

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MIHA MAZZINI
A SHORT HISTORY OF
READING IN THE
SUBURBS

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Miha Mazzini: A Short History of Reading in the Suburbs

Short story, version 1.10

Gregory read in the morning paper that pension companies had begun cutting costs by putting seniors into homes in Malaysia and Ukraine. The same evening he placed an ad in the paper, selling his large town center apartment. He said nothing to his two children until he moved into a studio apartment in a suburban apartment block and deposited the rest of the money in various banks. His daughter yelled hysterically down the phone, accusing him of selling her mother's memories, as well as her own, since the big apartment was where she had grown up. She said she wanted nothing more to do with him and ended the call. The son came to visit him and sat at the kitchen table, his legs bumping into things every time he moved.

"Dad, I understand, it reminded you too much of mom ..."

"I don't want to talk about it!" Gregory said.

To no avail:

"You've done the right thing. You're grieving, it's normal. A fresh start and the first step to acceptance. Your subconscious ..."

Gregory had long ago realized that the secret of being an understanding father lay in not listening. He let his son talk while he frowned approvingly here and there, meanwhile thinking that perhaps when his son had come home one day and said he was going to study psychology, he should have put him over his knee. But he had never beaten either of them – even though their choice of degree could have been a legitimate, albeit late, excuse. The same applied to his daughter – journalism. Dear me!

"So, the secret is in achievable goals. Make a list!" said his son in conclusion. He swayed as if he was going to hug Gregory, but then just shook his hand and walked toward the stairs. Then he remembered that his father now lived on the tenth floor and, with an apologetic smile, he headed for the elevator.

*

The first few nights in the new apartment were painful. Half awake, he would go to the bathroom and, unused to the new layout, bump into the wall or smash his shin bone against the edge of the bed. He started turning on the light, but this woke him up and then he had to spend hours doing crossword puzzles in bed before he was able to go back to sleep. Since his days were also spent making his way through the squares of all the available crosswords, he ran out of them sooner than the new editions came out. So he developed a habit of standing by the window, watching the other apartment blocks. They dated from the Seventies, when the flood of foreign loans and the influx of immigrants, who had to be housed in as densely located boxes as possible, was at its peak. When he realized he was starting to recognize faces and think about them –

wondering, for example, about the lady in five down, three across – he asked himself if perhaps his son's suggestion about making a list was worthy of consideration.

*

The first thing he wrote:

1. A walk morning and night.

He thought for a while and then added on the same line:

(a dog?)

*

When he returned from the library, he crossed out item six on the list taped to the front door. He put the books on the shoe cupboard, not sure what to do with them. Once more he looked at the list:

~~6. Join the library (read!)~~

He took the books to the kitchen table and began to read.

At university, most of his friends swore that after graduation they would never ever as much as look at a book again. They kept their word. Gregory did not contradict them, but his actions did: he regularly read technical manuals, even after the ironworks closed down and he had to report to the unemployment office and take the courses everyone knew were pointless, which lined the pockets only of the training companies that were often created solely for this purpose by the same people who allocated funds to them. Gregory felt as if he was sitting at a table with professional poker players, pushing piles of money at each other, while he was playing with beans.

After he had been unemployed for three years and the last few factories had moved to China, he thought: 'Never again.' He put down the handbook that had accompanied him throughout his working life and which he had read over and over again in order to make sure he did not forget anything. So as not to go rusty, he told himself.

Never again.

He did not have the heart to throw it away. Instead, he took it out and put it on top of the garbage container, sure that there were a few young people left in the country who could use Kraut's mechanical engineering handbook.

Each morning, on the way to the bakery, he watched the wind turn the pages and when the rain made the book sopping wet, he picked it up and leaned deep into the waste paper container so that he did not have to throw it in.

And now literature: made up stories, made up people. Why read about something that was not real? Every time he had laid out a new plan at work, he had felt excitement – he would be the

one to build a tangible object, something real would emerge from the lines on the tracing paper. Stories may become reality, but they would happen even if they had not been written. A technical plan is a vision, whereas literature is an illusion.

