

18+ Daydreams of Maria

Anna Gayatri



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Аннотация

A child's imagination becomes both an illusory refuge and a means of surviving trauma. Little Maria searches for love, safety, and the freedom to be herself.

In these stories, reality intertwines with fantasy: leaves become birds, toys come alive, an invisible mysterious character with his Pearl Beyond appears in an ordinary communal apartment, and a Clockmaker hides in the storage room...

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Prologue

When I Become a Tree

My name is Maria. My mother called me Manya. That name causes me pain, as does everything that came BEFORE. Now I can turn into anyone I want. Simply by walking down the street. I see a pigeon rising into the sky, and at once I feel a light yet powerful rush of air supporting my wings. I perceive the world with my peripheral vision, in entirely different colors, impossible for a human being to describe. The world becomes three-dimensional, sparkling, spinning rapidly, like a gigantic top. And I feel a strange hunger in my stomach. I need to eat. I have to eat something. And my sharp eye searches the carousel of branches, leaves, and roads for the tiniest thing that can be pecked at and swallowed...

And then I return to myself, only to slip once again into another body, another consciousness. Sometimes I like being myself, looking at the world through my own eyes. Until I fall back into childhood, and pain pierces through me.

Then I become a helpless five-year-old child again, trailing after my mother, who is always in a hurry, holding her little finger with my own, forever afraid that our fingers will come

apart and she will rush away, disappear, dissolve into the noisy, overflowing river of people. Such a rarity, such happiness — to be this clumsy little elephant, clinging with its trunk to its mother's tail. But there is something ahead — a kindergarten or a hospital, one of those endless changes. And I have to let go. And the aggressive world comes crashing down upon me. And Mama leaves, runs away, always in a hurry, relieved that the obstacle has finally disappeared from her dizzying, turbulent life.

I walk down the street. In a bright raincoat. Beneath a soft spring rain. And my gaze touches an old drainpipe, from which rainwater pours in torrents — or rather, erupts in a stream, like water spewing from a monster's jaws. And I become water, soft and shining, filled with tiny splashes of sunlight. I hold my hands beneath the gutter, and the water crashes into my palms in an icy stream.

And suddenly I fall back into my own body, and a whirlpool carries me away into that tiny room where I am alone with a tall man who is holding a pencil and a sketchbook, drawing something in it.

Not something. Someone.

Me.

He keeps glancing at me. And I sit there, huddling against the cold, because he has taken all my clothes off. It is always like this when Mama is not home. He undresses me like a doll and sits me down on the sofa. And I have to sit still.

Then, putting his drawing aside, he sits down beside me. His

long fingers begin to tickle me, and I laugh despite myself. And he starts giggling and presses his wet red lips against me. Then he unbuttons his trousers...

And then — I separate from my own body.

I am six years old. My gaze slips out the window. There is a single tree growing in our courtyard.

And I become the tree.

I feel its thick, wrinkled bark upon my little body. I no longer feel those disgusting kisses that make me sick. I feel nothing anymore.

Only the cold, clean air.

Only peace and silence.

It was my father.

My father.

When I had grown up and was finally able to tell Mama everything, she gave a little laugh.

“Nothing surprising. You were a beautiful girl. He was in love with you. And besides, he was an artist. They’re all like that.”

And I stopped wanting to be beautiful.

I stopped wanting to be myself.

And my soul continued its wanderings, begun in childhood.

I walk down the street. Red and yellow signs thrash in the furious gusts of wind. The world is full of deafening sounds — car horns, people’s voices, birds screaming.

And I want silence.

Silence and peace.

My feet carry me on their own. They follow a familiar road and bring me to a small courtyard where a single tree grows.

Strong, with mighty branches reaching toward the bottomless sky.

I walk up to it and press myself against its wet, wrinkled bark, merging with it with my whole being.

And suddenly my soul makes a strange decision:
to become a tree forever.

Never to return.

I sink into silence.

