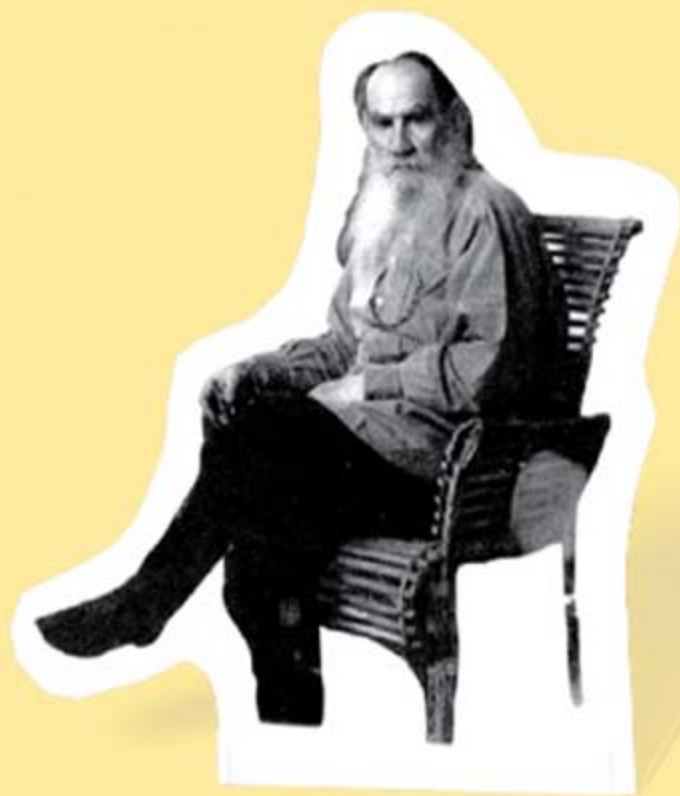


**LEO
TOLSTOY**



**ALYOSHA
THE POT**

STORY

ALYOSHA THE POT

Short Story

LEO TOLSTOY



HarperCollins e-books

Contents

[Begin Reading](#) 1

[About the Author](#)

[Credits](#)

[Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

ALYOSHA THE POT

[1905]

Alyosha was a younger brother. He was nicknamed “the Pot”, because once, when his mother sent him with a pot of milk for the deacon’s wife, he stumbled and broke it. His mother thrashed him soundly, and the children in the village began to tease him, calling him “the Pot”. Alyosha the Pot: and this is how he got his nickname.

Alyosha was a skinny little fellow, lop-eared—his ears stuck out like wings—and with a large nose. The children always teased him about this, too, saying, “Alyosha has a nose like a gourd on a pole!”

There was a school in the village where Alyosha lived, but reading and writing and such did not come easy for him, and besides there was no time to learn. His older brother lived with a merchant in town, and Alyosha had begun helping his father when still a child. When he was only six years old, he was already

watching over his family's cow and sheep with his younger sister in the common pasture. And long before he was grown, he had started taking care of their horses day and night. From his twelfth year he plowed and carted. He hardly had the strength for all these chores, but he did have a certain manner—he was always cheerful. When the children laughed at him, he fell silent or laughed himself. If his father cursed him, he stood quietly and listened. And when they finished and ignored him again, he smiled and went back to whatever task was before him.

When Alyosha was nineteen years old, his brother was taken into the army; and his father arranged for Alyosha to take his brother's place as a servant in the merchant's household. He was given his brother's old boots and his father's cap and coat and was taken into town. Alyosha was very pleased with his new clothes, but the merchant was quite dissatisfied with his appearance.

"I thought you would bring me a young man just like Semyon," said the merchant, looking Alyosha over carefully. "But you've brought me such a sniveller. What's he good for?"

"Ah, he can do anything—harness and drive anywhere you like. And he's a glutton for work. Only looks like a stick. He's really very wiry."

"That much is plain. Well, we shall see."

"And above all he's a meek one. Loves to work."

"Well, what can I do? Leave him."

And so Alyosha began to live with the merchant.

The merchant's family was not large. There were his wife, his old mother and three children. His older married son, who had

only completed grammar school, was in business with his father. His other son, a studious sort, had been graduated from the high school and was for a time at the university, though he had been expelled and now lived at home. And there was a daughter, too, a young girl in the high school.

