunday. Clean through. Sit well back, now."

She sat well back. The sledge hissed over the snow, and the bridge went by beneath them, and the city went by on both sides with its windows mostly dark. The driver told her about his wife's sister the whole way across, the wrist and the bonesetter and the bonesetter's fee, which had been robbery.

She was glad of him. She had not known until the sledge moved how badly she wanted a voice that was not his.

* * *

Aunt Lyuba's rooms were up two flights over a baker's, and the stair smelled of rye bread and coal and the cats who lived on the baker's leavings. The night ovens were going. Warmth came up through the steps.

Dasha opened the door with a candle in one hand and her braid over her shoulder, already halfway to a scold for whoever knocked at this hour. Then the candlelight reached the shawl. Her mouth stayed open on the first word and nothing came after it.

"I need your mother," Tatiana said. "Bring the good lamp."

Dasha was seventeen. She rolled papirosy ten hours a day at the factory on the Sampsonievsky and came home with tobacco under her nails that no scrubbing would lift. She had a wide plain face that showed everything that passed behind it, and it was showing everything now.

"Tanya, what happened, what is it, who..."

"The lamp, Dashenka."

Dasha went.

Aunt Lyuba came out of the back room in her nightdress with a wool jacket thrown over it, her gray hair in a single plait. She was her father's elder sister and had the Volkov jaw, square and stubborn, which on her father had looked like patience and on Lyuba looked like an argument she had already won. She took one look and pulled the table under the window.

"Sit." She unwound the shawl herself, slowly, peeling the last of it from where the blood had dried it to the skin. "Dasha. Water from the samovar, the basin, the vodka from behind the flour. And my case. The black case, not the work basket."

"Mama..."

"Now."

Tatiana sat. Lyuba brought the lamp close and turned the wick up until the flame stood tall and white, and the warmth of it reached the right side of Tatiana's face.

Lyuba bent and looked. She looked for a long time without touching.

Then she put her thumb on the brow above the swollen eye and pressed the lid upward a fraction. Light came in, a wet red blur, and then the lamp, and then her aunt's face, close and gray and furious.

"It's whole," Lyuba said. "He went over it. The lid is cut and the eye is whole." She let the lid fall. "You turned your head."

"Yes."

"Your grandmother's quickness. She could catch a plate before it knew it had been dropped." She straightened. "It wants closing tonight. All of it, from the hair to the chin. If I leave it open it will heal wide and pull your mouth down on that side for the rest of your life."

"Then close it."

"I do hems, Tanya. Buttonholes. I am not a surgeon."

"You do the finest buttonholes on the Vyborg side," Tatiana said. "Everybody says so. Close it."

Lyuba opened the black case. Inside, in rows, in loops of ribbon stitched to the lining, lay the needles of thirty years of work, the long ones and the short ones and the curved upholstery needles and the little sharps for silk. She chose a short curved one and held it to the lamp and turned it.

She chose another. Then she unwound a length of black silk from a card, the finest she had, the silk she kept for mourning dresses because the widows wanted their seams invisible.

She dropped the needle and the silk into a cup and poured vodka over them both. The smell of it filled the room, raw and clean. Dasha came with the basin and set it down too hard, so the water slopped onto the table.

"Wipe that." Lyuba soaked a clean rag in vodka. "Hold her hands, Dasha."

"I don't need my hands held," Tatiana said.

"You will."

She washed the wound first. The vodka went into it like a hot iron and Tatiana's whole body came up off the chair.

Dasha caught her wrists. A sound came out of Tatiana, high and thin, and she shut her teeth on it and sat down again.

"That is the worst of it," Lyuba said. "I lie to customers about the fit. I don't lie about this. That was the worst."

It was not the worst, but it was close.

The first stitch went in at the hairline. Tatiana felt the curved needle bite and turn under the skin and come up on the other side of the cut, and the silk draw after it, a fine dragging line of heat.

Lyuba tied it off with her fingers in a knot she had made a hundred thousand times. She cut the silk with the little stork scissors that had been Tatiana's grandmother's.

"One," Tatiana said.

"Don't talk. Your face moves when you talk."

Tatiana counted without talking. Two at the hairline. Three, where the cut crossed the brow and the needle grated on the bone.