*

He wanted to cross out (read!) on the list, but stopped with his pencil poised: would it mean that he had completed the task? He hated lies so he returned to the kitchen.

*

After three months, only (a dog?) and (read?) were not crossed out. The first item because of the mutt next door that often barked, getting on Gregory's nerves, and the second item because of the torture he experienced making his way through books. For a while he had just borrowed them and then returned them unread. Guilt overpowered him and he tried again to read them. Previous readers had underlined lines in some of them, usually a number of different pens had tried to analyze the author's thoughts at the beginning of the book, but later they gave up one by one and the second halves of most books were untouched. Gregory read only the underlined bits and soon realized why a particular section seemed important to his predecessors: some were looking for solace or wisdom, while others were collecting quotes for every occasion, most often birthdays and other important events.

*

Then he came across a book that a reader's pencil had touched on a single page and underlined only three words:

"she ran along"

Gregory stared at the thick line in the middle of the page, wondering why, out of all the possibilities, those three words – not even a whole sentence. Why?

*

That night he watched the flickering of light through the blinds and listened to the distant traffic and the occasional shouts of revelers, still thinking about those three underlined words.

Did someone just happen to drag a pencil tip along the paper, perhaps testing it, giving Gregory so much to think about and stopping him from sleeping?

The idea of revenge seeped into him like air inflating an air bed, slowly filling every last nook and cranny.

*

At the library he looked for an untouched book among the new arrivals, took it home and began randomly underlining. Without reading or taking any notice of what, he just drew a line wherever his hand fell.

His intention was not to sully the book or render it unreadable; moreover, he was afraid of being found out by the librarians. This is why he underlined the text in only ten, twelve places, with quite a few pages in between.

*

He got the books once a week, underlining them in thirty minutes; he did not get more for fear of attracting suspicion. Often, when standing by the window or walking, he thought about readers who would stop at one of his sentences and begin to wonder what was so important in those few words that made someone reach for a pencil and draw a bold line beneath them. He knew this dragged them out of the fictional world and into reality. He saw himself as a lonely anti-writer, a warrior against fantasy, struggling for reality. To him, that was the advantage of technology over the humanities, the eternal struggle of science against superstition, of light against darkness.

*

“Your friends tell me you’ve stopped visiting them,” said his son, frowning. His daughter, meanwhile, was sticking to her promise and no longer even called. Stubborn, just like her mother.

“It’s a bit far to the town center.”

The son sighed, shifted in his seat, striking his ankle against the table leg.

“It’s winter,” said Gregory, before his son could mention that which he didn’t want to talk about or even think about.

“I’ll see them in the spring,” he added when he saw his son opening his mouth, but he could not stop him from saying:

“Dad, that’s not good. Don’t you have any new friends here?”

He gestured to the window, the low lying grayness in place of the sky and the lights coming on in the other apartment blocks.

“I don’t need them.”

The son leaned forward, the skin on his chin glistening through the stubble. Even in college, he had already had to shave in the morning and again in the evening before going out – apart from during a brief period when he let his beard and hair grow, smoked grass and talked about changing the world.

“Look, all that ...” said the son, this time waving toward the window, “was built for workers from the south and army officers. Forty years have passed since then, so now it’s full of pensioners, living alone. I read that someone was found dead here only after two months. The neighbors even failed to notice the smell! I’m not sure that it was the best thing ...”

Gregory made a chopping movement in the air as if cutting down a tree. It was a familiar gesture he had used when the children were little to indicate they had crossed an invisible boundary. It still worked.

“In spring, I’ll go into town again. On foot,” he said.

The son nodded.

At the door, he stopped and said:

“Dad, this neighborhood has a pretty bad reputation. Why don’t you get a burglar proof door put in?”