Everything has gone still.

I feel the thick bark upon my helpless body.

I begin to stretch with all my strength toward the light, toward the sun, toward happiness.

But suddenly I hear, in the distance, the approaching sound of an axe.

English Lessons



“She had been told before that her mother was in heaven, that she had wings and a crown”¹...

It was quiet. Only the wind outside the window beckoned Liza into the street, promising freedom and serenity. But she sat up straight, her hands folded, like a model pupil, among other adults like herself, and listened to the dull voice that was making her sleepy.

“She had been told before that her mother was in heaven, that she had wings and a crown” — the thin teacher in enormous glasses looked thoughtfully at the young people sitting at their desks, and her gaze came to rest on a woman with short dark hair, the best student in her group.

“Elizabeth, please start translating from this sentence.”

Liza found the right paragraph in her book and began to read.

— *“Ей и раньше говорили, что ее мама на небе, что у нее есть крылья и венец; показывали картинки с изображением дам в белоснежных ночных рубашках, которых называют ангелами”²* Liza said slowly, carefully translating the English phrases into Russian.

The students sat in a stuffy classroom in a small club. An open book with colorful pictures lay in front of each of them,

¹ Quotations from Frances Burnett’s **A Little Princess** are cited here and throughout.

² “She had been told before that her mother was in heaven, that she had wings and a crown; they had shown her pictures of ladies in snow-white nightgowns, who were called angels,”

everything written only in English. And it was for this language that Liza had come to the stuffy classroom that evening.

If she learned English, they would give her the job she had dreamed of since childhood!

A white steamship would carry her away to distant countries, and she, Liza, would discover a vast world, shimmering with every shade of happiness...

A trickle of sweat ran down her back.

Liza sighed and glanced at the young man who had begun translating the text after her, slowly and thoughtfully searching for the right words.

“Mama!” Manya called, sitting up in her little bed.

The room was dark. A round clock ticked on the wall, its moustache-like hands trembling as they made a strange, crackling sound.

The bed stood beside the window, and frost glistened on the glass. Manya reached out to touch the cold black pane.

Black, because it was night outside.

“Mama!” Manya called again.

It was very quiet.

A sweetish smell drifted into the room from the kitchen, as though someone were cooking porridge.

Manya climbed out of bed and padded barefoot across the creaking floorboards to the door. She wanted to go into the

kitchen and look for Mama.

And she was hungry, too.

She pushed the door.

But it was locked.

So Manya knocked.

She waited, then knocked again.

But no one answered.

*“Там все луга в цветах, и целые поляны лилий, а над ними
веет ветерок и разносит по воздуху аромат, и все его вды-
хают — всегда, потому что там всегда ветерок”*³, — Liza
read aloud again.

It was hard to breathe.

The air was thick and sticky.

The thin teacher seemed to be listening absentmindedly, but
she always corrected a student at exactly the right moment if they
made a mistake.

And Liza almost never made mistakes.

She was the best student in this school for adults.

For adults reading a children’s fairy tale in English...

Liza smiled and looked sideways at her slender hands with
their long nails. The nails glittered beneath a coat of pearlescent

³ “There the meadows are all covered with flowers, and there are whole fields of lilies, and a little breeze blows over them and carries their fragrance through the air, and everyone breathes it in — always, because there is always a little breeze there.”

polish and gave her hope for a bright future, which broke through the gray reality of the present like a ray of light...

Manya felt as though she were standing inside a dark, damp cave, its entrance blocked by an enormous stone.

And she could not move it.

She pushed against it, beat it with her hands, but it was no use.

Manya remembered where the flashlight was and switched it on.

Shadows darted across the walls and ceiling, as though a many-armed giant were dancing.

"I have been locked in a dungeon," Manya thought.

She was five years old, and she believed in fairy tales.

"I have been imprisoned in a dungeon and left without food or water. Only bats fly around here, and rats run about."

And Manya began swinging the flashlight rapidly from side to side, and the shadows flew wildly about.

