
A RUSSIAN STORY
EUGENIA KONONENKO

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A NOVEL

The translation was made possible thanks to financial assistance
of Arseniy Yatseniuk "Open Ukraine" Foundation

Glagoslav Publications

A Russian Story

by Eugenia Kononenko

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First published in Ukrainian as “Російський сюжет”

Glagoslav Publications Ltd
88-90 Hatton Garden
EC1N 8PN London
United Kingdom

www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-78384-011-3

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the preparation of my English translation of *A Russian Story* I have been fortunate in enjoying the close co-operation of the author throughout. Ideally, this is how all literary translations should be written, so as to ensure that the translator is enabled to realise the author's intentions creatively without overstepping them. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support of my Ukrainian colleagues Dr Bogdan Babych and Dr Svitlana Babych of the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Leeds, who read the translation and made positive suggestions for improvements of detail. — *Patrick John Corness.*

Patrick John Corness is presently Visiting Research Fellow in the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Leeds. Formerly a Principal Lecturer in Russian and German, with wide experience in translation and interpreting, he has specialised since 2000 in literary translation from Czech, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. He holds the Silver Medal of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, for achievements in the international dissemination of Czech scholarship and culture. His interest in Ukrainian grew out of several years of close involvement during the 1990s in EU-funded projects supporting collaboration between universities in Western Ukraine and Coventry University in England. He has contributed translations of modern Ukrainian short stories to *Ukrainian Literature, a Journal of Translations* (Toronto), *The Massachusetts Review* and *The Stinging Fly* (Dublin).

To the memory of my Mother

A friend of his mother's, Iryna Romanivna, lived in a pre-revolutionary building in Lviv Square, and when he was a child her home had a remarkable effect on him. Venetian windows that looked out on to the old part of town, high ceilings, paintings on the walls — everything was so different from what he had known at his parents' house at Vitryani Hory. Iryna Romanivna's accommodation was not self-contained; she had a room in a communal flat, and in addition to the main door there was another one which always remained closed, hidden behind a large bookcase. That door must have led to the neighbours' room in the communal flat. However, he used to think it led to some different world. When he first asked Iryna Romanivna what would happen if they opened it she whispered that if you did not do so carefully you might disturb some very powerful sorcerers!

Ever since he has been living in America, he has occasionally had dreams about that room, though he never consciously remembers it. He dreams of the gold stripes on the wallpaper, the tall windows and the roofs of the old houses beyond. Now he is pushing the bookcase aside and opening that mysterious door, to find himself in a neatly whitewashed, sparsely furnished room in a rural cottage; there is just a table with benches in the middle, reflected on the well-varnished floor as though in a mirror. He takes a step inside this white room and he feels an eerie draught. On the wall there is a sloping mirror — he must have a look in it. Then Iryna Romanivna calls him: "Zhenia, where are you going? Come back this instant!" He wakes with a feeling of deep sadness that he has missed seeing something extremely important.

1. A picnic on the prairie

On a clear October day a group of five people were unhurriedly munching away in the open air, on a hill amid the extensive plains of the American Midwest. They were sitting on folding chairs around a table, also a folding one, eating off plastic plates and drinking from paper cups. They had driven out a dozen miles or so from the university campus and settled down here on a hilltop in the middle of the prairie, leaving the car by the roadside.

The company consisted of two women, one of whom could be described as a woman a little over forty, the other as a woman well over forty, two men of similar age-groups and a teenager who was fifteen. The teenager, named Myroslav, was the common denominator of the group. The man and the woman a little over forty were his long-since-divorced parents. The woman and the man nearing fifty were the respective new spouses of his parents and it could be that this pragmatic lad enjoyed a better relationship with them than with his own parents.

"It's great that you and *maman* got divorced and that you both re-married," the son had told his father that morning, sitting in the car as his dad's wife Dounia Gourman drove them to the shopping centre. "How dull it would have been to share grandad and grandma's flat in Pushkin Street!"