Gregory had heard a long time ago that the area became infamous when the testosterone of the immigrants and the military collided, but he was not quite sure what the lonely pensioners in the other apartments could do to him today. Nevertheless, he followed his son’s advice because it gave him a chance to examine and compare technical details and evaluate offers – a whole week of pleasure. In the end, he did not order the door, he was quite capable of assessing the situation and saw no reason to squander his money.

*

Occasionally, he would by mistake borrow a book that he had already underlined. The librarian never told him when this happened and he was too embarrassed to look right through the books there and then; he preferred to do what the other customers did and read the back cover, the reviews at the beginning and the first paragraph.

He put the already processed book down disappointedly. There were so many left in the library that needed his attention, so many more readers he had to bring to reality, but now his mission would have to wait a whole week.

*

Shock horror.

‘Breathe!’ he had to tell himself in order to inhale.

He was staring at his own fingers touching the open book.

His pencil had underlined “like me, he glassily”, but later someone wrote with a fountain pen in a very easy to read, child’s handwriting “at sunset”.

That was all.

He checked all the pages, all his underlinings.

Only that little note. Who? Why? What for?

That night, his head nearly exploded.

*

He no longer cared about what the librarians thought. He checked the whole shelf of new arrivals and found at least five other books where the fountain pen had touched his pencil marks.

He borrowed them, went to a photocopier's and stuck the copies in a vertical line next to the kitchen window.

He went for walks because they were on the list, but most of the remaining time, even during meals, he stared at the sheets of paper, trying to discern some meaning.

Did they follow one another?

“like me, he glassily” + “at sunset”

Or:

“at sunset” + “like me, he glassily”

And so on, without any meaning whatsoever.

No, never, there's always some meaning.

He remembered the subjects at school that were so alien to him that the offered information dropped inside him as into a chasm, lonely and lost. But sooner or later he experienced an “aha” moment, when the individual bits of data combined into a meaningful whole.

*

He spent the whole day at the library and in the evening borrowed a single book, a depressive Russian classic.

Of course, the idea had come to him at night: if he was working the shelf with new arrivals, perhaps the fountain pen had its own terrain?

He was right: the Russian classic had dense notes in the margins, written in the hand and ink he immediately recognized.

During the next few days he also found an English thriller and a French love saga.

The very selection of novels that the fountain pen was desecrating told him that some deep meaning lay behind it all. Someone was taking the stereotypes of each particular nation and sprinkling them with his or her own work.

*

His pencil kept on underlining and the fountain pen adding notes and Gregory thought no one could write so much without eventually revealing themselves.

“J (20, 9, 3-6)” it said.

For a while, he thought it was a code from the coordinate system, but then he came across an even more overt clue:

“Ruth (1, 1, 4-5)”

And got stuck.

He photocopied all three books and returned them.

*

He copied the codes onto sheets of paper and stuck them next to each other. His son always announced his visits and Gregory unwillingly hid them beforehand.

*

“Do you ever wonder about the meaning of it all?” said the man and the woman nodded. They stood there as if he had opened the door into another time, a time of tidy hairdos, ironed suits and skirts reaching below the knees.

Only when he had already let them in did he realize what he was doing – deeply engrossed in his thinking about the mystery, he had invited two Jehovah’s Witnesses into his apartment.

“Oh!” said the woman on seeing the sheets on the wall, “you’re studying the Bible, too!”

*

How obvious! “Ruth (1, 1, 4-5)” referred to a book of the Bible, first paragraph, first sentence. But what about “4-5”? Fourth and fifth words, obviously: “to pass.”

In the Bible left for him by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Gregory sought and copied the words referred to by each coordinate, but the secret still remained impenetrable.

That night he took the sheets of paper to bed with him and stared at the traces of the fountain pen until he drifted off.

‘A child’s handwriting? Do children today learn to write at all or do they immediately type? A teacher!’ it struck him.

‘Probably retired, her boredom has pickled her brain and now she’s inflicting her religious obsession on literature.’

