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The Cave

Translated by Richard Ravenal

Glaciers, mammoths, wastes. Black nocturnal cliffs, vaguely like houses; in the cliffs-caves. And who can tell what creature trumpets at night along the rocky path among the cliffs and, sniffing the path, blows up clouds of white powdery snow: perhaps a gray-trunked mammoth; perhaps the wind; but the wind may be only the icy roar of some enormous mammoth. One thing is clear: it's winter. And you must clench your teeth more tightly to keep them from chattering; and you must split your wood with a stone ax; and every night you must carry your bonfire from cave, to cave, deeper and deeper, and wrap more and more shaggy animal hides around you...

Among the cliffs, where in ages past St. Petersburg had stood, a gray-trunked mammoth roamed by night. And wrapped in hides, overcoats, blankets and rags, the cave-dwellers retreated from cave to cave. On the Feast of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin, Martin Martynych and Masha boarded up the study; three weeks later they moved out of the dining room and took refuge in the bedroom: That was the last retreat; there they either had to hold fast—or die.

In that Petersburg cave bedroom, things were as they had been in Noah's Ark not long before: clean and unclean creatures thrown together by the exigency of the flood. Martin Martynych's desk, books, stone-age pancakes looking like potter's clay, Scriabin's Opus 74, a flatiron, five potatoes lovingly scrubbed till they shone, nickel-plated bedsprings, an ax, a chiffonier, firewood. And in the center of this whole universe was a god—a short-legged, rusty-red, squat, greedy cave-god: the iron stove.

The god was roaring mightily. The great miracle of fire warmed the dark cave. Martin Martynych and Masha—the cave dwellers—reverently, silently, thankfully, stretched their arms toward him. For one hour it was spring in the cave; for one hour hides, claws, tusks were shed and through the frozen brain-crust sprouted green shoots—thoughts.

"Mart, you haven't forgotten that tomorrow...? Yes, I see you *have* forgotten!

In October, when the leaves have just yellowed and are beginning to wither and droop, there are blue-eyed days; if you tilt your head up on such a day, so that you no longer see the earth, it is possible to believe that joy and summer still exist. And with Masha too, if you close your eyes now and just listen to her, it is possible to believe that she is still the Masha of old, and that any moment she will laugh, get out of bed and give you a hug—not at all the same Masha

whose voice an hour before sounded like a knife scraping on glass, not the same person at all.

"Oh, Mart, Mart! You always forget... You never used to. The twenty-ninth—St. Mary's Day."

The iron god continued to roar. As usual, there was not light: they would not turn it on until ten. The dark shaggy vaults of the cave were swaying. Martin Martynych, squatting on his haunches, drew himself into a knot (tighter, tighter!), and throwing back his head, stared at the October sky so as not to see (oh, not to see!) those faded, drooping lips. But Masha:

"Listen, Mart: if we could light the stove tomorrow at dawn so that all day it will be the way it is now! What about it? How much do we have? Isn't there still about a cord left in the study?

It had been ages since Masha had been able to drag herself to the Polar study, and she did not know that there it was already... Pull the knot tighter, tighter!

"A cord? There's more! I think we have more there...."

At the stroke of ten, suddenly—light! Without finishing his sentence, Martin Martynych screwed up his eyes and turned away: it was harder in the light than in the darkness. And in the light his face looked crumpled and dull as clay. Many people have clay faces now: like Adam. But Masha—

"You know, Mart, maybe I'll try and get up tomorrow ... if you light the fire first thing."

"Of course, Masha ... On a day like that ... Of course, of course ... Very first thing."

The cave god was quieting down now, shrinking into himself. Soon he made no sound at all except for a faint crackling. Below at the Obertyshevs' someone had begun to split the gnarled logs of an old barge with a stone ax—and that same stone ax split Martin Martynych in two. One piece of Martin Martynych was smiling a clay smile at Masha and grinding a dried potato skin into the coffee mill pancakes; and the other piece of Martin Martynych, like, a bird which has flown into a room and is trapped there, was senselessly and blindly knocking against the ceiling, the walls and the window-panes: "Where to get wood—where to get wood—where to get wood?"

Martin Martynych put on his overcoat and fastened a belt around it (one of the cave dwellers' myths is that this keeps you warmer). The pail in the corner by the chiffonier rattled as he picked it up.

"Where are you off to, Mart?,

"Back right away. Downstairs for water."