The flat of his deceased grandfather Professor Nebuvaiko on Pushkin Street in Kyiv is quite large, not only by Soviet standards but even by post-Soviet standards. Now his grandfather has died,

Myroslav and his grandmother live in those four large rooms, just the two of them. Periodically, he goes to Camargue to visit his mother and her Thierry, who has a successful restaurant business in the south of France, or he comes here, to visit his dad and Dounia Gourman, a professor of Russian at the local university. The boy is now going to spend a whole year in the United States. He has already started attending a local school, and he is living with his father and Dounia. His mother has just come to visit them with her Thierry. Of course, they will not stay long. American homes have four bedrooms upstairs, but they were never intended to be separate living quarters. Actually, the very fact that the group consists of former spouses and new spouses means that even in terms of the cultivated correctness of American society they are not supposed to spend an extended period of time under the same roof.

Actually, what is political or any other sort of correctness? It means being able to keep yourself from boiling over when you are all seething inside. It cannot be said that in this company, which has just ceased its munching and is languidly watching swallows swooping over the prairie, the drive into the country had aroused a dormant whirlwind of passions. But old sparks are nevertheless sometimes rekindled, which is slightly disturbing. Only Myroslav remains indifferent. Perhaps this is because he is the only one amongst them who speaks all their four languages; the others know three and a half at the most, like his mother, who is considerably less proficient in English than in French. The rest of them know even fewer languages.

To begin with, Dounia tried to get them to agree on a common language at the picnic, because her husband, Eugene Samarsky, keeps exchanging Ukrainian phrases with his former wife Lada Nebuvaiko-Giono that Dounia does not understand, and this always puts her in a slightly awkward position. It is this lack of understanding as such that Dounia is concerned about, rather than the fact that her husband and his ex-wife still retain

a residual common language. Not only in terms of Ukrainian, but in a somewhat broader sense.

Lada addresses Dounia as *Klava*, or even *Klavochka*. And Klavdia Nebuvaiko, who was always called Lada in Ukraine, answers to Dounia's *Klava*. When her son Myroslav heard this, he burst out laughing: "Klava! Klava!" — pointing a finger at his mother. As he explained to his *maman*, if you said "you Klava" to a girl in Kyiv it meant you were telling her "you're stupid." For a long time now Lada has been called Claudine by her Thierry, because to him *Lada* means a car, not a woman. And she had a good laugh with her son; then she recalled that when she was a schoolgirl *Dounia* meant something similar in young people's slang.

"My mother kept putting on the *Dounia-the-Spinner* record until she wore the record-player out," said Eugene.

"We remember your mother, and that record player too," sighed Lada with a broad, nostalgic smile. "Incidentally, there you have someone who would support your wife as an enthusiastic Russophile."

Lada was beaming with a nostalgic smile now. She used to tell his mother all sorts of unpleasant things, saying that everyone was fed up of her Russian classics, and mother did not suffer this in silence, as a matter of fact. So Lada, in order to avoid these injurious altercations, limited her contact with his parents to a minimum.

"She and Dounia, as it turned out, had entirely different views of Russian literature," sighed Eugene. "They clashed over this. So we were not too upset when Mom did not get the three-year visa which she was very keen to obtain, despite everything, after Dad died."

"Yes, it would definitely have been possible if you could have had a child," said Lada.

That is rather sad. Lada and Thierry were in fact planning a child. After living together for several years, they decided to cement their relationship and they were expecting a daughter.

But they had a car accident on the highway near Marseilles. That was five years ago. To give them support, Eugene and Dounia flew to Camargue for a few days. They sat by their hospital beds while they were on a drip. And on the plane on the way back they discussed the disaster that had befallen their French 'relatives'. As for Eugene and Dounia, perhaps it had been sensible of them not to plan a child. After all, there is the unplanned Myroslav, who needs so much looking after!

