

WHITE WALLS

Collected Stories

TATYANA TOLSTAYA

Translated by

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SEE THE OTHER SIDE

A HOT DAY in May in Ravenna, the small Italian city where Dante is buried. Once upon a time—right at the start of the fifth century A.D.—the Emperor Honorius transferred the capital of the Western Roman Empire to this city. Once there was a port here, but the sea receded long ago, and in its place are swamps, roses, dust, and vineyards. Ravenna is famous for its mosaics; hordes of tourists move from one church to another, craning their necks to glimpse the dim luster of tiny multi-colored smalti high up under the dusky vaults. Something can be made out there, but not very well. One of the glossy postcards will give you a better view, though awfully bright, flat, and cheap-looking.

I'm suffocating, hot, and dusty. I'm depressed. My father died, and I loved him so much! Once, long, long ago, almost forty years back, he passed through Ravenna and sent me a postcard showing one of the famous mosaics. On the reverse side—in pencil for some reason, he must have been in a hurry—he wrote: "Sweetheart! I have never seen anything so sublime (see the other side) in my life! Makes you want to cry! Oh, if only you were here! Your Father!"

Each sentence ends with a silly exclamation mark—he was young, he was cheerful, maybe he'd had a glass of wine. I can see him with his felt hat cocked in the manner of the late fifties, a cigarette between white teeth—which were still his own then—beads of sweat on his forehead. Tall, slim, handsome: his

eyes shine happily behind the glass circles of his spectacles . . . The postcard—which he dropped in a mailbox, lightheartedly entrusting it to two unreliable postal services, the Italian and the Russian—shows heaven. The Lord sits in the midst of a blindingly green paradise of eternal spring, white sheep grazing all around. The two unreliable postal services, Russian and Italian, crumpled the corners of the postcard, but it was all right, the message was received and everything could be seen.

If heaven exists, then my father is there. Where else would he be? But the only thing is, he died—he died and doesn't write me postcards with exclamation marks anymore, he no longer sends tidings from all points of the globe: I'm here, I love you. Do you love me? Do you share my pleasure and joy? Do you see the beauty that I see? Greetings! Here's a postcard! Here's a cheap, glossy photograph—I was here! It's wonderful! Oh, if only you could be here, too!

He traveled all over the world, and he liked the world.

Now, as much as I can, I follow his footsteps. I go to the same towns, try to see them with his eyes, try to imagine him young, turning that corner, climbing those steps, leaning on the railing of the embankment with a cigarette in his teeth. This time I'm in Ravenna, a dusty, stuffy, exhausting place like all tourist sites where crowds fill narrow streets. It's a dead, trivial, hot town, with no place to sit down. The tomb of Dante, exiled from his native Florence. The tomb of Theodorich. The mausoleum of Galla Placidia, sister of Flavius Honorius, the very same one who made Ravenna the capital of the Western Empire. Fifteen centuries passed. Everything changed. Everything grew dusty, the mosaics crumbled. What had once been important—is unimportant; what once excited—has vanished in the sands. The sea itself receded, and where merry green waves once splashed, there are now wastelands, dust, silence, hot vineyards. Forty years ago—a whole lifetime ago—my father strolled and laughed here; his myopic eyes squinted; he sat

at a street table, drank red wine, and tore off bites of pizza with his own strong teeth. The dark blue night fell. And on the edge of a table, in pencil, he scribbled a few hurried words to me scattering exclamation marks all over, expressing his delight and love for the world.

The overcast sky is stifling. It's hot, but the sun can't be seen. Dust is everywhere. Land that was once the bottom of the sea now lies around the town in wide, fertile fields; where crabs once crawled, donkeys now pick their way; in place of seaweed, roses grow rampant. Everything died and went to seed. Along the once splendid streets of the Western world's capital, disappointed American tourists wander in pink sweatshirts, unhappy because the tourist agency has tricked them once again: everything in this Europe is so dinky, so small, and so old! Fifteen centuries. Dante's grave. The tomb of Galla Placidia. My father's grave. Some sort of naive green paradise on a wrinkled postcard.

What was it that amazed him here? I find the right church, I look up—yes, there's something green there, high up under the vault. White sheep on a green meadow. The usual dim light. The discordant hum of tourists below. Their fingers point, they look for explanations in their guidebooks. Such-and-such a century, such-and-such a style. Everything's the same everywhere, always. You can hardly see.