On the dark stairs, iced over from splashed water, Martin Martynych stood a while, swaying slightly; then he sighed and, clanking the pail like a prisoner's chain, descended to the Obertyshevs': their water was still running. Obertyshev himself opened the door, wearing a rope-sashed coat. He had not shaved for a long time, and his face looked like a vacant lot overgrown with dusty reddish weeds. Through the weeds poked yellow stone teeth, and between the stones flashed a lizard's tail—a smile:

"Ah, Martin Martynych Here for some water, are you? Please, please, please."

The compartment between the outer and inner doors was so narrow that you could not turn around in it with a pail: it was here that Obertyshev kept his wood. Martin Martynych, the clay man, knocked against the wood, and a deep painful dent appeared in his side. He got an even deeper dent when he knocked against the corner of a commode in the dark corridor. He crossed the dining room: in the dining room was Obertyshev's mate with the three Obertyshev cubs. She hastily hid a soup plate under a napkin: A human had come from another cave, and—Godknows!—he might fall on her and seize it.

In the kitchen Obertyshev turned on the faucet and smiled his stone-toothed smile:

"Well, how's the wife? How's the wife? How's the wife?"

"What can I say, Alexei Ivanych? Same as ever. In a bad way. Why, tomorrow's her name day, and I don't even have..."

"Who does, Martin Martynych? Who does, who does?"

In the kitchen the trapped bird flew up, beating its wings frantically and darting to the right, to the left—then in sudden despair it dashed its breast against the wall:

"Alexei Ivanych, I wanted to ask... Alexei Ivanych, couldn't I borrow just five or six pieces of wood from you?"

Yellow stone teeth poked through the weeds, yellow teeth sprouted from the eyes, Obertyshev became a jungle of teeth which grew longer and longer.

"What an idea, Martin Martynych! What an idea, what an idea! We ourselves are ... you know very well how things are now, you know very well, you know very well. ..."

Pull the knot tighter, still tighter! Martin Martynych gave a last twist, lifted the pail and made his way through the kitchen, through the dark corridor, through the dining room. At the threshold of the dining room, Obertyshev pulled out his instant lizard-nimble hand:

"Well, take care... But don't forget to slam the door shut, Martin Martynych, don't forget! Both doors, both, both—hard enough to keep warm!"

On the dark icy landing, Martin Martynych set the pail down, turned around and slammed the first door tight shut. He listened but heard only the dry quaking of his bones and the dotted line formed by his shaky breathing. In the narrow compartment between the two doors he put out his hand and felt around—one piece of wood, and another, and

another... No! He quickly shoved himself back onto the landing and closed the door. Now he would only have to slam it a little harder for the lock to click....

But he did not have the heart to do it. He did not have the heart to slam the door on Masha's tomorrow. And on the line formed by his faint dots of breath, the old Martin Martynych was engaged in a death struggle with the new: the old Martin Martynych, the Scriabin one, who knew "Thou shalt not!" and the new one, the cave man, who said "You must!" The cave man, gnashing his teeth, trampled and throttled his adversary, and Martin Martynych, breaking his nails, opened the door and plunged his hand into the woodpile one piece, four, five pieces he put under his coat, in his belt, into the pail. Then he slammed the door and dashed upstairs with huge animal bounds. Halfway up the stairs, on one of the ice-coated steps, he suddenly froze with terror and pressed himself against the wall: downstairs the door clicked again, and the dusty voice of Obertyshev called out:

"Who's there? Who's there? Who's there?"

"It's me, Alexei Ivanych. I—I forgot the door ... I wanted ... I went back-to slam it shut..."

"You? Hm ... How could you be so careless? You'll have to be more careful, more careful. Nowadays everybody steals, you know very well, you know very well. How could you be so careless?"

The twenty-ninth. From early morning a low cotton-batting sky rent with holes through which an icy wind blew down. But the cave god's belly had been stuffed since early morning, and he hummed benevolently. So let there be holes in the sky, let Obertyshev, that jungle of teeth, count his woodpile—what did it matter: there is only today; "tomorrow" has no meaning in a cave; only after centuries will "tomorrow" and "the day after tomorrow" again have meaning.

Masha got up and, swaying as if in response to secret breezes, did her hair in the old way: back over her ears and parted in the middle. And she was like a last withered leaf fluttering on a naked tree. From the middle drawer of his desk, Martin Martynych pulled out papers, letters, a thermometer, a small blue medicine-bottle (which he hastily shoved back so that Masha wouldn't see it)—and finally, from the farthest corner he drew out a little black lacquered box: in the bottom of it there was still some tea, some real—yes, yes, very real—tea! They drank real tea. And Martin Martynych, tilting his head upward, heard a voice very much like the one he used to know.

"Mart, do you remember? My blue room and the piano with the cover on it, and on the piano the ash tray with the little wooden horse, and I was playing, and you came up to me from behind, ..."