Dounia is surprised that, for some reason, the lad's sonorous name, which sounds good in any language, is not adopted in Russia. No hero of Russian classical literature, which Dounia is familiar with in all its boundless extent, bears this name. Myroslav himself is unconcerned about that. Russia is not involved in his plans for the future. And even if it had been, well, "Russia has so many non-Russians, like us!"– as his paternal grandmother enthusiastically recited from a poem by some minor Soviet poet. But the French Mi-o-slav, and the American My-ros, sound cool. He is grateful to his grandfather, the late Vasyl Tarasovych, professor Nebuvaiko, for giving him such a fine sounding name. And he also thanks his lucky stars that he has both a stepmother and a stepfather. Thanks to them, his life is far more interesting than that of those who live for years without a break from boring parents in the same tiresome dwelling, known sentimentally as their 'parental home'.

So Dounia, with the academic's inherent propensity for orderliness, hoped to establish a common language for the picnic, but it did not work out. The proposed options were English or Russian. Thierry does not know Russian and he does not want to speak English. But Thierry cannot be excluded from consideration, since in most cases it is he who pays for the dinners in the restaurants on the university campus. Lada does not want to speak Russian, even though she answers to *Klava*. What is more, Lada asked why the Russophile Dounia does not speak French, since the heroes of the Russian classics actually spoke it better than they did Russian. Dounia replied: "*Bien sûr*,

I speak French! It is not perfect, but it is acceptable." Eugene does not speak French though.

"Didn't you ever learn it?" Lada asked her ex-husband again.

"There was no incentive. Except for getting to know your new husband better."

Eugene, as an erstwhile adherent of Nietzsche, learned German after English, and he did quite well at it. But all the French he knew was what he had picked up from Lada while they were together.

So the table continues to be dominated by a lack of linguistic agreement; however that does not lead to overt conflicts — only weak flashes of distant lights. Like those that wander in the darkness of the prairie of an autumn evening, eventually dying out. But something inextinguishable still remains, no matter how proud the newly-weds are of their ability to form wonderful relationships with their ex-spouses.

Thierry put his hand on Lada's shoulder, but Eugene did not put his hand on Dounia's shoulder, and in Lada's eyes there is a scarcely perceptible flicker of triumph, which, it is fair to say, never disappears from the eyes of ex-wives when their ex-husbands see them in the company of their new ones. And in any case it was understood that she and Thierry were closer than he and Dounia were. But Eugene and Dounia had also developed a reasonably balanced relationship, never arguing, but never clarifying matters either.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Dounia, looking at the road meandering amid the plains, and the swallows overhead. "I have been following this road for years, but I never tire of it."

Since the beginning of their relationship Dounia and Eugene have often come here to this hill, where even in the dreadful summer heat a breeze blows among the bushes. Eugene has been driving for a long time now, but the itinerary has never varied. Dounia said this place reminded her of the Russian steppe, which she had read so much about but which she had never actually seen, because the only places she had visited in Russia

were Moscow and St. Petersburg. She had begun, apparently quite spontaneously, singing *Steppes and steppes all around.*[*] When Eugene, feigning a similar spontaneity, took up the refrain *Among the steppes that are so wide,*[**] although the Ukrainian *recitative* is much more intricate than the primitive Russian folk tune, Dounia fell silent, and she no longer sings *Steppes and steppes all around*, on the hilltop amid the prairie. Nevertheless, they continue to come here and bring guests with them.