At first they did not like Alyosha. He was too much the peasant and was poorly dressed. He had no manners and addressed everyone familiarly as in the country. But soon they grew used to him. He was a better servant than his brother and was always very responsive. Whatever they set him to do he did willingly and quickly, moving from one task to another without stopping. And at the merchant's, just as at home, all the work was given to Alyosha. The more he did, the more everyone heaped upon him. The mistress of the household and her old mother-in-law, and the daughter, and the younger son, even the merchant's clerk and the cook—all sent him here and sent him there and ordered him to do everything that they could think of. The only thing that Alyosha ever heard was "Run do this, fellow", or "Alyosha, fix this up now", or "Did you forget, Alyosha? Look here, fellow, don't you forget!" And Alyosha ran, and fixed, and looked, and did not forget, and managed to do everything and smiled all the while.

Alyosha soon wore out his brother's boots, and the merchant scolded him sharply for walking about in tatters with his bare feet sticking out and ordered him to buy new boots in the market. These boots were truly new, and Alyosha was very happy with them; but his feet remained old all the same, and by evening they ached so from running that he got mad at them. Alyosha was afraid that when his father came to collect his wages, he would be very annoyed that the master had deducted the cost of the new boots from his pay.

In winter Alyosha got up before dawn, chopped firewood, swept out the courtyard, fed grain to the cow and the horses and watered them. Afterwards, he lit the stoves, cleaned the boots and coats of all the household, got out the samovars and polished them. Then, either the clerk called him into the shop to take out the wares or the cook ordered him to knead the dough and to wash the pans. And later he would be sent into town with a message, or to the school for the daughter, or to fetch lamp oil or something else for the master's old mother. "Where have you been loafing, you worthless thing?" one would say to him, and then another. Or among themselves they would say, "Why go yourself? Alyosha will run for you. Alyosha, Alyosha!" And Alyosha would run.

Alyosha always ate breakfast on the run and was seldom in time for dinner. The cook was always chiding him, because he never took meals with the others, but for all that she did feel sorry for him and always left him something hot for dinner and for supper.

Before and during holidays there was a lot more work for Alyosha, though he was happier during holidays, because then everyone gave him tips, not much, only about sixty kopeks usually; but it was his own money, which he could spend as he chose. He never laid eyes on his wages, for his father always came into town and took from the merchant Alyosha's pay, giving him only the rough edge of his tongue for wearing out his brother's boots too quickly. When he had saved two rubles altogether from tips, Alyosha bought on the cook's advice a red knitted sweater. When he put it on for the first time and looked down at himself, he was so surprised and delighted that he just stood in the kitchen gaping and gulping.

Alyosha said very little, and when he did speak, it was always to say something necessary abruptly and briefly. And when he was told to do something or other or was asked if he could do it, he always answered without the slightest hesitation "I can do it". And he would immediately throw himself into the job and do it.

Alyosha did not know how to pray at all. His mother had once taught him the words, but he had forgot even as she spoke. Nonetheless, he did pray, morning and evening, but simply, just with his hands, crossing himself.

Thus Alyosha lived for a year and a half, and then, during the second half of the second year, the most unusual experience of his life occurred. This experience was his sudden discovery, to his complete amazement, that besides those relationships between people that arise from the need that one may have for another, there also exist other relationships that are completely different: not a relationship that a person has with another because that other is needed to clean boots, to run errands or to harness horses; but a relationship that a person has with another who is in no way necessary to him, simply because that other one wants to serve him and to be loving to him. And he discovered, too, that he, Alyosha, was just such a person. He realized all this through the cook Ustinja. Ustinja was an orphan, a young girl yet, and as hard a worker as Alyosha. She began to feel sorry for Alyosha, and Alyosha for the first time in his life felt that he himself, not his services, but he himself was needed by another person. When his mother had been kind to him or had felt sorry for him, he took no notice of it, because it seemed

to him so natural a thing, just the same as if he felt sorry for himself. But suddenly he realized that Ustinja, though completely a stranger, felt sorry for him, too. She always left him a pot of kasha with butter, and when he ate, she sat with him, watching him with her chin propped upon her fist. And when he looked up at her and she smiled, he, too, smiled.

