In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1951) VN speaks of his first love and compares a love letter to a bullet:

Happy is the novelist who manages to preserve an actual love letter that he received when he was young within a work of fiction, embedded in it like a clean bullet in flabby flesh and quite secure there, among spurious lives. I wish I had kept the whole of our correspondence that way. Tamara's letters were a sustained conjuration of the rural landscape we knew so well. They were, in a sense, a distant but wonderfully clear antiphonal response to the much less expressive lyrics I had once dedicated to her. By means of unpampered words, whose secret I fail to discover, her high-school girlish prose could evoke with plangent strength every whiff of damp leaf, every autumn-rusted frond of fern in the St Petersburg countryside. 'Why did we feel so cheerful when it rained?' she asked in one of herlast letters, reverting as it were to the pure source of rhetorics. *'Bozhe moy*' (*mon Dieu* – rather than 'My God'), where has it gone, all that distant, bright, endearing (*vsyo eto dalyokoe, svetloe, miloe* – in Russian no subject is needed here, since these are neuter adjectives that play the part of abstract nouns, on a bare stage, in a subdued light). (Chapter Twelve, 5)

In her fifth, and last, letter to Ganin (the main character in VN’s novel *Mashen’ka*), Mary asks Ganin:

Боже мой, где оно,-- всё это далёкое, светлое, милое... Я чувствую, так же как и ты, что мы ещё увидимся,-- но когда, когда?
My God, where has it gone, all that distant, bright, endearing… I feel, just as you do, that we shall see each other again – but when, when?

VN’s first novel, *Mashen’ka* (“Mary,” 1926) corresponds to *Tamara* (1925), in VN’s novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) Vadim Vadimovich’s first book. The characters of LATH include Iris Black, Vadim’s fist wife who works on an indeterminable detective tale and wants to incorporate in it a love letter that she herself received:

One afternoon, in March or early April, 1930, she peeped into my room and, being admitted, handed me the duplicate of a typewritten sheet, numbered 444. It was, she said, a tentative episode in her interminable tale, which would soon display more deletions than insertions. She was stuck, she said. Diana Vane, an incidental but on the whole nice girl, sojourning in Paris, happened to meet, at a riding school, a strange Frenchman, of Corsican, or perhaps Algerian, origin, passionate, brutal, unbalanced. He mistook Diana--and kept on mistaking her despite her amused remonstrations--for his former sweetheart, also an English girl, whom he had last seen ages ago. We had here, said the author, a sort of hallucination, an obsessive fancy, which Diana, a delightful flirt with a keen sense of humor, allowed Jules to entertain during some twenty riding lessons; but then his attentions grew more realistic, and she stopped seeing him. There had been nothing between them, and yet he simply could not be dissuaded from confusing her with the girl he once had possessed or thought he had, for that girl, too, might well have been only the afterimage of a still earlier

romance or remembered delirium. It was a very bizarre situation.

Now this page was supposed to be a last ominous letter written by that Frenchman in a foreigner's English to Diana. I was to read it as if it were a real letter and suggest, as an experienced writer, what might be the next development or disaster.

*Beloved!*

*I am not capable to represent to myself that you really desire to tear up any connection with me. God sees, I love you more than life--more than two lives, your and my, together taken. Are you not ill? Or maybe you have found another? Another lover, yes? Another victim of your attraction? No, no, this thought is too horrible, too humiliating for us both. My supplication is modest and just. Give only one more interview to me! One interview! I am prepared to meet with you it does not matter where--on the street, in some cafe, in the Forest of Boulogne--but I must see you, must speak with you and open to you many mysteries before I will die. Oh, this is no threat! I swear that i our interview will lead to a positive result, if, otherwise speaking, you will permit me to hope, only to hope, then, oh then, I will consent to wait a little. But you must reply to me without retardment, my cruel, stupid, adored little girl!*

*Your Jules*

"There's one thing," I said, carefully folding the sheet and pocketing it for later study, "one thing the little girl should know. This is not a romantic Corsican writing a *crime passionnel* letter; it is a Russian blackmailer knowing just enough English to translate into it the stalest Russian locutions. What puzzles me is how did you, with your three or four words of Russian--*kak pozhivaete* and *do svidaniya*--how did you, the author, manage to think up those subtle turns, and imitate the mistakes in English that only a Russian would make? Impersonation, I know, runs in the family, but still--" (1.12)

On April 23, 1930, Vadim’s wife is shot dead by Wladimir Blagidze, *alias* Starov (who blows his brains out beside his victim’s dead body). After Iris’s death, Nadezhda Gordonovna Starov (the killer’s former wife) attempts to meet Vadim and tell him everything:

From somewhere in the Orkneys, Nadezhda Gordonovna and a clerical friend arrived in Paris only after her husband's burial. Moved by a false sense of duty, she attempted to see me so as to tell me "everything." I evaded all contact with her, but she managed to locate Ivor in London before he left for the States. I never asked him, and the dear funny fellow never revealed to me what that "everything" was; I refuse to believe that it could have amounted to much--and I knew enough, anyway. By nature I am not vindictive; yet I like to dwell in fancy on the image of that little green train, running on, round and round, forever. (1.13)

