

**Excerpt from *Stories* by Nataliya Meshchaninova, tr. Fiona Bell
Forthcoming Fall 2021, Deep Vellum**

Ever since I was a kid, almost all my fears have been about my mother. I don't know if this is because she had heart problems (born with a defect), or because until I was six, I only saw her hysterical, never happy... Anyway, by the time my milk teeth came in, my greatest fear was that she would die. A car would hit her. Yes, she'd be on her way home from work and get hit by a car. Maybe she'd already been hit. I'd look outside, sitting like a frog on the windowsill. She's not coming home from work. Here's the bus, everyone's getting off at the stop, trailing home like ants. But Mom's not there. She's definitely been hit by a car! Or maybe not. She'd fall out the window. She'd just be hanging the laundry or washing the window, when she'd lose her balance. She would fall. Good luck surviving a fall from the fifth floor. Or maybe not. She would die of a heart attack. She'd already had one before. She wouldn't survive a second one. Or what if something happened to me? She'd die of grief. Or from a heart attack brought on by grief...

Never upset Mom – I learned that quickly. That's why I became an expert at lying before I was even out of diapers. My lies didn't stop her from worrying, but they did make me feel like I was guarding her, and my fear for her life receded a little. As far as my mom knew, I was always doing great. I got straight A's, went to clubs, wrote poetry, and put the toys away in my room. My fear of upsetting my mother was stronger than the truth, stronger than my own self-interest. My fear of losing her was paralyzing.

I was also terrified of war. I don't know where this fear came from, since no one ever told me any scary stories. Even though Grandpa was wounded in the war, he never stirred my imagination with his memories of battle. I didn't watch war movies, either – even the thought was unbearable. I think my fear of war came from my dreams. I had them often, almost always the same way. I was a man, a soldier, rushing across a field toward the forest. There was a German helicopter flying above me, and I felt the machine-gun fire plowing across the wet grass and finally overtaking me. Always like that: I got stitched through with a line of huge bullets and it hurt like hell. I heard triumphant German voices. Then I died. Afterwards I woke up, but I couldn't move my arms or legs, and I couldn't scream either, so I lay there dead as a doornail and thought: “Now that I've been killed at war, Mom will definitely die of grief.” These war dreams crawled over me night after night, rustling like cockroaches. They alternated with dreams where my mom fell off a cliff and hit the rocks below with a thud.

My friend told me to write my fear down on a piece of paper, as if it had already happened. Most importantly, it had to be in secret code. Then my fear would go away. I'd learned a code somewhere: first you write the alphabet from top to bottom, then on the other side you write it bottom to top. You end up with A-Z, B-Y, C-X, and so on. I wrote the following in code: "Nln tlg srg yb z xzi" ("Mom got hit by a car"). I put the note somewhere on my shelf. My mom found it and thought that I'd been sleepwalking again. She took it to show the women at work what nonsense I had written in my sleep. The women were alarmed, but eventually forgot about it. A few years later, Mom actually did get hit by a car and barely survived. Everyone who knew her donated liters of blood. I begged the hospital to take more blood, more! Every week I went to the donation center and they chased me out because you're not allowed to give blood that often. For a long time, my mom was on the edge of death and I lived in her hospital ward. When she was sleeping very quietly, I watched her stomach nervously. Phew, all right, it's still moving, just barely visible. She's breathing, she's alive. I blamed myself for everything. Why did I write that note, and in code, no less? I thought it worked like a spell: whatever you wrote came true. This theory was confirmed a few more times, but overall it wasn't exactly scientifically proven, so no one believed me when I said, "Never write bad things – they'll come true."

All that came later, though. Back then, when I was a kid, my fear of my mom's death was unsubstantiated. But that loss already existed somewhere inside me, and whenever I thought about it, I felt a viscid pain. I never told my mom.

But I had more important things to worry about! The troublemakers. Scary, disgusting groups of pimply teenagers in front of school. Their dirty hands, stinking of tobacco, tugging at your skirt, which was two years old but still pretty clean. On my way to school I waited until I spotted a teacher to cling onto. "Heyyyyyyy, Inna Alexandrovna! I'll walk with you! Yep! Great! Of course, I did my homework!"

The whole class was nothing but troublemakers. One girl was always masturbating in literature class, her face all red. Everyone except the teacher knew what she was doing. After class, in the back room, oh the things they did to her. She was too ashamed to scream, but she did huff and puff. It was scary, so scary. Between periods, you had to rush out into the hallway – even if it meant taking a smack on the butt and a blow to the ego – just so you didn't hear the noise coming from the back room, that girl, that stifled laughter, that strange yelping. Why didn't the teachers notice anything? Why did they sleepwalk to the teachers' lounge as soon as the bell

rang? Why did they allow that huffing and puffing in the back room?

Mom, I'm not going to school today. Mom, my foot. My foot hurts a lot. I don't need to go to the doctor, it's rheumatism. (How did I come up with that?) My mom believed me, somehow. She believed every lie I told, no matter how ridiculous.

It's evening. My mom yells from the hallway: "Natasha! Someone's here for you!" In the doorway behind her I see HIM, the worst of the worst. I pass his apartment every day; he lives on the second floor. As I run past his door, I always feel like he's watching me through the peephole and sneering with the most wretched, depraved smirk.

MOTH-ER! Why can't you see – he's one of the troublemakers! Mom! Why are you calling me to the door? Why didn't you tell him I'm not here? I'm not home and never will be. Why aren't you grabbing him by the ear and threatening to hurt him? How come you're calling me with that sing-song voice, as if my best friend came over to fold origami???

I went out to see him. His eyes grazed over me, and for some reason he kicked between my legs. Right under the balls, if I'd had any. "Tomorrow you're gonna bring me money. As much as you got. Or else I'll jump on you from a tree."

He started jumping on me from trees regularly, since I didn't have any money to my name. They must have taught the troublemakers how to jump from trees or something...

I gathered my things and some food and started off along the railroad tracks. To Moscow. I'd heard it was best to travel north. But since I'd blabbed to one of my friends about running away, I was brought back before evening. My mom was wringing her hands. I realized I hadn't protected her peace of mind, that my dreams of Moscow had been an unacceptable luxury. I had to find a way to survive here.

I had to become one of the troublemakers. There were no good kids in my town, nowhere for them to come from. All the kids were troublemakers: bad, disgusting, and extremely dangerous. They played dangerous games in the woods by the railroad tracks. Oh, the things that went on in those woods, which were filled with the trills of nightingales and flowering acacias.