In every Italian church there's a box on the wall for money—an added service for those interested. If you put in three hundred lira—a quarter of a dollar—then for several moments bright spotlights turn on near the ceiling, illuminating the stones of the mosaic in fresh white light. The colors brighten. You can see details. The crowd grows excited, its hum grows louder. Only a quarter of a dollar. You've already come so far, you paid for the plane ticket, for the train, for the hotel, the pizza, the cold drinks, the coffee. What is it now, you begrudge a few extra cents? But many do. They're annoyed; they weren't forewarned. They want to see heaven for free. A bunch of

tourists waits for some generous, impatient person to deposit a coin in the slot of the swindling Italian apparatus—all Italians are swindlers, isn't that right?—and then the spotlights will flare, and for a short moment, insufficient for the human eye, paradise will be greener, the sheep more innocent, the Lord—kinder. The crowd rumbles more loudly... but the light goes off, and the din of disappointed tourists collapses from a momentary grumble of protest to a greedy growl, to a whispered disappointment. And again everything is coated in gloom.

I wander from church to church along with the crowd. I listen to its muffled, multilingual murmur, like the rush of the sea; a slow human whirlpool spins me around, and tired, inane faces flash by—as inane as my own; eyeglasses glint, the pages of guidebooks rustle. I squeeze through the narrow doors of churches, trying to push past my neighbor, trying, like everyone else, to get a better spot, trying not to become irritated. After all, I think, if heaven truly exists, then it's likely I'll enter it with just such a flock of sheep, of people—old, not very smart, a bit greedy. Because if heaven isn't for us, then who's it for, I'd like to know? Are there really others, special people, people who are noticeably better than us ordinary, statistically average souls?

No, there aren't any, so I may have to plod across those green meadows in a herd of American tourists, disgruntled because everything is so ancient and small-scale. And if that's the case, then that means heaven is awful and boring—which by definition shouldn't be true. Everything in heaven should be utterly sublime.

"I have never seen anything so sublime (see the other side) in my life!" my father wrote me. See the other side. An ordinary paradise. What did he see that I don't see?

Along with the crowd I squeeze into a small building about which the early-twentieth-century Russian traveler Pavel Muratov once wrote in his famous book *Images of Italy*:

The blue of the ceiling of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia is unusually dark and deep—almost inscrutably so. Depending on the light penetrating through the small windows, it will shimmer, in a wonderful and unexpectedly marvelous manner with either a greenish, lilac, or crimson hue. It is against this background that the famous depiction of the youthful Good Shepherd, sitting among snow-white sheep, is placed. The half-circles near the windows are decorated with a large ornamental motif of deer drinking from a spring. Garlands of fruit and leaves wind along the lower arches. On viewing their magnificence one cannot help but think that never has mankind arrived at a more satisfactory solution to the problem of decorating a church wall. Owing to the small size of the mausoleum chapel, the mosaics do not create the impression of vain, cold pomp. The very air around the sarcophagus itself, which once contained the embalmed body of the Empress, appears to shine with blue fire; it is worthy of being the dream of an ardently religious imagination. Was this not what the stained-glass artists strove to achieve in the Gothic cathedrals, though in a different way?

Marvelous words! But, having pushed myself into the chapel, I can't see anything. Maybe the guide once illuminated the church with a torch for Muratov, but now it's simply dark here, and the scanty light that only barely makes its way through the windows is blocked by tourists' backs. The crowd stands dense and stubborn, elbow to elbow. You have to put coins in the light box, but no one's in a hurry, everyone is waiting for someone else to do it. I'm in no hurry either. "I've put coins in lots of times," my internal voice says, in justification, "let others do it this time." A minute passes in the stuffy dark. Another minute. "I won't give in," each of us thinks. The

darkness presses on your head. It smells like mice, mold, and something else very old—as though time itself smelled that way. Then human smells come through—aging flesh, perfume, breath mints, sweat, tobacco. That’s the way it will be right after death: dark, someone’s breathing and sniffing in the dark; heat, anticipation, a subtle hostility to one’s fellow travelers, a polite decision not to show this hostility; small egotism, stubbornness, hope, doubt. The waiting room on the road to heaven—where else is there to go? “I have never seen anything so sublime (see the other side) in my life! Makes you want to cry!” my father wrote from paradise.