Dounia would immediately mount her hobby-horse. Whoever their guests were, she would always start banging on about her monograph on 'Russian Sexuality', which she has been writing all the years she has been living with Eugene, considering it the main purpose of her life. In Moscow, everyone is aware of this still unfinished book, because Mrs Dounia Gourman-Samarsky of Midwest University has given papers at conferences in Russia, presenting the respective chapters of her study. Russian colleagues have written to tell her that the Patriarch of Moscow intends to pronounce that her monograph is anathema, but in all sincerity Dounia does not understand why. What is the reason for this curse? Is it really because she gave several papers at respected universities, convincingly arguing that only Russian nineteenth century literature can speak about everything without actually saying anything? On the basis of scant details found in Russian classical authors, merely suggesting the depth of certain chasms, Dounia made unexpected findings. With the scientific directness of an obstetrician-gynaecologist, she examines how the fall of Anna Karenina occurred and how the landowner Totsky corrupted young Nastasia Filippovna. Right now Dounia Gourman was working on what Mark Volokhov was doing in the gazebo with the young girl Vera in Goncharov's novel *The Precipice*.

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[*] A Russian folk song

[**] A line from *Testament,* a cult Ukrainian song set to words by Taras Shevchenko

"And the way the Muscovite treated Kateryna,* that is of no interest to your wife?" asked Lada.

"We are not at Harvard," replied Eugene.

"What has Harvard to do with it?" said Lada, confused.

"Only at Harvard could you obtain funding to pursue research on Kateryna," explained Eugene.

At the beginning of his relationship with Dounia he heard the phrase *we are not at Harvard* almost three times a day. If he had really wanted to develop a specifically Ukrainian branch of Slavonic Studies, he would have had to establish personal contacts at Harvard! But here too, in this university in the middle of the prairie, where spirits of the past roam during autumn nights, glimmering like the eyes of mystical coyotes, there are quite good opportunities available to him, said Dounia, combing her wild red hair inherited either from her Irish mother or from her Jewish father, who came from a family of immigrants from Belarus.

Dounia does not speak Ukrainian, so again things turned out as she had feared, and this is actually the reason why she had tried to establish a common language at the picnic. Once again she did not understand quite correctly what Eugene and Lada were talking about and at an inappropriate moment she confirmed that she had indeed given a presentation at Harvard on Katerina Ivanovna's distressing intimate relationship with old Marmeladov, which she had discovered after reading that great novel by the great Russian writer for the *n*th time.

"Can you imagine it, Klava, they approved my approach!" Dounia's green eyes lit up as she, a provincial university professor — one from the Midwest at that — began to speak about her success at Harvard.

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* Kateryna is the eponymous heroine of a poem by the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko, a village girl seduced, made pregnant and abandoned by a soldier of the Imperial Russian army, nicknamed *the Muscovite*. The poem *Kateryna* is a central theme of classical Ukrainian literature, interpreted as symbolising relations between Imperial Russia and colonial Ukraine.

During the intellectual conversation between Lada, Dounia and Eugene, Thierry became discourteously bored.

"Mme Gourman," he said, stressing the final syllable, "isn't it time we drove back for dinner?"

"Oh, it's only just five o'clock," replied Dounia in French. "Since when does a Frenchman dine at five?"

So Thierry stood up, dragged Myroslav away from the table and started a mock fight with him. After several blows the young man pushed his stepfather over and sat on him triumphantly, and Thierry immediately pretended to be dead. For some reason Eugene recalled that when he had fooled about like this with his late father during family picnics at Pushcha-Vodytsia near Kyiv, his mother had always yelled at them, saying they had gone crazy, because they had over-eaten and now they were going to make themselves sick. But Lada disregards the antics of Thierry and Myroslav. The lad's own father remarked that he and his son had long since lost that physical contact whereby a boy and a grown man enjoy jostling and sparring together. To be more precise, he and Myroslav had never had such contact.

However, although he does not spar with Myroslav like Thierry does, he communicates with his son in their native language, fulfilling his parental obligations even across the ocean — all the more so since, according to Myroslav, grandma Nina had become completely de-Ukrainianised; she had switched to Russian, saying that the late Nebuvaiko had foisted his Ukrainian on her. When Eugene lived at their house on Pushkin Street, his mother-in-law did not seem to have had anything 'foisted' on her; on the contrary, in family company it was she who gradually imposed constraints on her highly-placed husband. Eugene had no influence on the way his son communicated with his grandmother Nina. So at least he taught Myroslav not to switch to Russian with his stepmother, saying that she had an almost perfect command of Russian anyway, whereas his son did not yet have perfect English. So Myroslav, like Eugene, communicates with Dounia only in English.