Lyuba worked slowly, with her lips pressed together and her breath going out through her nose in short hard bursts, the way she breathed over a difficult sleeve.

At the eyelid she stopped.

"Dasha. The lamp. Lift it and hold it there."

Dasha let go of Tatiana's wrists and lifted the lamp. The light swung and settled and then began to tremble, a small steady shiver that sent the shadows running back and forth across the table.

Dasha was crying. She made no sound at all, and the tears ran down into the corners of her mouth, and the lamp shook.

“Hold it still,” Lyuba said. “Dasha. Still.”

“I'm trying, Mama.”

“Try harder or give it to her.”

Tatiana put up her right hand and took the lamp. Dasha let go of it at once, the way a child lets go of a hot pan.

The brass was warm and greasy under Tatiana's fingers. She found the angle her aunt needed by watching her aunt's face, and then she held it there, her elbow braced on the table, and the light stopped moving.

Lyuba looked at her across the flame.

“Your father,” she said, and did not finish.

She bent to the eyelid. These stitches were the smallest Tatiana had ever felt, a lady's sewing, no wider than a grain of barley.

Four of them across the lid. Tatiana counted them with the lamp steady in her hand and her right eye fixed on a crack in the plaster above the window, a crack shaped like the river at Shlisselburg where her father had once taken them all in a hired boat.

Eight. Nine. Down the cheek the skin was thicker and the needle went harder.

Dasha had sat down on the floor with her back against the stove. She was watching Tatiana's face, the half of it she could see, with her own face wide open and wet. Tatiana watched her back with the one eye and fixed that face where it would keep: the broad forehead, the little white mark at the corner of the mouth from the time she fell against the coal box at six, the way the lower lip pushed out when she was trying not to howl.

Seventeen. Eighteen. The jaw.

“Who was he?” Lyuba said. She did not look up from the needle.

“A gentleman. He wiped his boots before he came in.”

“Did he give a name?”

“No.”

“Do you know it anyway?”

“No.”

Lyuba drew the silk through and tied it. “Good. Then I don't know it either, and Dasha doesn't know it, and if anyone comes up those stairs asking, we will all three be telling the truth.”

She cut the silk. “Nineteen.”

“Nineteen,” Tatiana said.

“Hush. Don't move your face.”

The last stitches went in where the cut ran out at the bone of the chin. Twenty-six in all. Lyuba tied the last one and cut it, and then she put down the scissors and the needle side by side on the table, square to the edge, the way she laid out her tools at the end of a working day.

She took the lamp out of Tatiana's hand and set it on the table. Her fingers, Tatiana saw, were shaking now that there was nothing left for them to do.

“There,” Lyuba said. “It will be a line. Straight as a seam.” She sat down heavily on the bench. “At least the animal was neat.”

* * *

They put her in Dasha's bed and Dasha slept on the bench by the stove with her coat for a blanket. Tatiana did not sleep. She lay on her back because her aunt had told her to, and the stitches pulled every time she swallowed, and the wound beat like a second heart all down the left side of her face.

Toward morning, when the window had gone from black to the color of dishwater, she got up and found a pencil in the drawer where Lyuba kept her pattern papers. She took a sheet of brown tissue and smoothed it on the table.

Dasha was asleep on the bench with her mouth open and one hand under her cheek. Tatiana drew her.

She drew her with one eye and a carpenter's pencil on tissue paper meant for cutting sleeves, and it was the worst drawing she had made since she was nine, because the eye she had left could not judge the distance from the pencil to the page. She drew it anyway.

The forehead, the little white mark, the braid gone loose over the edge of the bench. She folded the tissue in four and put it inside her bodice and went back to bed.

* * *

"You can't stay," Lyuba said.

It was the second evening. The swelling had gone down enough that the left eye opened to a slit, and through the slit the world came in red and blurred and doubled, but it came in. Tatiana sat at the table with a cup of tea going cold in front of her because drinking it hurt.

"I know."

"Not in your rooms. Not here. Not anywhere in this city." Lyuba was standing at the stove with her back to the room, doing nothing to the pot on it. "He let you live, Tanya. That was a message. Men like that don't send the same message twice."

"I know."

"If you know, then why have you been sitting there for two days with that look?"

"What look?"