It was all so new and so strange that at first Alyosha was frightened. He felt that it disturbed his work, his serving, but he was nonetheless very happy. And when he happened to look down and notice his trousers, which Ustinja had mended for him, he would shake his head and smile. Often while he was working or running an errand, he would think of Ustinja and mutter warmly "Ah, that Ustinja!" Ustinja helped him as best she could, and he helped her. She told him all about her life, how she had been orphaned when very young, how an old aunt had taken her in, how this aunt later sent her into town to work, how the merchant's son had tried stupidly to seduce her, and how she put him in his place. She loved to talk, and he found listening to her very pleasant. Among other things he heard that in town it often happened that peasant boys who came to serve in households would marry the cooks. And once she asked him if his parents would marry him off soon. He replied that he didn't know and that there was no one in his village whom he wanted.

"What, then, have you picked out someone else?" she asked.

"Yes. I'd take you. Will you?"

"O Pot, my Pot, how cunningly you put it to me!" she said, cuffing him playfully on the back with her ladle.

At Shrovetide Alyosha's old father came into town again to collect his son's wages. The merchant's wife had found out

that Alyosha planned to marry Ustinja, and she was not at all pleased. "She will just get pregnant, and then what good will she be!" she complained to her husband.

The merchant counted out Alyosha's money to his father. "Well, is my boy doing all right by you?" asked the old man. "I told you he was a meek one, would do anything you say."

"Meek or no, he's done something stupid. He has got it into his head to marry the cook. And I will not keep married servants. It doesn't suit us."

"Eh, that little fool! What a fool! How can he think to do such a stupid thing! But don't worry over it. I'll make him forget all that nonsense."

The old man walked straight into the kitchen and sat down at the table to wait for his son. Alyosha was, as always, running an errand, but he soon came in all out of breath.

"Well, I thought you were a sensible fellow, but what nonsense you've thought up!" Alyosha's father greeted him.

"I've done nothing."

"What d'you mean nothing! You've decided to marry. I'll marry you when the time comes, and I'll marry you to whoever I want, not to some town slut."

The old man said a great deal more of the same sort. Alyosha stood quietly and sighed. When his father finished, he smiled.

"So I'll forget about it," he said.

"See that you do right now," the old man said curtly as he left.

When his father had gone and Alyosha remained alone with Ustinja, who had been standing behind the kitchen door listening while his father was talking, he said to her: "Our plan won't work out. Did you hear? He was furious, won't let us."

Ustinja began to cry quietly into her apron. Alyosha clucked his tongue and said, "How could I not obey him? Look, we must forget all about it."

In the evening, when the merchant's wife called him to close the shutters, she said to him, "Are you going to obey your father and forget all this nonsense about marrying?"

"Yes. Of course. I've forgot it," Alyosha said quickly, then smiled and immediately began weeping.

From that time Alyosha did not speak again to Ustinja about marriage and lived as he had before.

One morning during Lent the clerk sent Alyosha to clear the snow off the roof. He crawled up onto the roof, shovelled it clean and began to break up the frozen snow near the gutters when his feet slipped out from under him and he fell headlong with his shovel. As ill luck would have it, he fell not into the snow, but onto an entry-way with an iron railing. Ustinja ran up to him, followed by the merchant's daughter.

"Are you hurt, Alyosha?"

"Yes. But it's nothing. Nothing."

He wanted to get up, but he could not and just smiled. Others came and carried him down into the yard-keeper's lodge. An orderly from the hospital arrived, examined him and asked where he hurt. "It hurts all over," he replied. "But it's nothing. Nothing. Only the master will be annoyed. Must send word to Papa."

Alyosha lay abed for two full days, and then, on the third day, they sent for a priest.

"You're not going to die, are you?" asked Ustinja.

“Well, we don’t all live forever. It must be some time,” he answered quickly, as always. ‘Thank you, dear Ustinja, for feeling sorry for me. See, it’s better they didn’t let us marry, for nothing would have come of it. And now all is fine.”