He leapt up, turned on the light and looked at all the notes through a magnifying glass.

A woman, yes.

‘Is it possible that the mystery is the result of insanity, that it is all meaningless?’

He felt pain, as if his flesh was being torn off his bones.

‘NO!’

‘There is meaning, there always is, it’s just too obvious for me to notice. There has to be!’

*

“The spring is over,” said his son and Gregory did not know why he made this climatological observation until he was given an explanation:

“You never went to visit your friends. They tell me you don’t answer the phone. This is going nowhere. What do you do all day long?”

“I go to the library, borrow books and think about what I’ve read.”

His son gave him a long, surprised look. Gregory thought: ‘He’s just like his mother, he won’t give up!’

“You need human company. Why don’t you join a reading club?”

“I already have!” said Gregory, looking his son straight in the eye.

*

That night, Gregory realized his son was right, passivity was leading him nowhere. In the morning he was standing in front of the library even before it opened; he borrowed the three books and underlined random bits at home.

He had to wait until the start of the calendar summer for a response. The fountain pen had gone crazy in response to his latest underlinings, adding words and biblical coordinates which he then spent the next two days translating into equally meaningless quotes. For the first time, the pen had left the safety of the margins and ventured into the middle of the text. In order to acquire enough space, the woman even had to Tipp-Ex out a part of the printed lines. The Russian novel became patchy, as if attacked by a painter just warming up to his work.

Gregory laughed out loud and took the book to the window. The summer had warmed up his apartment so much that he had to open the bedroom window as well to create a bit of a draft. He licked the tip of his pencil and quickly made some random underlinings.

*

August the third: he knew that he would never forget that date. He opened an English thriller in order to see the latest interventions by the fountain pen, when in the middle of a page with a number of underlinings and comments, he spotted a sticker with the following, written in ballpoint pen:

$$\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} |(x, e_n)|^2 = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} |\alpha_n|^2 = \|x\|^2$$

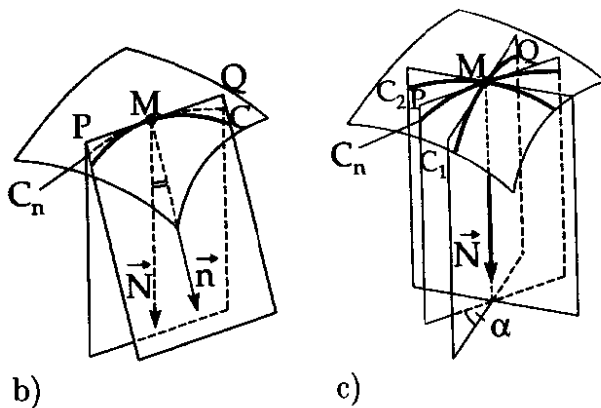
And beneath it:

(12.130)

'The Fourier series' he thought, even before the numbers in the parenthesis attracted his attention. He ran to the case he had stuffed under the bed, in which he kept the few remaining textbooks from his student days. He dug out Bronshtein and Semendyayev's *Handbook of Mathematics*, leafing through manically until he reached equation 12.130 and there it was: the Riesz-Fischer theorem.

He looked at the handwriting through the magnifying glass: a ballpoint pen of the cheapest kind on a sticker with rounded edges, probably for printing addresses on.

His index finger leafed through the pages and he found some other interventions, some even in graphic form.



'Curvature of a surface, whatever for? Who is this cheap ballpoint pen and why is it interfering in my exchange with the religiously manic teacher? He or she even writes 'b)' and 'c)' below the diagrams. Is it an idiot who just copies things and has no technical education?'

He was filled with rage and could feel his heart thumping in his chest.

'I'll die, now I'll die and never find out what the secret is. What the point of it all is!' he thought as weakness overcame him, he stumbled and fell into a chair. Despair made him want to cry, shout, grab random objects, hug someone just to feel that someone else was alive, that his heart was beating and his lungs breathing. But he knew no one could help him, he was alone with the secret and with death.