"Your father's look. The one he wore at the bottom of a wall when the mason had laid it wrong and he was deciding how much to pull down." Lyuba turned around. "He was a good builder. He was a bad man to argue with."

Tatiana turned the cup a quarter turn on its saucer. Then another quarter.

"I was thinking about where," she said.

"Anywhere. Away. Paris, Berlin, London, I don't care. Somewhere they print what you write and nobody comes to your door about it." Lyuba sat down across from her. "There's a man I know. A clerk. He can make your papers go through quickly, if you have the money for quickly."

"I have what Papa left."

"Then you'll have nothing left after." Lyuba reached across the table and took her niece's right hand in both of hers. Her palms were rough from the needle and the iron. "Your father left that money so you would have a life. This is the life. Spend it."

Dasha had been mending a stocking on the bench by the stove, or holding a stocking and a needle in her lap. She had not made a stitch in an hour.

"It isn't fair," she said.

Lyuba let go of Tatiana's hand. "No."

"If the Tsar knew men like that went about doing this to people, he wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't. Father Ivan says the Tsar is like a father to us, and no father..."

“Dasha.”

“No father would let a man do that to his daughter's face and say nothing.”

“Dasha, hush.” Lyuba said it quietly, but she glanced at the door.

Tatiana looked at her cousin. Dasha's face had gone red and blotched, the way it did, and her chin was pushed out, and she believed every word. She believed it with the whole of her wide plain face, and Tatiana opened her mouth to say what she knew, and closed it.

There would be time for Dasha to learn it. Tatiana hoped it would take years.

“Finish your stocking,” she said instead. “There's a hole in the heel big enough to drive a sledge through.”

Dasha looked down at the stocking. She laughed, once, wet and surprised. Then she put her face in the stocking and cried, and Lyuba went and sat beside her and put an arm around her, and over Dasha's head her aunt's eyes met Tatiana's and said plainly: you did right.

* * *

The papers took four days and the last of her father's money. Tatiana did not ask where her aunt went to get them. Lyuba came back the fourth afternoon with snow on her shoulders and a paper packet inside her coat, and she put it on the table and went to wash her face, and that was all.

“I'm going back to the rooms,” Tatiana said. “Tomorrow. Early.”

“You are not.”

“I need my things. I need to see what's there.”

“I'll go. Dasha and I will go together. Tell us what you want.”

“No.” Tatiana put her hand flat on the paper packet. “I won't send either of you into that room.”

In the end Dasha went with her, because Dasha refused to be left behind and Lyuba was due at a customer's on the Kamennoostrovsky at nine. They crossed in the gray before sunrise on foot, along the ice road with its line of lamps going out one by one as the light came.

The ice under the snow was hard and loud. Men with sledges of firewood passed them going the other way and nodded.

Dasha walked close at her left side, where the bad eye was. Tatiana had not asked her to. She was grateful and did not say so.

Before the embankment the ice road came up past the end of a little canal and a footbridge, iron, painted green once and now mostly rust. Tatiana stopped. Dasha stopped with her.

“What is it?”

“Papa brought me here when I was nine. We were supposed to be going to buy nails.” Tatiana looked at the bridge. “Everyone looks at the railings, he said. Look at what holds the railings up. And he made me get down on my knees on the ice and count the bolts under the deck, and tell him which ones were doing the work and which ones were only there because the drawing said so.”

“Did you know?”

“Not then. He told me. Three of them were carrying everything. The rest could have come out and the bridge wouldn't have noticed.” She started walking again. “He said most things are like that. Find the three bolts.”

The dvornik at her building was a different man, younger, with a cold. He had not seen her before. He looked at the bandage and at Dasha and stood aside without a word, because two women carrying an empty carpetbag at seven in the morning were nobody's business at all.

Her rooms were cold. The stove had gone out four days ago and the frost had come in at the corners of the window and drawn ferns there. The chair still stood at its angle by the table.

Tatiana went to it and pushed it back into its place.

She did it before she had decided to. Then she stood with her hand on its back.

The wood was so cold it burned. Dasha stood in the doorway holding the carpetbag against her chest and did not come in.

"Is that where he sat?" Dasha said.

"Yes."

"I'd like to break it."