Yes, on that evening the universe was created, and the wondrous wise snout of the moon, and the nightingale trill of bells in the hall.

"Do you remember, Mart: the open window, the green sky, and below—from another world—an organ-grinder?"

Organ-grinder, marvelous organ-grinder—where are you now?

"And on the embankment—do you remember? The ranches still bare, the water rosy, and past us floated the last blue block of ice, like a coffin. And the idea of a coffin seemed funny to us... because of course we would never die. Do you remember?"

Downstairs someone had begun to split wood with a stone ax. Suddenly the sound stopped, and there was some commotion, followed by a shout. Martin Martynych was split in two: one half of him saw the immortal organ-grinder, the immortal wooden horse, the immortal block of ice; while the other half—breathing in a shaky dotted line—counted off the pieces of wood with Obertyshev. And now Obertyshev has finished counting, and, sprouting a jungle of teeth, he throws on his overcoat and ferociously slams the door. And now...

"Wait, Masha, I think—I think someone's knocking."

No. No one. No one yet. You can still breathe, still tilt your head upward and listen to her voice, so like her old voice.

Twilight. The twenty-ninth of October had grown old. Worried, peering old woman's eyes—everything shrinks, wrinkles, hunches up under those peering eyes. The ceiling is caving in, everything is flattening-out—the armchairs, the desk, Martin Martynych, the beds; and on the bed, completely flattened out like a piece of paper—Masha.

At dusk Selikhov the house chairman came. He had once been a strapping two-hundred-fifty pounder, but by now had fallen away to half his size and clattered around in the shell of his jacket like a nut in a rattle. But he still had his old rumbling laugh.

"Well, Martin Martynych, in the first place, in the second place, congratulations to your spouse on her name day. Of course, of course. Obertyshev told me..."

Martin Martynych bolted from his chair like a gunshot, rushed to speak—say something, anything....

"Some tea?... right away—in just a minute... today we're drinking—real tea. Real! I'll just..."

"Tea? I'd really prefer champagne, you know. Haven't got any? Well, what do you know! Haw-haw-haw! A couple days ago a friend and I made some brew from Hoffmann drops. It was a howl! We got stewed to the gills. 'I am Zinoviev,' says my friend. 'Down on your knees!' It was a howl! Going home from there I meet a fellow at Marsovo Field with only his vest on, swear to God! 'What's up?' I say. 'Nothing much,' says he. 'Just been stripped clean by robbers, so I'm running home to Vasilyevsky Island!' It was a howl."

Flattened, paper-like Masha laughed in her bed. Tying himself in a tight knot, Martin Martynych laughed louder and louder—to give Selikhov fuel to go on, so he wouldn't stop, so he would talk about something else ...

But Selikhov was petering out; soon he was silent except for a few gentle snorts. He rattled around in the shell of his jacket; then he got up.

"Well, birthday girl, let's have your little hand. G.A.F. What, you don't get it? It's *Greetings And Felicitations*, the way *they* would say it—G.A.F. It's a howl!"

He lumbered into the hallway, then into the entry. One last second: now he will either go away or ...

The floor began to sway and spin under Martin Martynych's feet. With a clay smile on his face, Martin Martynych held onto the doorpost. Selikhov puffed as he stamped his feet into his huge boots.

Mammoth-like in his boots and fur coat, he straightened up and caught his breath. Then he silently took Martin Martynych by the hand, silently opened the door to the Polar study and silently sat down on the sofa.

The floor of the study was an ice floe; softly the ice floe cracked and broke off from the shore—and it carried Martin Martynych off, spinning him around till he could scarcely hear Selikhov's voice, coming from the far bank of the divan.

"In the first place, in the second place, my dear sir, I must tell you: I'd crush this Obertyshev like a louse, by God... But you understand, since he has made a formal declaration and says he'll go to the police tomorrow... what a louse! I can only give you a piece of advice: this very day, this very minute, take the wood back to Obertyshev and shove it down his throat to keep him quiet."

The ice block was spinning faster and faster. Tiny, flattened, all but invisible—like a splinter—Martin Martynych replied, but seemed to be talking to himself; and not about the wood but about something else:

"All right. This very day. This very minute."

"Excellent, excellent! He is such a louse, such a louse, I tell you..."

It was still dark in the cave. Clay-faced, cold, blind Martin Martynych clumsily bumped against the medley of things which had been deposited in the cave by the flood. He shuddered: that voice, like Masha's the way it used to be:

"What were you and Selikhov talking about? Ration books? I was lying here thinking: why not get up our courage and go somewhere where there's sun... What are you clumping around for like that! You must be doing it on purpose. you know very well I can't stand it—I can't, I can't, I can't!"