*

He sat at the kitchen table long into the night, not knowing what to do. Through his open window came the voices of young people gathering in the wrecked playground, flirting with each other. The boys were trying to make their voices as deep as possible, while the occasional high-pitched female comments were soon replaced by giggles.

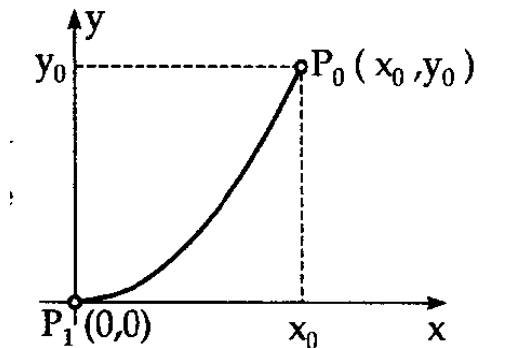
The air felt like a summer's evening was supposed to: redolent of timelessness.

He changed his sweaty undershirt and splashed his face with water that came out as warm as if he had turned on the hot water tap instead of cold.

The youngsters departed, lights gradually went off, even the bluish glow from televisions was slowly fading, but Gregory was still sitting, staring ahead, as if immersed in some thick fluid, thoughts floating past, occasionally colliding with him.

*

The ballpoint found the French love story in the middle of September and the Russian depressive in the first week of October. On page ten, it drew onto a sticker:



Gregory shook his head: 'What a simpleton! Something as joyful, optimistic and uplifting as the Abel integral equation certainly does not belong in a Russian classic!'

He hated the cheapness of the blue lines that left shitty deposits of color in corners and on curves and how it was unable to keep pace when the hand guiding it traveled too fast and faded away to something barely perceptible. It physically hurt him as his eyes followed a line that strayed and he thought the correspondent not just slow witted, but also insufficiently careful.

Gregory stared at the glass against which the rain poured, unable to rid himself of the feeling of disgust.

*

He dreamed about an entrance to a bar and a brawny security guy, leaning in the doorway. Gregory was embarrassed to meet the man's eyes, so he stared at the ground, at his sandaled feet and the rain falling onto his bare toes. Every time he lifted his eyes, the security man's white beard got longer so that in the end it reached down to his waist.

"Abel!" Gregory sat up in bed.

'Maybe the connection is not a mathematical one, but religious? It's not about the Norwegian mathematician, but about Cain's brother?'

He unsuccessfully tried to go back to sleep, but did not have the strength to wake up completely. In semi-sleep, his brain whispered to him one explanation after another and each one seemed more plausible.

'Is the woman with the fountain pen and the Biblical quotes a Vatican agent? What then is the man with the ballpoint pen, who quotes from a Soviet math book? An international communist conspiracy? But the handbook was written by Bronshtein. Or have I accidentally been sucked into the coordinated correspondence of the Vatican-Jewish conspiracy? Am I in mortal danger?' He dared not ask the librarians to tell him who else kept borrowing the three books, but for international agents breaking into a computer database it would be child's play. Would they come and get him if there was the slightest hint that he was close to uncovering the truth?

*

"I see you've bought a burglar proof door," said his son, "does that mean you don't feel safe?"

Just like his mother, just like her!

*

He lay low for a whole week, but then he could no longer stay away. By now the books had so much writing and so many stickers in them, that there was very little space left for underlining, so he got his Olfa knife and slowly, carefully cut out long strips of stickers and randomly revealed parts of the original text.

The Vatican agent got it immediately and began putting her comments next to his cutouts, while the Soviet agent again took some time to add his equations.

*

Before the Christmas holidays, he received an empty card and knew straight away that it was from his daughter, who still was not speaking to him. He had to endure Christmas dinner with his son and his family. He was given the Oxford encyclopedia of literature and realized just how much he hated them all, including the grandchildren. What he really wanted was to be alone, bent over his books. Regular visits to the library had turned him into a loner.