"It's the landlady's chair. She'd want four rubles." Tatiana let go of it. "Come in, Dashenka. Shut the door. You're letting the stairs in."

They lit the stove. Tatiana went through the room the way her father had gone through a house he had been asked to buy, one wall at a time, touching everything, saying nothing. Dasha followed her with the carpetbag.

The clothes were easy. Two dresses, the brown and the dark blue. Stockings, shifts, the good boots, the second pair of gloves.

Her father's watch, which no longer went. The little icon of Saint Nicholas that had hung over her grandmother's bed and then over hers.

The books were harder. There were more than forty of them on the shelf and the floor and the windowsill, and she could carry four. She took them down one by one and opened each and closed it again and put it in a pile on the bed.

In the end she took the French grammar, her father's engineering manual with his notes in the margins, and a book of Pushkin so worn the boards had come away from the spine. She took nothing else.

"You can't leave all these," Dasha said.

"You take them. Sell them if you need to. The Pushkins first, they fetch the most."

"I'm not selling your books."

"Then read them," Tatiana said, and Dasha went red and looked at the floor, because Dasha did not read well and they both knew it.

That left the papers.

They were in the bottom drawer of the writing table, in the box under the bed, in a hatbox on top of the wardrobe. Five years of them. Pages she had written under the other name, and drafts of pages, and letters from the editor who had printed them, and notes for pages she had not written yet.

Pieces. Scattered, the way a builder's yard is scattered before anybody has drawn the building.

She sat down on the floor by the stove with the hatbox in her lap and began to feed them in.

Dasha knelt beside her. "Tanya, what are you doing?"

"Burning them."

"But that's what he wants." Dasha caught at her wrist. "Isn't it? That's what he came for. If you burn them, you're doing what he told you."

Tatiana looked at her cousin's hand on her wrist. The tobacco stain under the nails. The pulse going fast at the base of the thumb.

"Every one of these has the other name on it," she said. "Some have the editor's name. Some have the names of people who told me things. If a man comes looking after I've gone, and he will, I want him

to find a cold stove and a stack of Pushkin." She took a page out of the hatbox and held it to the open door of the stove until the corner caught. "And I want him to find nothing in your mother's rooms but buttonholes."

Dasha let go.

"Besides," Tatiana said. She watched the page curl black from the corner inward. "Papa cleared a site before he dug a footing. Every time. Even when the old wall looked sound. He said you can't build on top of what was there, because what was there will always be telling the new wall where to stand."

"You're not building anything."

"Not yet."

The stove drew hard. The pages went quickly, the thin ones in a breath and the thick bundles slowly, opening at the edges like cabbage leaves in a soup.

Dasha fed some of them in after a while, without reading them. Tatiana let her.

At the bottom of the hatbox, under the last of the letters, lay a packet of copybook sheets tied with a piece of red wool.

Tatiana's hands stopped.

The sheets were brown at the edges and soft as cloth with handling. The writing on them was large and careful and slanted the wrong way, a child's hand, a girl of fourteen pressing too hard with a steel nib. She did not need to untie the wool to know what was written there.

"What's that one?" Dasha said.

"Babushka's stories."

"The fox and the miller? And the river that wanted to go uphill?"

"And the birch wood that remembered the woodcutter's grandfather. All of them." Tatiana held the packet in both hands. "I wrote them down the last winter she was well. Her hands had started to go slow, you remember, at the spinning, and I thought..."

She did not finish.

"She went slower when you had the copybook out," Dasha said. "I remember that. I was little, but I remember. She used to stop at the good parts and wait for you to catch up."

Tatiana did not answer for a while. The stove ticked. Somewhere below them a door banged and a woman shouted at a child for leaving it open.

"I never thanked her," she said.

Dasha leaned against her shoulder, carefully, on the right side, where it would not hurt.

Tatiana put the packet of copybook sheets inside her coat. Then she put the last of the editor's letters into the stove and shut the door on them and sat there with her cousin's weight against her arm until the room was warm.

* * *

Lyuba would not come to the station.

"I saw your father off at a station once," she said, "when he went to work on the railway in Finland, and he came back from that one, but I swore at the time I wouldn't do it again, and I'm too old to stop keeping my word." She was buttoning Tatiana's coat for her, top to bottom, as though Tatiana were six. "Dasha will go. Dasha has told the forewoman she has the influenza."