He prayed with the priest, but only with his hands and with his heart. And in his heart he felt that if he was good here, if he obeyed and did not offend, then there all would be well.

He said little. He only asked for something to drink and smiled wonderingly. Then he seemed surprised at something, and stretched out and died.

AN EXTRA STORY

LIFE EXPECTANCY

FROM *GIRL TROUBLE*

BY HOLLY GODDARD JONES

AVAILABLE FROM HARPER PERENNIAL

IN SEPTEMBER 2009

Coach Theo Burke was standing outside his classroom during morning break when he noticed Josie across the hall, pinned up against a locker. One of the varsity basketball players, Jatarius, was doing the pinning—his near-seven feet making Josie seem almost short in comparison, big hands straddling her shoulders, too-handsome black face leaned in to kissing distance. The worst thing—the thing that felt like a punch in the gut—was the look on Josie’s face, a look Theo knew well. Her head was tilted, and she was smiling, but just a little: that smart smile, that sexy half-smile with the bottom lip barely caught under her front teeth, an expression that Theo recognized as the smallest bit calculated but mostly genuine. Mostly the only way Josie knew how to be.

He strode over, hands shoved so deep in his khakis that his watch got caught on one side. He cleared his throat.

“Jatarius,” Theo said.

“Yeah.” A slow breath, dusky, directed on Josie and not at him.

“Move it along.”

Jatarius pulled to a slow stand, languid, his skin gleaming as if oiled. “Just talking, Coach,” he said, and Josie giggled. Theo turned to her, and she looked away.

“You’re supposed to be swapping books now, not talking,” he said, realizing as he said it how ridiculous—how *old*—he sounded. Josie was losing interest in him, and all he had to cling to was his authority as her teacher and her coach. Her better. And how false that felt, watching her, knowing what her breasts looked like beneath that t-shirt and hooded sweatshirt: small, spread apart—a tall girl’s breasts.

Jatarius pulled his backpack up over his shoulder. “See ya,” he told Josie, and she fluttered her fingers at him as he sauntered off.

“What are you doing?” Theo whispered, looking around to make sure nobody was watching them.

She tried to laugh again, but her voice caught a little, and she stopped. Her eyes were over-bright, her shoulders stiff, but she smiled—for him, for the group of girls crossing behind him. “I’m pregnant, Coach,” she said. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She shrugged.

The bell rang, and Theo turned to walk back into his classroom, where twenty-six sophomores were waiting to learn about the Fertile Crescent, the first bloom of civilization.

Abortion, she told him. Soon, now, so I don’t have to miss any game time. Right away. Yesterday.

“All right,” Theo said, fanning the air with his palms, a ges-

ture implying *calm down* that he used when students freaked out about a bad test score or got into fights. He and Josie were in his coach's office. He'd let practice out early that day, after only an hour. Josie had seemed normal—made her warm-up sprints at top speed, missed only a single basket as they ran figure-eights—but *he* could barely concentrate enough to follow the action or to guide the girls to the next drill. They looked the same out there in their practice jerseys and white high-tops: lanky girls with brown ponytails and acne. Only Josie stood out, her gold hair alight under the gym's fluorescents. Only Josie seemed real. "All right, slow down. Give me a minute."

She looked at her hands, as if she were counting off the seconds. "Antibiotics," she said finally. "I was sick over Christmas break. That's what did it."

Theo was thinking: *baby*. He had a baby, and a wife. His baby was eleven months old, and they called her Sissy, short for Cecily. Five months ago they found out that her breathing problems were caused by cystic fibrosis, which turned the name—their affection—into a lousy pun, a cruel joke. "Wait," he said. "What? Did what?"

"The antibiotics affected the Pill," she said. "I looked it up on the Internet. At least I'll know better from now on."

"From now on?"

"Jesus," she said. "I'm eighteen. I'm not going to stop having sex."

"I'm just saying," Theo said. He wondered, despite himself, if she would still want to have sex with him.

She pulled a package of gum out her purse and unwrapped a piece. "I'm just ready to get this over with," she said, now chewing. "I've got a lot to worry about. School and all."

