

Unnecessary Things by Tatyana Tolstaya (published in *The New Yorker* – August 9, 2017)

This Teddy bear once had amber eyes made from special glass—each one had a pupil and an iris. The bear itself was gray and stiff, with wiry fur. I adored him.

Then a lifetime went by. I bought my own apartment in St. Petersburg and was walking around the parental abode collecting my clothes and books while begging my mother for various knickknacks and for old fabrics stored in even older suitcases. No one had any need for this stuff—not my mother and certainly not me—but I like unnecessary things: all the pragmatic, commercial, and manipulative meaning has disappeared from them, any usefulness has evaporated, leaving only their naked souls, their true selves, all that was heretofore hidden by the hustle and bustle of passing days.

While digging in the cupboard under the stairs, surrounded by grimy burlap and old ski poles that none of us could bring ourselves to throw away, groping in the dark in the space between the wall and the storage chest, I found the bear or, to be more precise, his remains: a furry wooden frame with a single front paw, a plastic button for one eye and bits of hanging black thread for the other.

I grabbed him, holding him tight, clutching his dusty, bristly torso, and closing my eyes to keep the unexpected stream of tears from raining down on him. I just stood there, in the stifling and cramped semi-darkness, listening to the frenzied beating of my heart. Or perhaps it was the bear's heart—who's to know?

What was it like? Maybe something like this: say you have babies, they grow up and turn forty, and you get used to this fact and live with it, and then you rummage in the closet and here he is, your first baby, the way he used to be—eighteen months old, not able to talk yet, sweet-smelling like oatmeal and applesauce, his face puffy from crying, lost but found, waiting for you all these decades behind the storage chest in the closet, unable to call for you—and now you are finally reunited.

I took him with me to my new apartment. Everything there was insultingly new—that is, unfamiliar and alien. The place was full of items bought at antique and secondhand shops, items that had previously belonged to other people and had not yet acclimated to their new habitat. I did my best to soften the strangeness of these foreign chests of drawers and sideboards with my mother's knickknacks and fabrics. I placed the bear on my bed, not knowing what else to do with him.

That night, I slept with my arm around him; he weakly returned the hug with his solitary paw. It was a white summer night, a kind of gauze with dusky twilight, no slumber, but a yearning for it. The bear smelled of dust, dust and old age, infirmity, decades, millennia. Opening my eyes in the underwater dimness of this alabaster midnight, I could see the black thread hanging from his miserable little eye socket. I stroked his wooden head; it was covered with scars. I touched his ears.

No, I thought, this cannot continue. There is a short story by William Faulkner called "A Rose for Emily." It's about a woman who poisons her lover to prevent him from leaving her, and who subsequently locks herself in her house and refuses to leave it for the forty years until her death. After her funeral, a rotted corpse in a rotted nightshirt is found lying on his side in a bed, as if embracing someone, and next to him, on a pillow with the indentation of a head, there is a single long strand of iron-gray hair.

In the morning, I left for Moscow. And when I came back, a month later, the bear was gone. He wasn't on the bed, or under it; he wasn't in any of the closets, or in the crawlspace. He was nowhere to be found. Nowhere.

(Translated, from the Russian, by Anya Migdal.) Tatyana Tolstaya is the author of "The Slynx" and "White Walls," among other works of fiction. Her new collection, "Aetherial Worlds," will be published in 2018.