"She'll lose her place."

"She'll lose a day's wages. The forewoman's my customer. Her daughter's wedding dress is in that cupboard and she knows it." Lyuba did the last button and stepped back and looked at her niece. She

looked at the bandage, and the strip of skin showing below it along the jaw where the silk ran black and tidy through the bruise.

"Take the stitches out in ten days," she said. "Not before. Snip each one at the knot and draw it out toward the cut, never away. Get somebody with clean hands. If it goes red and hot, go to a doctor and give him whatever name you like."

"Yes."

"Write to me. Not your own name. Not mine. Write to Mrs. Zakharova at the baker's downstairs, she'll bring it up."

"Yes."

"Don't be clever in the letters."

"I'm never clever."

"You have never once in your life not been clever." Lyuba took her face in her two hands, lightly, the left hand barely touching. Her eyes were dry and furious. "Go on. Go. Before I say something we'll both be sorry for."

* * *

The Warsaw Station at eight in the morning was steam and shouting and the smell of hot oil and wet wool. The train stood along the platform breathing, a long green line of carriages with frost on every window.

Porters ran with trunks on their backs, bent double. A priest in a fur hat was saying goodbye to what looked like nine daughters, kissing each one three times and starting over at the beginning when he reached the end.

Near the barrier stood two gendarmes in their gray greatcoats. They were not looking at anyone in particular. They were looking at everyone in a general way, which was worse.

Tatiana felt Dasha's hand tighten on her arm.

"Don't look at them," Tatiana said. "Look at the third carriage from the front. Look at it as though you have a seat in it and you are already thinking about what you'll eat when you get there."

"I don't have a seat in it."

"Then think about what you'll have for supper tonight."

They walked. Tatiana kept her eyes on the third carriage and her weight low and her pace even, as if the platform were a plank between two scaffolds and she had crossed it a thousand times.

The plank believes you. Her heart was going so hard she could feel it in the stitches.

They passed within two arm's lengths of the gray greatcoats. One gendarme was telling the other about a dog. Neither of them turned his head.

At the carriage step Dasha let out a breath that came out half a laugh.

"How do you do that?"

"Papa. On the scaffolds." Tatiana set the carpetbag on the step. "You look as if you have already decided. Then you do the thing you decided."

"I'd fall off."

"You'd learn." She looked at her cousin. "You'll have to learn. Everybody in this city has to learn it sooner or later."

Dasha's face started to crumple, and she caught it, and pushed her lower lip out, and held it. Then she reached into her coat.

“Here. I bought it Tuesday at a stationer's on the Nevsky.” She held out a parcel in brown paper, tied with string. “It's not for his kind of pages. It's for Babushka's. And yours. Whatever comes.”

Tatiana took it and untied the string with her gloves on, clumsily. Inside was a notebook bound in dark green cloth, as thick as two fingers, with a marbled edge and a ribbon to keep the place. The paper was cream and heavy and good.

She opened it. The pages were ruled faintly in blue, ninety-six of them, and every one was empty.

It had cost three weeks of rolling papirosy. Perhaps four.

“Dashenka.”

“Don't say anything, I'll cry, and then you'll cry, and then the stitches will come out and Mama will say it was my fault.”

Tatiana closed the notebook and held it against her chest. Then she unwound the gray shawl from her own head, her grandmother's shawl, the one she had worn across the river on the first night with her blood soaked into one corner of it.

Lyuba had washed it. The mark had come out pale brown, the size of a coin.

She put it over Dasha's head and crossed it under her chin and tucked the ends into the collar of her coat.

“That's yours,” Dasha said. “That's Babushka's.”

“It's yours now. You wear it when it's cold. You wear it when you go anywhere with a lot of people.” Tatiana pulled the ends straight. “So I'll know you.”

“Know me from where?”

“From anywhere.”

The guard came down the platform shouting and slamming doors. The engine gave a long shriek that went up into the iron roof and stayed there. Tatiana kissed her cousin on the right cheek and the left and the right again, and the gray wool smelled of Lyuba's soap and of the stove and, faintly, under all of it, of their grandmother.

She climbed up into the carriage. Dasha stood on the platform in the gray shawl with her fists jammed into her coat pockets and her chin out.

