[TASHA KARLUKA](https://www.shortstoryproject.com/writers/tasha-karluka/)| FROM:RUSSIAN

**CHICKEN MORNING, NOON AND NIGHT**

**Translated by : Michele A. Berdy**

Sonya, how could you? How can you wear those short dresses covered with pea-green dots?”

“Sonya, have you said your prayers?”

“Sonya, how can you listen to those fascists?”

“Sonya, have you read Sholem Aleichem?”

“Sonya, what are you eating? That’s not kosher!”

“Bubbe, I like peas on me, not in me.”

“How long can this go on? I can’t stand it!”

“It’s Wagner, Bach! They weren’t fascists. It’s not their fault they were born Germans and not Jews.”

“He’s writing about love and I don’t know what that is yet. I don’t understand what he’s saying.”

“But Bubbe, it tastes so good!”

I — Sonya — and my grandmother— Gittel Yakovlevna— live in a communal apartment in Odessa. I’m 15 years old, taking drum lessons but Bubbe thinks they’re piano lessons.  I have unusual blonde hair and blue eyes. In my passport it says “Jewish,” but in Odessa they think I’m the illegitimate daughter of a German who lived here more than a quarter century ago.

If it weren’t for the line in my passport, the Torah my grandmother gave me on my third birthday, the endless Sholem Aleichem on the bookshelves, attendance at the synagogue and the lighting of Sabbath candles, I’d think I was German, but the way things are — I don’t think I’m German.

There’s a boy in my class who is also Jewish. I can’t stand him. He’s constantly pouring sand in my backpack, lifting up my dress and eating my fruit jellies in the cafeteria. But when they call Senya Hebe — that’s his real last name — when they call him “Heebie Hebe,” I go fight for him. I can’t fight at all, but I go anyway since Bubbe says that the war against the fascists started just like that — some blockhead called a Jew a “Hebe,” but no one noticed or everyone pretended like they didn’t notice.  I don’t want a war. I want to live. I want to go to dances. And wear perfume. I want to learn to walk in high heels. And to kiss, to kiss — I really want to learn how to kiss.

A week ago Masha Koloradova brought a quiz to class. You know the kind — a notebook with questions like: “Who is your favorite actor?” “What’s your favorite color?” “Who do you love?” She gave it to me to fill out, and one question was, “When did you have your first kiss?” I looked at the answers of the other girls, and they all wrote things like, “A long time ago!” “A year ago,” or “When I was 12.” But I hadn’t kissed anyone. Can you imagine? I hadn’t kissed anyone, and I was so ashamed! You can’t even imagine how ashamed I was. You know what’s strange about it? I don’t know how to make borscht or use the washing machine or speak English. I’m not ashamed about that. But I’ve never kissed anyone and I’m ashamed. Really ashamed.

So that I wouldn’t embarrass myself, I wrote “When I was 11.” So? Let them envy me. No one will ever know the truth anyway.

Bubbe says that you should only kiss the one you think you’ll spend your whole life with. “So if you think you’ll spend your whole life with Fedya, kiss him,” Bubbe said. Which Fedya she had in mind, I don’t know. In fact I don’t know anyone named Fedya, but I really want to kiss. What’s it like — kissing?

When I pray before I go to bed, I don’t recite those boring old prayers that Bubbe taught me. I just talk with God. I ask to meet the one I’ll spend my life really soon with so that I can kiss him. Even if Bubbe sees. It’s good that there’s God. Even if He doesn’t exist. But the thing is, no one knows for sure. Whoever has God will never be alone. If you have God, that means you have someone to talk to. You can even imagine that He answers you.

I don’t have friends. There are kids I hang out with. We go to the movies or to the beach in the summer. I’ve got friends that I talk about acne cream with, but I don’t have a true friend — a person I can tell everything to. I keep it all inside me. Bubbe says that I’m very anti-social. I am anti-social with some people to keep from hurting them. And with others to keep from being hurt. For now, I’ve got God, and that’s the way it’s going to be. I share my secrets with Him and only Him.

Our communal apartment has five rooms, one kitchen, three stoves, one toilet and an old shower that breaks all the time. The line for the toilet can only be compared to the line outside the shop around the corner in the morning when they deliver fresh bread. All of world literature can be found in our toilet, beginning with Hugo and ending with Dostoevsky. But our neighbors love Chekhov’s short stories most of all.

“The man didn’t write bricks like comrade Tolstoy. He wrote normal-sized little stones — you have your morning movement and are five pages better read,” Isaak Fishilevich said. He lives in the room across the hall from us. He is, by the way, a decorated veterinarian and humanist.