Everything became confused — it seemed as though a storm wind were raging, carrying scraps of cloth, leaves, and papers through the air.

And ghosts and vampires were flying everywhere.

And Manya began jumping and screaming, not from fear, but from delight.

"I'll be a ghost too!" she cried. "I'll fly outside and frighten people! And then I'll find Mama, frighten her, and she'll come

back!”

Manya laughed and jumped around the room, waving the flashlight.

Then she ran to the window and shone the light onto the glass. Night looked back at Manya, indifferent and utterly black.

“Mama!” Manya called uncertainly. “Are you there? Outside the window?”

She flung open the little window, and Night breathed upon her with mortal cold.

And Manya suddenly felt uneasy.

She realized that she was alone.

And that Mama was really, truly gone...

“А маленькие дети бегают в лугах, собирают охапки лилий, смеются и вяют из них венки. А улицы там сверкают. И никто никогда не устает, какой бы долгой ни была дорога”⁴, — Liza read aloud.

And she thought:

How tired I am. How tired...

The teacher looked straight through her and nodded, nodded, like a little bellflower swaying in the wind.

It would be so good to go home already. To sleep.

⁴ “And the little children run about in the meadows, gathering armfuls of lilies, laughing and making wreaths of them. And the streets are sparkling. And no one ever gets tired, no matter how long the road is.”

Liza wanted to stretch, to stand up, to distract herself.

But the taut little string of the text held her there, and she kept reading.

“Very good, Elizabeth. Very good.”

The teacher’s voice soothed her with a gentle rustling, like autumn leaves whispering in the wind...

Manya went to the door again and shook the handle, but it would not open.

“Mama, open the door, open it!” Manya sobbed.

She shook the door so hard that several books fell from the shelf onto the floor beside her.

“Open it! Open it! I’ll be good, I’ll listen! I’m hungry! I want something to drink! Please open it!”

She cried and screamed, but no one heard her, and no one answered.

Manya sank down onto the floor and began beating her fists against the wooden boards.

And one of the books fell open.

In the beam of the flashlight, Manya saw a bright picture.

It showed the golden walls of a castle, and in a golden room stood a Princess wearing a golden crown and a glittering golden dress.

Manya pulled the book closer and studied the picture carefully.

Above the golden Princess flew a fairy — or perhaps an angel.
Manya wasn't quite sure.

But she wished that wings would grow on her, too.
Even if they weren't golden...

Liza walked down the street.
The cold wind filled her with joy.

This wind is blowing in my favor! Liza thought. It promises
me mountains of gold! Once I learn English, I'll work wherever
I want! And all my dreams will come true!

She smiled.

She smiled at the trembling streetlights, at random passers-
by, and at herself.

Everything would be exactly the way she wanted it.
Everything!

When she entered the little courtyard of her building, she saw
a dim ray of light glowing from the window of her room.

"But I turned off the lamp when I left. And Manya was already
asleep..."

She hurried into the entrance hall and, impatiently fumbling
through her handbag, could not find her keys for a long time.

At last she opened the front door and rushed down the dim
corridor toward her room.

She opened it.

And nearly stumbled.

Manya, her daughter, lay just inside the doorway, her head resting on a book, fast asleep.

A flashlight lay beside her on the floor.

Lisa bent down and saw tearstains on Manya's cheeks.

Then Liza followed the beam of light and saw the bright picture of the Princess.

Beneath the picture, there were words written in English.

And Liza read:

"And the walls around this city are of gold and pearl, and they are so low that one can go up to them and lean upon them, look down upon the earth, and smile and wave to us..."

"And the streets are sparkling."

Liza sighed and looked once more at the English words:

"And the streets are sparkling. And no one ever gets tired, no matter how long the road is. They fly wherever they want..."

Liza looked at Manya and whispered:

"And no one ever gets tired, no matter how long the road is. They fly wherever they want..."