She did not wave. When the train began to move she walked beside it for a while, and then she ran, and then the platform ended and she stood at the end of it getting smaller in the steam.

Tatiana watched her until there was nothing left to watch. Then she took the brown tissue out of her bodice and unfolded it on her knee and looked at the drawing of the sleeping face, the forehead, the little white mark at the corner of the mouth. It was a bad drawing.

It was right.

* * *

The carriage was second class and three parts full. Across from her sat a woman in a sealskin cape with a small boy of five or six, who was eating a pirozhok out of a paper and getting cabbage on his collar. Beside Tatiana a fat merchant slept with his hands folded over his watch chain.

The boy looked at her.

He looked at the bandage and the black silk running out below it along her jaw, and he stopped chewing. He looked with his whole face, mouth open, cabbage forgotten, the way he would have looked at an elephant or a fire engine.

There was no pity in it and no disgust. He wanted to know.

“Did a dog bite you?” he said.

His mother took his chin between her finger and thumb and turned his head toward the window. “Sasha. We don't look.”

“But did it?”

“Sasha.”

Tatiana met the mother's eyes. The mother looked away at once, at the window, at the boy's collar, at the clasp of her own cape, at anything. She went on looking at anything for the next six hours.

The boy kept stealing glances when his mother dozed. Each time Tatiana let him. Once she lifted her hand and showed him, with one finger in the air above the bandage, the long straight line from the hair to the chin.

He followed the finger with his eyes from top to bottom. Then he nodded, satisfied, as if she had answered his question, and went back to his pirozhok.

She preferred the boy. She would prefer the boy, she thought, for the rest of her life.

* * *

Snow lay over everything all day, flat white country and black woods and little villages huddled around their onion domes, and the frost on the window went from white to blue as the light failed. The carriage lamps were lit. The merchant woke and ate a chicken out of a basket, bone by bone, and slept again.

At the frontier they were made to get down.

The customs hall was long and cold and lit by gas, and it smelled of wet boots and tobacco. The passengers stood in lines with their bags open on long tables while men in uniform turned over their linen with the ends of their pencils. A woman ahead of Tatiana had a samovar in her trunk and an officer was making her account for it in writing.

Tatiana had the notebook and the copybook sheets inside her coat. She had not decided to put them there. She had done it on the train, before the brakes went on, and now she could feel the edge of the cloth binding against her ribs every time she breathed.

The officer at her table was a thin man with a cold and a pair of steel spectacles mended at the bridge with thread. He went through the carpetbag. The brown dress, the blue.

The French grammar, which he opened and shook. Her father's manual, which he opened and frowned at, turning it sideways to read a note in the margin about the bearing load of oak.

“Engineer?”

“My father was a builder.”

He grunted and set it down. He picked up the Pushkin and did not open it. Then he held out his hand for her papers, and she gave them to him, and he unfolded them and read them, and read them again.

He looked up at her face.

He looked at the bandage over the tops of the mended spectacles, and kept looking. Tatiana looked back at him.

She kept her weight low and her hands still on the edge of the table and she looked at him as if she had already crossed this hall and was sitting in the train on the other side, thinking about her supper. The plank believes you.

Behind her somebody coughed. The samovar woman was weeping.

“An accident?” the officer said.

“On the ice.”

“Bad ice this year.” He folded the papers along their creases. He stamped them, twice, and handed them back. “Next.”

She closed the carpetbag. She walked the length of the hall to the far doors without hurrying, and out onto the platform on the other side, where the air was exactly as cold as the air she had left and the snow was exactly the same snow.

A German conductor in a blue coat was shouting at a porter in a language she could read but had never heard spoken in anger. Her legs began to shake only when she was back in her seat with the door shut.

The boy Sasha was asleep against his mother. The merchant had moved to another carriage. For the first time since the clock on the landing struck eleven, nobody in the world was looking at her at all.

* * *

The train moved again after midnight. The lamp over the seat had been turned low, and it swung a little on its chain with the motion of the carriage, so the light came and went across her lap.

Tatiana took out the green notebook.