Like a knife scraping on glass. But what did it matter now? Arms and legs like machines. To raise and lower them you had to have chains and a windlass or ship's hoist, and to turn the windlass not one man but three were needed.

Drawing on the chains with all his strength, Martin Martynych put the tea kettle and pan on the stove and threw in the last piece of Obertyshev's wood.

"Do you hear what I'm saying to you? Why don't you answer? Do you bear me?"

Of course this wasn't Masha, no, it was not her voice

Martin Martynych moved more and more slowly, his feet 'became bogged down in quicksand; it grew harder and harder to turn the windlass. Suddenly the chain slipped off the pulley; the arm of the hoist dropped down and sent the teakettle and pan tumbling noisily onto the floor. The cave god hissed like a snake. and from somewhere else, from the far shore, all the way from the bed, came the shrill voice of a stranger:

"You're doing it on purpose! Go away! This minute! I don't need you or anyone else—I want nothing, nothing, nothing! Go away!"

The twenty-ninth of October was dead; dead were the immortal organ-grinder, the block of ice in the sunset-reddened water, and Masha too. And it hardly mattered. For there could be no improbably tomorrow, no Obertyshev, no Selikhov, no Martin Martynych: everything had to die.

Mechanically, remotely, Martin Martynych still went through certain motions. perhaps he lit the stove again, picked up the pan from the floor and brought the tea kettle to a boil; and perhaps Masha said something to him—he did not hear: there were only the dully aching dents in the clay made by certain words, and by the corners of the chiffonier, the chairs, the desk.

Martin Martynych slowly drew from the desk bundles of letters, a thermometer, sealing wax, the box with the tea in it and more letters. Finally, from somewhere in the very bottom, he drew out the little dark-blue medicine bottle.

Ten o'clock: the lights went on. Electric light—cold, hard, naked, simple, like life and death in the cave. And just as simple beside the flatiron, Opus 74 and the pancakes—the little blue medicine bottle.

The iron god hummed benevolently, devouring the parchment-yellow, bluish and white paper of the letters. The lid of the tea kettle began to rattle, gently calling attention to itself. Masha turned around:

"Is the tea boiling? Mart, darling, give me some, won't you?"

Then she saw. An instant pierced through and through with clear, naked, cruel electric light: hunched in front of the stove Martin Martynych; a rosy glow on the letters, as on the water at sunset; and there, over there—the little blue medicine bottle.

"Mart... Do you... do you want to so soon...?"

Silence. Indifferently devouring the immortal words—the bitter, tender, yellow, white, blue words—the iron god was purring gently. And Masha, as simply as if she were asking for tea:

"Mart, dearest! Mart—give it to me!"

Martin Martynych smiled from afar:

"But you know, Masha: there's only enough for one."

"Mart, there's nothing left of me now. This is no longer me—I'm going to do it, Mart... Mart, you understand, don't you, Mart!"

Oh, that same voice, her old voice... and if you tilt your head upward...

"I deceived you, Masha; there's no more wood in the study. I went to Obertyshev's, and between the doors were... I stole them—do you understand? And Selikhov came to see me... I've got to bring them back at once, but I burned them all—I burned them all—all of them!"

Unconcernedly the iron god began to doze off. As it flickered out, the walls of the cave still shuddered spasmodically, as did the houses, the cliffs, the mammoths, Masha.

"Mart, if you still love me... Mart, remember back! Mart, darling!"

The immortal wooden horse, the organ-grinder, the block of ice. And this voice... Martin Martynych slowly rose from his knees. Slowly, laboriously turning the crank he took the little blue medicine bottle from the table and handed it to Masha.

She threw off the covers and sat up in bed—rosy, swift, immortal as the water once at sunset; then, laughing, she seized the bottle.

"There, you see: I didn't lie here and think about going away somewhere for nothing. Light another lamp—this one here, on the table. So. Now put some more wood in the stove.

"Now... Go take a little walk. I think the moon is out—my moon, remember? Don't forget to take the key, because you're bound to slam the door, and then there'll be nobody to...

No, there was no moon. Only the cave of the world, silent and immense, and the dark heavy low-hung clouds—its vaulted ceiling. Narrow endless passages between the walls; and dark icy cliffs, like houses; in the cliffs, deep purple hollows: in the hollows, crouched around fires—humans. A light icy draft blows white powder up from under your feet; and over the white powder and icy cliffs, above the caves and crouching humans, with huge measured steps, an enormous mammoth silently moves.