I have the worst luck — someone always wants to use the toilet when I do. If I go first, after five minutes someone starts knocking on the door. If I go after someone else, after someone else you could die of asphyxiation. Only Uncle Isaak, the humanist, is tactful. He holds it. He holds it in and waits.  So you can imagine my surprise when I saw Uncle Isaak carrying “Mein Kampf” in his string bag a while back. He bought it at the flea market. But when I went into our crapper I saw little cut-up pieces of paper in place of toilet paper. That was “Mein Kampf.” The paper was rough, but I left with a sense of duty well done and the image of dozens of little scraps floating down the sewer. In the symbolic battle, fascism lay dead on the dung pile.

Bubbe is 78 years old. She still puts on lipstick, puts combs in her hair, and buys lacy bras. Not for men! For herself. Bubbe says that she still feels like a woman thanks to her foundation garments. Men adore her. Bubbe still smokes, even today — she uses a cigarette holder. In the evenings she goes to the park to play card games and dominos with the men. She has beautiful large eyes, gray hair and a bedroom voice. People who don’t know her think that when she was young she sang arias, had affairs, and walked around in furs and jewels. I don’t know if that’s true or not. Bubbe doesn’t tell me. She doesn’t tell anyone anything. Probably her best friend is God, too.

Bubbe always tells me, “Smile even when you feel bad! Better people should envy you than feel sorry for you.” I never talked about sex with Bubbe. I always thought that she didn’t even know the word. But yesterday she told me, “I won’t tell you anything about sex. When you have a husband, let him tell you and show you. And even if you know everything about sex before you meet your husband, don’t say a thing. Keep your mouth shut and listen to your husband! If you want a smart husband, you have to be a little fool.”

Bubbe is considered wise. But you ought to see her in the morning — when she’s looking for yesterday. That’s what she calls it. She flips through all her books and turns her clothes inside out searching for her pension money and glasses. Bubbe is losing her memory. One old lady from Odessa, when she saw grandmother go by, she whispered in that way that is always really loud, “Old prostitute!” and she hissed like a snake, you know? I always want to walk up to her and punch her big nose, but Bubbe stops me, turns to face her and says, “Musichka, darling, it’s not my fault that in fifty-six Lenya Utesov fell in love with my tush and not your bones.” The old snake hisses even more as we walk away with our heads proudly held high and our tushes swaying.

Men still look adoringly at my grandmother, but I’m not pretty. When she hears me say I’m not pretty, she tells me I’m stupid. “Not only am I not pretty, I’m stupid, too. I’ve got the whole package!” I tell her. Then Bubbe takes me by the hand over to the mirror. “Look at my big nose,” she says. I look and see that her nose is big. “Look at my eyes,” she tells me. I look and see that the left is bigger than the right one, or the right is smaller than the left. “Look at my lips.” I look and see that they are thin and wrinkled. Grandmother seats me in a chair and smiles, and then she begins to walk around the room. You should see her walk! She’s a goddess! She sits on the edge of a chair and lights a cigarette. Her fingers, her neck, an untidy hair across her face… Oh, gods! I don’t see her big nose, or notice that her eyes are different, or see her thin lips. Sometimes I think she isn’t getting old, she’s just maturing. She’s maturing beautifully. “A person is beautiful on the outside when they aren’t rotting on the inside,” Bubbe says. “You’re like wine — you get better with age. But I’m like meat — I spoil the older I get,” I tell her.

It was autumn. It was raining. Yellow leaves stuck to my boots and didn’t want to let them go. I was sad, really sad for the first time. Like when it’s empty inside and you want to howl. I both wanted to hide and for someone to hug me without asking any questions. I wanted to be silent and scream at the same time. I headed for the sea. I got to the shore.  I took off my boots and began to walk along the sand. I got a razor out of my pocket (I took it from home, special), took off my coat, and rolled up the sleeves of my chiffon blouse. Veins. My green veins. You could see them so easily. In a movie once I saw a razor gliding beautifully through veins. Like a knife through soft butter. I lowered the razor. One more centimeter and it would slide through butter.

The neighbor’s boy ran into our courtyard and rang the doorbell to our apartment. Our bright room, Bubbe putting on lipstick. “Do you know what happened? Did you see what your Sonya did,” Dima asked. “Gittel! Gittel! Did you see? Did you see Sonya? We warned you, didn’t we? We told you she could get up to anything,” our neighbor said. All our neighbors ran into our room and asked Bubbe the same questions, but no one dared to say what happened. They were afraid. Bubbe got up, walked up to the window and saw me. Sonya! Her Sonya! Holding a bouquet of yellow flowers with a shaved head. She started to laugh so hard that she could only say, “Well, maybe now my Sonya will start to wear a hat.”

That was the first debilitating depression. The first time I left home. With a razor. The first time I brought Bubbe flowers for no reason. The first time a razor came so close to my veins. Like in a movie.

But I’m afraid of pain.

I want to live. I want to go to dances. I want to wear perfume. I want to learn how to walk in heels. And to kiss — I really want to learn how to kiss.

I didn’t tell anyone what I wanted to do to myself. Only He and I knew about it. Later I was so ashamed before Him and Bubbe. And the stray dog Velvet, who I feed. If I didn’t feed her she might die. When winter came, I felt fine.