She opened it on her knee and smoothed the first page flat with the side of her hand. The paper was cool and smooth and heavy, and it lay open without being held, the way good paper does. She took out the pencil, her father's carpenter's pencil, cut flat so it would not roll off a beam, and she sharpened it with Lyuba's stork scissors, which she had found at the bottom of the carpetbag that morning wrapped in a stocking. Lyuba had not said a word about the scissors.

Tatiana sat with the pencil over the page for a long time. The wheels went over the joints in the rails, and the carriage swayed, and the lamp swung. Her face throbbed in time with her heart. Outside, the snow was faintly blue and went on without end in every direction.

She thought of the gentleman in her rooms, his gloves laid neatly on his knee. You will not write again. He had left the pages because the pages did not matter to him. He had been right about that.

The pages had not mattered. They had been scattered and quick and clever, and she had been twenty and twenty-one and pleased with herself, and she had believed that being careful was enough.

What mattered was what a person carried after the pages burned. Her father on his knees on the ice counting bolts. Her grandmother slowing at the good parts. Dasha asleep on the bench with her mouth open. A boy with cabbage on his collar who wanted to know, and a woman in sealskin who did not.

If she was going to carry it, she would carry it properly. All of it, in order, in one place where it could be found.

She wrote at the top of the first page, in Russian, in letters smaller and tighter than any she had made before, because the paper was dear and there would never be enough of it:

The beginning is worth beginning.

She looked at the line for a while. It was not clever. She left it.

Below it she wrote the first words of the fox and the miller, the way her grandmother had always begun it, and she wrote on through the fox's first trick and the miller's first mistake. When she came to the place where the miller lifts the lid of the flour bin, she felt her own hand slow on the page, all by itself, and she let it.

The train went west through the dark. The pencil went on. Ninety-six pages, she thought, somewhere past the second trick.

She would need more than one.

The World of The Time Machine

Who's Who

The people of the novel as you first meet them at Victor's table. Nothing here gives away where the machine goes or how it ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Victor	An Oxford man of science and a widower. He spent four years on the theory and the instrument and a fifth on everything around it, and in November 1895 he takes his machine forward in time to find a cure.
Catherine	Victor's wife. She died of smallpox in November 1890, at thirty-four. She loved the garden, and Victor watched her in it from the laboratory window.
Tatiana Volkova	Victor's neighbor: small, Russian, a writer who is also a draftsman. She carries a sketchbook everywhere, and a scar runs the left side of her face from hairline to chin. She is in the machine's bunk when Victor pushes the GO lever.
Pieter	A mouse who came aboard through a crack in the laboratory wall. His heart runs at 450 beats a minute, and he always seems to know who needs him.
The machine	Brass and nickel, twelve indicators, a seat, a bunk and a galley, the size of a comfortable room. It keeps its own record of every pulse aboard.
Eleanor Whitmore	First through the door at the dinner party. She has known Victor for eleven years and reads his face without seeming to.
James	Eleanor's husband, a natural philosopher in the old sense, fifty-eight and curious about everything, the mechanism above all.
Arthur Finch	A barrister who arrives exactly on time, always, and examines the wine label like a problem.
Edmund Hartley	The physician who attended Catherine through her illness and was there when she died. He and Victor have not spoken of it directly in five years.
Clara Osgood	Thirty-one, with an independent income and a serious science the Philosophical Society has begun to notice. She asks the question nobody else thought to ask.
Thomas Beaumont	A journalist who has covered Parliament for seven years and wants to know why things happen. He keeps a notebook in his coat.

In this story only: Aunt Lyuba, Tatiana's father's elder sister, a seamstress on the Vyborg side; Dasha, Lyuba's daughter, seventeen, Tatiana's cousin, whom the novel's first stop remembers; Sasha, a boy on the train; the izvozchik, the dvornik and the customs officer.