*

He arranged the books on the table and leafed through them with slow, caressing movements.

'A dance, this is a dance!' he told himself. However much and whatever they wrote, stuck on and cut out, they were always careful not to touch each other's work, only the original was rapidly disappearing. Just the first and last few pages were left untouched, for incidental readers.

The banging of pyrotechnics echoed around the apartment blocks. When the rockets flew into the air and the sky was additionally lit up by the big firework display in the town center, he closed the books, but kept his hands on top of them.

'If I'm honest with myself,' he thought, 'am I any closer to the meaning of all this?'

He shook his head, but the bitterness of this realization dissolved in hope before he even realized it.

*

In the middle of January, his local library sent him a letter. He thought it was a bill for all the ruined books, but instead it was a notification that he had been awarded the title of

GOLDEN READER

He was the one who had borrowed the most books in the previous year and was invited to a special event at which the gold, silver and bronze awards would be given, followed by a modest buffet.

Gregory was about to scrunch up the invitation when it struck him:

'There are three of us! If I borrowed the most, the Vatican woman must be right behind me, followed by the Soviet. We'll finally meet!'

*

A sleepless, feverish week ensued. He wanted to give up a number of times, even picked up the phone once to call the library, but stopped every time. He had to find out!

*

The event took place in a small room on the second floor. The head of the library had a longish speech, a boy who called her aunt played something almost familiar on a flute and then the award winners came up on stage one after the other, receiving their certificates, printed on a color printer that was running out of ink, and free membership cards for the current year.

The second award winner was not as old as Gregory had expected. There must be something wrong with her back or she had been born looking out of proportion. Her round glasses were stuck between her inflated cheeks. She moved clumsily, leaving the impression of feeble-mindedness even though Gregory couldn't quite put his finger on why he felt that way.

The first glance at the third award winner made Gregory think that it was an empty suit getting up onto the stage. The man must have lost a lot of weight, but not necessarily recently, since the cut of the suit dated from before most of the librarians were even born. The thin man received his certificate with both hands, nodded and quickly crawled back to the seat next to Gregory's. He was slightly bent over, as if sick, and Gregory had a good look at him. The man had tried to salvage the torn elbows on his jacket by darning them. The thread first surrounded the hole in a rectangle and then attempted to weave its way across the middle. But it was in vain, the shirt underneath which, if artificial fiber is able to turn yellow, could be made of nylon, peeped out

anyway. Gregory leant forward and inhaled. He wanted to catch the stench of this person, but instead his nostrils caught a pleasant scent, albeit of the cheapest possible soap.

The man was incapable of controlling his hands and from time to time they trembled so strongly that the sheet of paper in them fluttered. At such moments, the man squeezed his hands together and Gregory remembered his disdain at seeing all the stumbling points and blotches in the equations.

The head of the library invited them to the buffet. Some canapés and glasses of wine from a Tetra Pak container were arranged on a desk. The award-winning threesome moved in as remote orbits as possible, avoiding each other's eyes. It soon transpired that the audience consisted mainly of the library employees, who began chatting among themselves and forgot about the award winners.

Gregory's stomach acid rose after the first sip of wine. He sensed the thin man in the corner on his right staring at the wall and inching his way toward the exit. There appeared a gap among the librarians and Gregory spotted the second award winner standing next to the desk, reaching for a canapé. She swallowed it whole with a single movement of her hand. Then she looked left and right and pulled a plastic bag out of her purse. Once more she looked around and then stashed away some food to take home.

*

With his head bent, Gregory walked through the falling snow and stopped in front of a garbage container. He got his membership card and pushed his hand into the darkness until he gently placed it on top of the other thrash.

His name was written on the certificate in golden letters so he slowly tore it up in his pocket and walked until he discarded it, bit by bit into every waste bin on the way to the town center.

THE END