The flashlight flickered.

And went out.



The Little Chick



Manya was skipping down the street after Mama. She was five years old. Spring was beginning. The sun was cheerful, sliding bright rays across the thin sheets of ice covering the puddles.

Manya stepped on one of them—

crunch-crunch—

and it spread into a web of tiny cracks, while her shoe sank into the blue water.

Then Manya began jumping from one patch of ice to another, stamping her feet in delight and making little white fountains of glittering ice burst out of every frozen puddle.

She laughed and glowed with happiness until Mama called to her from somewhere far ahead, and she came running after her as fast as she could.

They had to hurry.

They were going to visit someone.

What a wonderful thing it was — to go visiting on such a beautiful spring day!

But Mama was a little worried. There was a child where they were going, and Mama wanted to buy a present.

She left Manya waiting outside, darted into a shop, and came out quickly with a small box.

Then they ran to catch the tram.

After paying the fare, they sat down on the wooden benches opposite each other.

Manya sat by the window and prepared herself to watch the

sparkling world outside.

But then Mama opened the little box and took out a toy.

It was a bright-yellow, fluffy little chick on thin plastic legs.

Mama took some kind of paper and a little key out of the box as well, but immediately put them back.

Manya shyly reached out her hand to touch the soft fur.

And Mama let her hold the chick.

Just while they were riding.

Manya held the tiny creature carefully in her palms, hardly daring to breathe.

She was proud that Mama had trusted her with something so fragile.

Her heart began beating faster. Her cheeks turned red, and she kept looking and looking at the little yellow ball.

And the chick stared back at her with its black eyes, as though saying:

I am so small, so helpless. Protect me, Manya. Love me. Take care of me...

The girl could feel warmth coming from the chick, and for a moment it seemed to her that it moved and breathed.

Yes, Manya's heart answered. I will love you and protect you!

The palms of her hands felt warm and soft against its fluffy fur.

Outside the window, lights began to come on. The day was fading.

People moved and talked all around them, but Manya noticed

nothing.

She kept looking at her little chick, overwhelmed by love and tenderness.

Nothing else existed.

Only her warm hands, and in those hands — happiness.

A happiness in which everything came together:

the cozy glow of a lamp before bedtime, when your eyes grow heavy with pleasant drowsiness and you fly away to unknown lands;

Grandmother's lullaby;

the warm spring wind;

Grandfather's wrinkled hand as he stroked Manya's head;

Mama's voice;

the high blue sky;

and the carefree singing of birds.

The girl hardly breathed, dissolving into a feeling of peace and serenity, while her hands carefully held the little chick.

The steady rattling of the tram stopped.

"We're getting off. Give me the toy!" Mama said.

Manya looked at her in bewilderment, not understanding the words.

"What, did you fall asleep? Fine, carry it for now. Come on!"

And Mama grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her toward the exit.

Manya pressed the chick against her chest and stumbled after Mama.

The puddles had begun to freeze again, making the pavement slippery, and she was afraid of falling, holding the little furry ball tighter and tighter against herself.

And then they reached the entrance.

“Give it to me!”

Mama held out her hand.

Manya stepped back.

“What are you doing? Give me the chick, quickly!”

She pried Manya’s fingers open, took the toy, and shoved it into the box.

“Well, cry some more! Greedy little thing! Come on!”

She pushed her into the entrance, and they began climbing the stairs.

Tears were choking Manya, but she swallowed them.

Her nose began to run, and she wiped it with her sleeve.

She tried to do it without Mama noticing, but Mama saw anyway and smirked.

“Greedy, and a crybaby too. Just try bawling in there!”

She rang the bell.

Behind the door came shouts and laughter.

“Smile,” Mama hissed.

The door flew open, and Manya was blinded by bright light.

There was a party going on. A group of children ran around, and the adults happily surrounded Mama.

Then an unfamiliar little girl came running up, and Mama put the box into her hands.