“Of course,” Theo said. She was going to Western Kentucky University in the fall, a full ride. He had helped her get it. He had posed with her, her mother, and Western’s basketball coach three months ago when they signed the letter of intent, and the photo ran in the *News Leader*. “Cute girl,” his wife had said when she saw it. And Theo—who was already meeting Josie for fast screws in his office and his car and a few times at her house, when her mother was pulling seconds at the sewing factory—had only nodded.

Now Josie sat in the chair opposite Theo’s, the desk between them, and played with the end of her thick, yellow braid, wanting, he saw, to put it into her mouth. He’d done his best to tease her out of that habit, seeing it as the one solid piece of evidence between them—other than the obvious facts of their positions as teacher and student, of course—that being together was scuzzy and wrong, an embarrassment to them both. Because in so many other ways, it hardly seemed like a problem at all. She’d turned eighteen in December, and she was about to graduate. She was mature. She had a good future ahead of her. There was the infidelity, but Theo tried, with some success, to keep his home life and school life separate, and it seemed to him that he was okay—getting by, at least—as long as he was able to do what had to be done in both lives. He was an average teacher, but better than most coaches: he liked his World Civ classes and tolerated Kentucky Studies. At least he wasn’t just popping a movie in the VCR every day, like Mathias, the boys’ basketball coach, who famously screened *Quigley Down Under* for his freshman geography students during their Australia unit. He thought that he was a better than average father, at least most of the time. He’d hoped for a son, sure—pictured a boy

all those years he and Mia were trying and failing to conceive, a boy to play basketball with and to fish with, all of the clichés. But he'd been happy with his girl, and if her delicacy dismayed him a little—how could it not?—in so many ways, it only made him love her more.

Some days, driving home from work, he thought, *I have a house*, and was instantly filled with pride. House, yes—he was a man, all right. *I have a wife. I have a child*. Before coming in the front door, he could picture all three, house, wife, daughter, as they ought to be: clean, happy, healthy. *This is my life*, he'd think, and then he'd open the door.

"My mom probably wouldn't be too upset if she knew," Josie said. "She likes you. She doesn't get hung up on stuff like you being a teacher. She'd take care of it if she had the money to, but she doesn't."

"How much?" Theo asked.

Josie shook her head. "I don't know yet."

How much was an abortion? Two hundred dollars? A thousand? He tried to imagine withdrawing that much money from the checking account without Mia noticing. Mia was in her own world a lot of the time these days, but she could surprise him with her sudden sharpness.

"But you'll take care of this, right?" Josie said. She was going to cry, he was sure. *Put the braid in your mouth*, he thought. *Do it if that'll shut you up*. "Right?" Josie said.

No less than five hundred, he bet. But he could scrounge it up. Mathias might loan it to him out of his pot fund. Theo could pay it back slowly that way, twenty this week, fifty the next. There wasn't any question, though; it had to be done. His job paid for shit—and he'd have to pick up something part-time

this summer, probably, just to make ends meet—but it was all he had, and the insurance was good. He couldn't lose that. Not with Sissy to worry about.

"Okay," Theo told her. "You get the information and set it up, and I'll pay for it."

"And drive me," Josie said. "I can't ask Mama to do that."

"Okay, I'll drive you," Theo said.

She pulled the rubber band off the end of her braid and raked her fingers through the thick weave of her hair, setting it loose. It ran over her shoulders, halfway down her back, wavy and almost iridescent. Rapunzel hair, he'd always thought. Her nose and cheeks were freckled, and she had that balance between strength and delicacy that most of his girl athletes lacked. Miraculous.

"We could have sex," she said, almost with resignation.

He nodded.

When Sissy's cystic fibrosis was confirmed, the doctors threw a lot of numbers at Theo and Mia, too many to make sense of. Life expectancy. Percentage of cases in the U.S. Chances of this, chances of that. But the fact that stayed with Theo—the data that confirmed for him everything wrong with his marriage and his life—was this: a child could only get the disease if both parents carried a defective gene. Defective, the doctor's word. Dr. Travis—the first of several—told them this in his wood-paneled office with the dark green carpeting, and Theo could remember thinking he, Mia, and Sissy, who was too small at six months but still porcelain-pretty, were now lost in the woods together. He and Mia, two unknowing de-

fectives, had somehow found each other, beaten the odds, and brought forth a child who was drowning in her own chest because the two of them should never have been together in the first place.