But in the end Lada started speaking Russian with his stepmother anyway. She makes a show of being enthralled by the depth of her research; however, she actually makes fun of the enthusiastic Russianist, asking ridiculous questions that Dounia takes seriously.

"Now Dounia, how do you rate Ilya Oblomov's sex life?"

"I can rate it such as it was! I have written an article on that too," said Dounia, and her eyes lit up. "

And was that also at Harvard?"

"No, that was at Princeton, also a very prestigious university!"

"So you dig very deep, I see!"

"Yes. A great deal depends on sexuality. Almost everything! The Old Russians knew this long before Freud. But sexuality does not mean pornography, because then it would have no depth; it would be purely banal! The Russian classical writers understood this just as well as the French. Even better, actually."

"Dounia, what could you say about the relationship between Khoma Brut and the damsel?" *

"Oh, those are your Ukrainian lands! Nothing is quite as it should be over there! I'll just need some help from Eugene on this."

"So funding is available for Gogol, and not only at Harvard?" Lada put on a clever show of being keenly interested.

"So you are not working yet?" He interrupts Lada, fed up of her mockery of the artless Dounia. Somehow everyone — Lada, Thierry and Myroslav — finds it necessary to make fun of his wife.

"Better call me *Traven***," the young man told his stepmother when she shortened *Myros* to *My* and Dounia again failed to grasp what the cross-linguistic puns were about. She knew Gogol's play *The Inspector General* by heart, though.

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* Heroes of the short story *Viy* by the classic Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, who was born in Ukraine. The action of this mystic tale takes place in Ukraine. Many other works by Gogol are based on Ukrainian themes.

** The name of the month of May in Ukrainian

But Lada doesn't work! She doesn't work, she stays at home! She is a little housewife in a big house, that's all! She had always dreamed of marrying a Frenchman, so she didn't want Myroslav, but she had no wish to be concerned with merely choosing curtains to match the wallpaper! She wanted to teach at the university! She wanted to master the Provençal language, which no one in Provence knows. All her classmates at the Faculty of French Philology who married Frenchmen had long since divorced. They had dragged their former spouses off from Ukraine to France. That was usually the case if they had learned to speak French. But look what happened to me! Yes, that's right! All the feminism of my youth went to pot, just like your love for Ukraine!"

"Like our love."

EUGENIA KONONENKO

Eugenia Kononenko was born in Kiev. She studied mathematics at Shevchenko University, Kyiv and also French language and literature at Kiev Linguistic University. Now she is Research Associate in the Ukrainian Centre for Cultural Studies.

Eugenia Kononenko is a writer of fiction and a literary translator from French and English. She has published numerous short stories, several novels, children's books and essays, as well as academic works based on her research in the fields of popular culture and gender studies. Some of Kononenko`s short stories have been translated into a number of languages. She is the recipient of several Ukrainian national awards.

He is young, intelligent, well educated, with patriotic sentiments. But certain misunderstandings oblige him to flee from Ukraine. For some reason, everything in his life builds up to a certain Russian scenario. So to what extent should one burden Ukrainians with the outcome of this Russian Story? Finding himself involuntarily identified with Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the hero of the novel, Eugene Samarsky, becomes a 'superfluous man' in Ukraine.

This novel by Eugenia Kononenko deals with love and the quest for one's own identity, with the vaguely remembered circumstances rendering life nonsensical in Ukraine during the last years of the empire and the early years of independence. It considers the possibility of a mid-Atlantic meeting in today's globalised world.

Glagoslav Publications
ISBN 978-1-78384-011-3
London