After that, Manya was taken into the children's room, where the children were playing and laughing.

The unfamiliar girl opened the box and took out the chick.

"Oh! There's a key too!" the girl cried happily.

She immediately began sticking the key into the chick and turning it several times.

And suddenly the toy came alive.

The chick began hopping across the floor, pecking at something as if it were alive.

Manya smiled despite herself.

The girl clapped her hands.

"He's alive! He's alive!"

She kept winding him up, again and again.

And then suddenly something cracked.

One of the chick's legs broke off.

The toy fell.

Manya screamed in fright.

She pushed the girl away and grabbed the yellow little bundle.

The girl screamed too and lunged at Manya.

"Give him back! Give him back! He's mine!" she shrieked.

Manya began sobbing at the top of her voice and pressed the broken toy even tighter against herself.

The girl grabbed her by the hair.

And Manya simply stood there and cried.

Then the adults came running.

Mama pulled the chick from Manya's hands and gave it back

to the girl.

Then she leaned close to Manya's ear and whispered:

"I'm ashamed that you are my daughter."

The adults left, and none of them saw how the girl, smiling maliciously, broke the chick's other leg.

Then she spent a long time fussing with it, trying to wind it up with the key and make it jump without its legs.

On the way home, Mama did not speak to Manya.

She only looked at her sternly.

Then, unable to contain herself any longer, she said:

"I'll talk to you when we get home. Greedy little thing."

Manya didn't care.

It felt as though there were a hole in her heart, and a black wind was howling inside it.

At home, Mama shouted at Manya for a long time.

And the next day, all her toys disappeared.

But Manya didn't care.

She no longer noticed the joyful rays of sunlight that spring, or the fragile ice beneath her feet.

She obediently went to kindergarten.

She ate when they fed her.

She slept when they told her to sleep.

"What a gloomy little thing you are!" Mama said to her one day.

But Manya didn't care.



The Bluebells



“My little bells, my steppe-born flowers,
Why do you gaze at me, dark blue and bright? And what
are you ringing on a merry day in May,
Swaying your heads among the uncut grass?”

Alexey Tolstoy

Sometimes Mama painted.

It happened rarely, and Manya loved watching her from her little corner.

First there was a sheet of paper, pure and white as snow. Then it filled with patches of color, and soon Manya could make out the shape of a vase, and inside it, one after another, delicate flowers opened on thin green stems.

Manya eagerly followed the movements of the brush with her eyes, and it seemed to her that it was she who was painting.

Manya herself had only colored pencils, which were always breaking. She loved holding those brightly colored sticks in her hands, loved moving them across the paper.

But all that came out were scribbles.

If only she could try paints!

But Mama would not give her any.

“Learn to draw first,” she would say. “That’s what pencils are for.”

One day Mama left the room, and Manya, seized by a sudden impulse, went over to her painting, picked up a brush, dipped it into the paint, and began moving it across the paper as if under a spell.

She was painting flowers.

Or rather, she was finishing what Mama had already begun.

She dipped the brush into blue, then red, then yellow, and watched with delight as enormous bright flowers blossomed against the clear sky.

Manya felt like a sorceress, and beneath her hand a new, wonderful world was being born.

She did not even notice when Mama came back.

Mama gasped.

She screamed at Manya and snatched the brush from her hands.

“Never!! Don’t you dare! Touch my paints! And paint on my pictures! You ruined everything! Everything!”

In a rage, she tore the painting apart.

And when Manya burst into tears and tried to hug Mama and ask her forgiveness, Mama pushed the girl away.

“Go away! Don’t touch me! I don’t want to talk to you! You took it and ruined everything! Learn to draw first, little artist!”

Manya quietly went back to her corner, took out a sheet of paper, and began drawing something with her pencils.

And the next day, when Manya was at kindergarten, a miracle happened.

She found a little sheet of paper lying on the floor.

On it, drawn with simple colored pencils, were the most dazzlingly beautiful flowers.

Bluebells.