At the end of Chapter Twelve of SM (in the same section in which he tells about Tamara’s letters) VN mentions a small and shoddy Greek ship *Nadezhda* (Hope) on which he left Russia forever:

The break in my own destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds. Ever since that exchange of letters with Tamara, homesickness has been with me a sensuous and particular matter. Nowadays, the mental image of matted grass on the Yayla, of a canyon in the Urals or of salt flats in the Aral Region, affects me nostalgically and patriotically as little, or as much, as, say, Utah; but give me anything on any continent resembling the St. Petersburg countryside and my heart melts. What it would be actually to see again my former surroundings, I can hardly imagine. Sometimes I fancy myself revisiting them with a false passport, under an assumed name. It could be done.

But I do not think I shall ever do it. I have been dreaming of it too idly and too long. Similarly, during the latter half of my sixteen-month stay in the Crimea, I planned for so long a time to join Denikin’s army, with the intention not so much of clattering astride a chamfrained charger into the cobbled outskirts of St. Petersburg (my poor Yuri’s dream) as of reaching Tamara in her Ukrainian hamlet, that the army ceased to exist by the time I had made up my mind. In March of 1919, the Reds broke through in northern Crimea, and from various ports a tumultuous evacuation of anti-Bolshevik groups began. Over a glassy sea in the bay of Sebastopol, under wild machine-gun fire from the shore (the Bolshevik troops had just taken the port), my family and I set out for Constantinople and Piraeus on a small and shoddy Greek ship *Nadezhda* (Hope) carrying a cargo of dried fruit. I remember trying to concentrate, as we were zigzagging out of the bay, on a game of chess with my father—one of the knights had lost its head, and a poker chip replaced a missing rook—and the sense of leaving Russia was totally eclipsed by the agonizing thought that Reds or no Reds, letters from Tamara would be still coming, miraculously and needlessly, to southern Crimea, and would search there for a fugitive addressee, and weakly flap about like bewildered butterflies set loose in an alien zone, at the wrong altitude, among an unfamiliar flora. (Chapter Twelve, 5)

Nadezhda Starov’s patronymic seems to hint at George Gordon Byron, a poet who had a love affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. In his last poem, ***On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year*** (1824), Byron says that he cannot be beloved. It seems that Nadezhda Gordonovna wanted to tell Vadim that Iris Black was his half-sister.

According to Dora (a lame lady whom Vadim meets during his visit to Leningrad in the 1970s), as a girl she dreamt of becoming a female clown, ‘Madam Byron’ or ‘Trek Trek:’

"But look here, can't I do something? Can't I sort of hang around and make inquiries, and perhaps seek advice from the Embassy--"

"She is not English any more and was never American. It's hopeless, I tell you. We were very close, she and I, in my very complicated life, but, imagine, Karl did not allow her to leave at least one little word for me--and for you, of course. She had informed him, unfortunately, that you were coming, and this he could not bear in spite of all the sympathy he works up for all unsympathetic people. You know, I saw your face last year--or was it two years ago?--two years, rather--in a Dutch or Danish magazine, and I would have recognized you at once, anywhere."

"With the beard?"

"Oh, it does not change you one droplet. It's like wigs or green spectacles in old comedies. As a girl I dreamt of becoming a female clown, ‘Madam Byron,' or ‘Trek Trek.' But tell me, Vadim Vadimovich--I mean Gospodin Long--haven't they found you out? Don't they intend to make much of you? After all, you're the secret pride of Russia. Must you go now?" (5. 2)

Parting with Dora, Vadim kisses her hand:

I kissed her hand whereupon she remarked that she had seen it done only in a movie called *War and Peace*. (ibid.)

When Vadim and Iris visit Count Starov (who seems to be Vadim’s real father, and the father of Vadim’s three wives) at his villa in Mentone, Nikifor Nikodimovich kisses Iris’ hand (see my previous post “Mason & hand-kissing in LATH; silent love, Grib & Baron d'Onsky in *Ada*”).

*War and Peace* (1869) is a novel by Tolstoy. According to Vadim, it was Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy, who summoned him to look at the harlequins:

I saw my parents infrequently. They divorced and remarried and redivorced at such a rapid rate that had the custodians of my fortune been less alert, I might have been auctioned out finally to a pair of strangers of Swedish or Scottish descent, with sad bags under hungry eyes. An extraordinary grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy, amply replaced closer blood. As a child of seven or eight, already harboring the secrets of a confirmed madman, I seemed even to her (who also was far from normal) unduly sulky and indolent; actually, of course, I kept daydreaming in a most outrageous fashion.

"Stop moping!" she would cry: "Look at the harlequins!

"What harlequins? Where?"

"Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together--jokes, images--and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!"

I did. By Jove, I did. I invented my grand-aunt in honor of my first daydreams, and now, down the marble steps of memory's front porch, here she slowly comes, sideways, sideways, the poor lame lady, touching each step edge with the rubber tip of her black cane. (1.2)

Alexey Sklyarenko