I love winter. In winter everything’s more straight-forward. Women don’t bare their legs and shoulders. Men don’t have to look at naked women’s bodies or shout vulgar things after high heels. All that’s left are eyes — sad, playful, varied — and desires, all cloaked by garments and God, who lives inside everyone. I love a lot of clothing on me and chicken is more expensive in the winter, so we don’t buy it often. And that’s good! In the summer chicken is cheaper, and Bubbe can’t cook anything but chicken and chicken cutlets. It’s chicken morning, noon and night. That poor, poor bird. And poor, poor Sonya. The bird and I are unhappy for the same reason: because I eat it.

Yesterday my favorite ballet troupe came to Odessa. Bubbe doesn’t like them. She says that before they go on stage they take or sniff something. But I sat in the upper balcony and wept, and then laughed, and then wept again. I want to live my life on stage to that music, with those people, in that dance. But I have to go to synagogue. Today is Friday and almost the Sabbath.

Bubbe sat like usual with her cigarette holder and barely smiled. My hair had grown out to a buzz-cut, and for some reason everyone thought that I’d had lice and had my head shaved. That’s why parents didn’t let their children get close to me. Bubbe thought this was hysterical. Lately only two things made her laugh: Mikhail Katsman’s courtship and my buzz-cut.

I love to go to synagogue. And I love to go to church, too. And to mosques.

But those people who call themselves the servants of God…

They act as if God Himself personally offered His friendship them, and even His protection to some people. Their crossword puzzles in cassocks. Their faces on the television. Their bank accounts. Their memorized, empty words that they try to fill other people’s ears and souls with. In vain. Sometimes I turn into a fly and buzz into their rooms when they’re alone. With my little paws I close their ears so that they don’t hear; I close their eyes so that they do not see. Shameful. I’m ashamed of them. And I go back to sinners. I feel better with them. I think it’s because God doesn’t live on their tongues. He is hidden deep down, so that they can cherish Him.

Yesterday Senya Hebe didn’t come to school. The teacher said he was sick. I sent him a bouquet of flowers. I always send flowers to people when they’re sick. No one has ever sent me flowers. But that’s just because I’m never sick.

A week ago Bubbe’s admirer came over — Uncle Misha, or rather Mikhail Katsman. He called me over quietly, so that Bubbe wouldn’t hear. “Sonya, what does your grandmother dream of?” Uncle Misha asked. I thought about it. She doesn’t really care much for Uncle Misha — she’s still head-over-heels in love with Utesov — so I said: “She’s dreams of a black typewriter.”

That very day the doorbell rang. It was a box — not for us but for Bubbe. A gift from Mikhail Katsman. She was puzzled and so I had to tell her everything.

Bubbe? What is it, Bubbe?

She shouted. There was a row. For the nth time she reminded me that I was cheeky, snotty and would go far. And when I left the room and she thought I couldn’t hear her, she burst out laughing.

Bubbe wants me to be a doctor, but I’m going to be a writer. The problem is, Bubbe says, that with the way I look now, only the circus school would take me. And even then we’d have to bribe my way in. Not long ago Uncle Misha sent Bubbe tulips. Where did he get them in the winter? Mikhail Katsman has a job in the government, and he’s 80 years old. He has always dreamed of being repatriated to Israel and living on the shores of the Red Sea with my grandmother.

I think Bubbe is falling in love. Yesterday she bought herself a new bra with roses on it and Guerlain perfume. She even went on a diet. And that old hag Musichka painted under our windows: “Gittel is a tramp.” Uncle Misha spent half a day scrubbing off the inscription. Bubbe sat by the window and watched him as he sent air kisses into our window. To her.

Humph. Either spring is in the air or I’ll have to go to synagogue and arrange with the Rabbi for a wedding soon.

Now Bubbe is Katsman. Gittel Yakovlevna Katsman. Tomorrow the newlyweds are going on their honeymoon to Israel. And Uncle Misha is prepared to put up with chicken morning, noon, and night.

And then for some reason flowers have been delivered to our room lately. Well, not to us, but to me. And on little cards there is something about love. I don’t know what love is yet. I don’t understand what he’s writing. It’s Senya Hebe who’s writing. I wrote about it in a letter to Bubbe in Israel. “What can I say, Sonya? If you take that last name on top of your personality, you’re sure to go far. And when you become a writer, you won’t have to worry about thinking up a pen name,” Bubbe replied.

Bubbe and Uncle Misha kiss all day long — so that means what they have is for eternity. Meanwhile, Senya and I like to sit on the shore of the Black Sea and get close to eternity. Yesterday I wrote my first short story about my favorite old lady, and Senya really liked it. Basically Senya likes everything about me. The only thing is that I can’t cook. Or rather, I can, but like Bubbe: it’s chicken morning, noon, and night.