Manya caught her breath.

She stared at the pale-blue and deep-blue flower heads, and it seemed to her that they were gently swaying in the wind and ringing ever so softly.

And suddenly an idea came to her.

She would take the picture.

She would hide it.

She would bring it home.

And show it to Mama.

And she would say that she, Manya, had drawn it!

And then Mama would surely give her paints and let her move a brush across the paper, and Manya would create her wonderful world all over again!

And that was exactly what she did.

She folded the little sheet into four, put it into her pocket, and that evening proudly unfolded it in front of Mama.

“Look! I did it! I drew it! Do you like it?”

The girl looked into Mama’s eyes with hope and delight.

Mama stared at the drawing in bewilderment.

“Where did you get this? What nonsense are you making up? You think I’m going to believe you drew it?”

“It was me! Today, at kindergarten! Do you like it?”

Mama pressed her lips together sternly.

“Fine. Let’s suppose I believe you. If you really drew it, then you should be able to draw it again. Take your pencils, sit down, and draw. And it has to be exactly the same. Exactly. Just like

this. And if you can't, so much the worse for you. I can't stand lies!"

Manya shrank into herself and went to her little corner.

She was very tired that day. She just wanted to play.

But obediently she sat down at the table, took her pencils, and began trying very, very hard.

Patiently she copied the curling lines of the flowers, trying to fill them with color and life, so that they would ring in the wind just as beautifully.

Time passed very slowly.

Manya could hear the clock ticking.

Everything grew blurry before her eyes. The hand holding the pencil moved as if in a dream, and her heart clenched with fear.

She tried so hard.

But the bluebells came out crooked, and their colors were not bright but dull.

The strokes were rough and stubbornly went outside the lines.

Manya rubbed and rubbed the paper with her eraser until it began to wrinkle, and the eraser left dirty smudges behind.

Manya kept working, afraid to stop, patiently wetting the tips of her pencils with her tongue to make the colors brighter.

A strange, bitter-sour taste of graphite remained in her mouth.

Then the eraser went to work again.

And when a hole had begun to show through the crumpled paper, Mama suddenly appeared beside her and sharply pulled the drawing out from under her hand.

“Little artist!” Mama said mockingly. “You ought to be whipped for lying! But it’s already late. The neighbors are asleep. Off to bed! And I don’t want to see or hear you! Liar.”

Mama crumpled both drawings and threw them into the wastebasket.

Manya quickly undressed and slipped beneath the blanket.

She tried not to cry, but the tears stubbornly crawled down her cheeks.

Mama turned off the light, and frightening shadows began dancing on the wall.

Manya quietly pulled the blanket over her head.

Complete silence fell.

Only the clock ticked loudly, creaking with every movement.

The tears kept flowing, and Manya felt very bad, very wicked.

She wanted to ask for forgiveness, to hug Mama, to kiss her, and to see that Mama had forgiven her and loved her again.

But Mama was asleep, and Manya could not wake her.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow Manya would ask for forgiveness.

She would hug her.

She would kiss her.

Tomorrow, tomorrow...

With a little sob, Manya buried her nose in the wet corner of her pillow and fell asleep.

She was walking through a field of bluebells.

The flowers shone beneath the rays of the sun, swaying softly

in waves in the wind, ringing ever so gently.

And then Mama appeared.

She was walking toward her, stern and angry, striking the bluebells with a belt.

The flowers fell apart.

Their delicate ringing faded, replaced by a long, mournful hum.

“No!” Manya cried out in anguish. “Mama, don’t hit them! I won’t do it anymore!”

But Mama could not hear her.

She walked on, her lips pressed firmly together, and kept lashing the flowers with the belt.

Again and again.

Soon, only the little stems were swaying in the wind.

The sun went out.

Falling Leaves



“It all began with a leaf trembling in the wind.”

J. R. R. Tolkien

“Every leaf on a tree becomes a page of sacred scripture,
if one day the soul learns how to read...”