Finally, the familiar click resounds—someone has taken the plunge; as before, the light turns on briefly for an instant. The shortest moment—the eye doesn’t have time to take in the ceiling, the eye casts about—for a short moment the dull, hot darkness overhead suddenly becomes a starry sky, a dark blue cupola with huge, shimmering stars close to the eyes. “Ahhhhh!” comes the sound from below, and the light goes out, and again there’s darkness, even darker than before. And again the click, and again the fantastic, multicolored stars, like spinning Ferris wheels, and that very same “air shining with blue fire”—a momentary vision—and again gloom. Once again the clink of a falling coin, again the click—the glorious vision, don’t leave, stay with us!—and again the blow of darkness. The crowd of sinners stands as though enchanted, faces lifted. A path has opened in the darkness, a promise has been given, evidence has been presented: all will be saved, no explanations necessary—the magical dark blue abyss, raised over us by nameless artists, speaks for itself, sings in a wordless language. The blue flows down toward the baskets of fruits and leaves...everything disappears, but again and again the light flashes, and the fête becomes endless, and the angels will begin singing any minute now. Let there be light!

I squeeze carefully through the crowd, I want to steal a

glance at the insatiable being who has put on these fireworks, who has rolled back the walls of the sepulcher with light. He sits in a wheelchair, his face lowered. There's a box of coins on his lap. His hand gropes for a coin, sticks it into the machine's slot, and for a short moment, while the blue is tinted with lilac and crimson fire, a woman guide hurriedly whispers words in his ear that I can't hear, and even if I could, I wouldn't understand: I don't know this language.

This man—is blind. He has the reserved and patient face of all blind people, his eyelids are closed, his head bowed, his ear bent toward his companion. Who is she to him—daughter, wife, or simply a person hired to accompany him on his travels? He listens to her whisper and occasionally nods his head: *yes yes*. He wants to hear more, he puts in coin after coin. He throws coins into the darkness, and from the darkness sounds a voice that tells him, as well as possible, about the great comfort of beauty.

He listens his fill, nods, smiles, and the woman deftly wheels his chair around in the crowd and rolls him out of the mausoleum. People look at them: he doesn't care, and she's probably used to it. The chair bounces along the cobblestones of the square, affording the sitter a little additional suffering. A bit of rain drips from the clouds, but soon stops.

"See the other side!" But there's nothing on the other side, on the other side there's only darkness, heat, silence, irritation, doubt, dejection. On the other side—there's the depiction, worn with age, of something that was important long, long ago, but not to me. "Makes you want to cry," father wrote forty years ago of the beauty that struck him then (and perhaps about something greater). I feel like crying because he no longer exists, and I don't know where he's gone, and all that's left of him is a mountain of papers and this postcard with the green heaven, which I move from volume to volume like a bookmark.

But maybe that is not the way things are, maybe everything

was calculated long, long ago, everything has gone according to plan, and only now has the plan taken effect? An anonymous Byzantine master, inspired by faith, imagined the beauty of the Lord's garden. He expressed it in his language as well as he could, maybe he was even frustrated that he didn't have the skill to do more. Centuries passed, my father arrived in Ravenna, lifted his head, saw the vision of Eden, bought a cheap little picture of the picture, and sent it to me with love fortified by exclamation marks—everyone chooses their own language. And if he hadn't sent it, I wouldn't have come here, I wouldn't have visited the dark chapel, I wouldn't have encountered the blind man, I wouldn't have seen how, with a wave of his hand, the blue light of heaven's threshold flares on the other side of the darkness.

Because we are just as blind, no, we're a thousand times blinder than that old man in the wheelchair. We hear whispers but we plug our ears, we are shown but we turn away. We have no faith: we're afraid to believe because we're afraid that we'll be deceived. We are certain that we are in the tomb. We are certain that there's nothing in the dark. There can't be anything in the dark.

They move away down the narrow streets of the small, dead town, and the woman pushes the chair and says something, leaning over toward the blind man's ear, and she probably falters, and she chooses her words, words I would never choose. He laughs at something and she straightens his collar, adds coins to the box on his lap, then goes into a taverna and brings him out a piece of pizza. He eats gratefully, messily, his hand touching the invisible, marvelous food in the darkness.

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