Timeline

From Tatiana's childhood in Russia to the night the machine leaves Oxford.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
About 1870	Tatiana Volkova is born in Russia, the daughter of a builder.
1882	Victor first sees Catherine at a lecture at the Royal Institution, when she says something about the speaker's third point that rearranges his second.
1884	Tatiana's father dies. She is fourteen, and she begins writing down her grandmother's stories. Victor and Catherine take the house in Oxford.
1887	In Oxford, Catherine is photographed in the garden with the wisteria in its first full bloom.
November 1890	Catherine dies of smallpox. Victor decides that morning to build a machine that moves through time.
1891	A well-dressed man calls at Tatiana's rooms in St. Petersburg. Twenty-one years old, she leaves Russia, and the notebooks begin. *What She Could Carry* takes place here.
About 1892	Tatiana is living next door to Victor in Oxford, and notices when his laboratory light burns at midnight.
November 1895	Victor invites his friends to dinner, Thursday week, seven o'clock. In the small hours of a Thursday he pushes the GO lever and hears a sneeze behind him.
The first stops	St. Petersburg, January 1905. Verdun, November 1918. Hiroshima, August 6, 1945. Houston, July 20, 1969. Geneva, October 1979. Then on, far past anything Victor planned.

Places

- **Victor's house, Oxford.** A laboratory with a cold stone floor that smells of coal dust and machine oil; a dining room where the friends gather; a garden with an elm by the east wall and wisteria that comes back every April.
- **The machine's cabin.** The displacement mechanism and seat at the front, a bunk along the right wall, a fold-down table on the left, a galley with a spirit stove, storage in the floor and walls, and a partitioned bathroom at the rear that Victor will not describe.
- **The exterior.** Hooks and steel webbing welded to the outside, hung with eight jugs of water, dry goods in weatherproof canisters, and spare parts labeled in Victor's hand. A laboratory instrument given a rucksack.
- **St. Petersburg.** Tatiana's city: its frozen river, its ice roads lit by lamps, its yard porters at every gate. The novel's first stop.
- **The Warsaw Station.** Where the trains leave St. Petersburg for the west and the frontier.

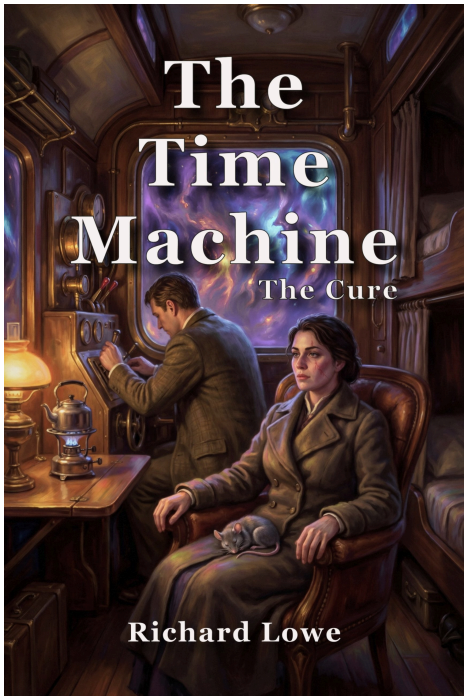
Glossary

- **The gray.** What surrounds the machine in transit: sourceless light, no weather, and the hum of the field felt in the chest.
- **The patterns.** What the observation ports show during transit: every moment at that spot, compressed. They pull the mind into a waking trance, so Victor curtained and taped the ports.

- **The displacement field, or bubble.** The field around the machine. Nothing outside can reach in and nothing inside can reach out.
- **The cost.** What transit takes from the body: shakiness, slow thinking, a desperate hunger. The rule is eat before exiting, wait twenty minutes, assess, then go out.
- **The twelve indicators.** Displacement rate, temporal position, field stability, power reserves and the rest of what Victor watches, read in sequence, left to right.
- **The notebooks.** Tatiana's twelve notebooks, written small and tight in Russian. They begin in this story.
- **Logistics.** Tatiana's word for food, water, clothing and everything else that keeps two people and a mouse alive.
- **Dvornik.** A Russian yard porter, who keeps the gate of a building and knows who comes and goes.
- **Izvozchik.** A cab driver; in winter, the driver of a sledge.
- **Papirosy.** Russian cigarettes with a hollow cardboard mouthpiece, rolled by hand in the factories.
- **Babushka.** Grandmother.

Read the Novel

Four years later Tatiana Volkova lives next door to a widower in Oxford whose laboratory light burns at midnight. One night she goes downstairs to check on him and ends up hiding in his time machine. The Time Machine: The Cure follows Victor, Tatiana and a mouse named Pieter from Oxford in 1895 to the far end of the future.



The Time Machine:
The Cure
The Victorian Era Series

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