Unknown

How beautiful that frosty autumn day was!

The teacher walked down the street, and behind her, like colorful balloons floating and bobbing impatiently in the air,

came the children.

Manya was among them.

People hurried past on their way somewhere, and one young woman paused to look at Manya. She smiled at her, then hurried on.

And finally — the Park!

And an avenue lined with tall, centuries-old maple trees.

The children scattered along the path, while Manya stood still, gazing up at the sky.

Leaves were falling from the sky.

They drifted slowly downward, like weightless feathers, gently settling upon the ground.

“They are enchanted birds,” Manya whispered.

Then she explained to a boy who had come up beside her:

“They used to be wild pigeons. They were wild and free. I know, because I was their Queen!”

“And did you have a crown?” the boy asked innocently.

“Yes. A little golden crown. And we lived in the forest, but we flew wherever we wanted. And one day...”

By now several children had gathered around Manya.

“One day an evil wizard caught us in a net. And he turned all the pigeons into leaves. And now they can only fly when they fall from the trees...”

“And you?”

“He turned me into a girl, because I was the Queen! But I liked being a wild pigeon better...”

“And flying.”

Manya bent down to the black, damp earth and picked up a leaf — bright yellow, with red veins.

She lifted it to her lips and kissed it.

“I remember you,” she whispered. “You were so beautiful!”

“They’re all beautiful,” the boy sighed, enchanted.

“Would you like us to collect some more leaves and bring them to you?”

“Yes,” Manya nodded solemnly.

“And then we’ll have a flock. A flock of beautiful wild pigeons. And I’ll take them home with me, and they’ll be happy there.

“Only choose the most beautiful ones, all right?”

The children scattered along the avenue once more.

Again and again they came back to Manya, showing her the treasures they had found.

“Beautiful? Beautiful?” they asked.

And Manya, with all the dignity of a queen, either nodded in approval or refused to accept a leaf.

Soon she held an autumn-colored fan of leaves in her hands, and her face was glowing.

How beautiful!

A girl who had been watching the children from a distance came up to Manya.

She smiled and asked:

“Can I hold them?”

And held out her hands.

Manya trusted her with her flock of pigeons, trembling in the wind.

But the girl took the leaves, looked at them, then looked at Manya.

And suddenly, with a mocking smile, she threw them onto the ground and began stamping on them.

“There! Take your pigeons! You’re lying! Lying! You’re a liar!”

A deep, ringing silence fell.

It was possible to hear the leaves falling, rustling softly as they touched the ground.

The children surrounded Manya and seemed to be waiting for something.

The whole world seemed to be waiting for something from her.

The children.

The trees.

Even the sky.

Everything had fallen silent in expectation.

And Manya, beside herself with rage, swung her arm and struck the girl in the face.

Blood ran down the girl’s cheek.

It flowed in a slow little stream, like a raindrop sliding down a windowpane.

Then the girl began to cry, and the teacher ran over to her.

The children all began talking at once, breathlessly telling her what had happened.

Manya could not make out their words.

She heard Silence.

Then the teacher shook her roughly by the shoulders for a long time and shouted something at her.

After that, Manya was made to sit on a bench.

And told to sit still.

The children walked silently around her, and Manya caught their admiring glances.

In their eyes, she was a hero.

But inside, Manya felt frightened and confused.

She looked down at her hands, still clenched into fists.

Then she looked at the trampled leaves.

Those crumpled, torn leaves were the souls of the pigeons.

And Manya felt tears on her face.

They flowed like little streams of blood, like raindrops sliding down a window.

Her fists slowly opened.

And she saw the children.

They were timidly approaching her.

In their hands trembled leaves — yellow, red, green.

Royal gifts.

Suddenly the wind rushed in.

It tore the leaves from their hands and swept up the trampled ones from the ground in a swirling whirlwind.

And all of them rose into the sky, flying upward like fragments of a bright mosaic.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

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