When he came home that night after making arrangements with Josie, Mia was in the old recliner, Sissy in her lap, and they were rocking, watching TV. Mia's bare foot bobbed above the floor, keeping time. The house was filthy, and Theo was nauseous at the smells that assaulted him as soon as he walked in the door: soured food stuck to the dishes that were piled up on the kitchen countertops; the heavy metallic tang of piss, where the toilet hadn't been flushed; and shit, too, he was sure of it. Maybe the baby's, but probably the dog's. Mia took care of Sissy to the point of obsession, but she seemed to forget that they had a dog—a Beagle mix they'd gotten free from an unplanned litter—though bringing him home was her idea. She'd read in some magazine that dog owners had longer life expectancies, and cancer patients with dogs more often went into remission or had spontaneous recoveries. He didn't ask her how the cancer thing was supposed to apply to their daughter.

"Smells like crap in here," Theo told her, setting his briefcase and duffel bag down by the front door.

"I hadn't noticed," Mia said. "Baby-Girl's clean." As if in support, Sissy erupted into one of her chants: *ma ma ma ma ma MAAAA!* Theo picked Sissy up and kissed her clean neck, trying to fill his nose with her scent. She hooked her small hand and paper-thin fingernails into his ear and twisted. "Ma," she said again.

"I hear you," Theo told her. She hasn't said it once.

"Might be the dog," Mia said. She kept watching TV, and Theo knew what she was thinking just as clearly as if she'd spoken out loud: *You'll take care of this, right?*

Theo put Sissy down, his stomach already starting to churn. "I'd say that's the most likely option." He whistled and walked around, trying to find the source of the smell. "Joe!" he yelled, whistling again. The odor, thick, sickly, seemed to be everywhere at first; then he rounded a corner, and it hit him like an arrow, coming from the bedroom. He got down on his knees and looked under the bed.

"Christ," he said. "Fuck."

Joe was in the corner, far from the bed as he could get, and Theo could see the fast rise and fall of the dog's stomach. "Hey, boy." The dog cowered at first—his eyes, so eerily human, rolled up at him warily—then let Theo lift him and carry him into the living room like a baby.

"Dog's sick," Theo told Mia.

She nodded.

"Did he get into something?"

"I don't know. He was out back for a few hours. Maybe he got into the garbage." She was still watching the TV. "Poor boy," she said without interest. "Should we take him to the vet?"

"Probably just needs to finish his business," Theo said, and he went out back to put the dog out. In the low light, he could see Joe make a slow circle in the backyard, then lie down. Theo went back inside and tried his best to clean up the mess, using every chemical he could find under the kitchen sink, moving the bed and pulling up the corner of the carpet so he could get to the pad and sub-floor, too. The smell lingered, and he opened a window.

In the living room, Mia hadn't moved. He sat on the couch and watched what she was watching: a cooking show. Not a regular show, though, like his own mom had watched on PBS when he was in high school—*The Frugal Gourmet* or that one with the old Cajun guy, Justin Wilson—shows where somebody stood behind a counter and cooked the food regular-style. This show had a fattish woman with brown hair, and she looked to be in her own house, because the sunlight seemed real and not put on. The camera zoomed in as she dropped an egg into a mixing bowl, which you didn't see happen on Justin Wilson.

"What is this?" he asked her.

"My favorite show," Mia said. Her voice was dreamy. "This woman owns a restaurant in New England. She cooks very simple foods. She doesn't use margarine, only butter."

"Margarine's better for you," Theo said.

"Not true," Mia told him. They watched as the woman dipped a fancy silver measuring cup into a bowl of sugar. "*This dish is fragrant and delicious*," the woman was saying. "Margarine is a trans fat," Mia continued, "which doesn't break down in your system. Natural foods are better."

"Why do you like this so much?" Theo asked. The woman was now grating lemon peel.

Mia stroked Sissy's arm as she talked. "Her hands. She has such clean hands and fingernails. And her sugar, it doesn't just look like sugar."

Her medication. She'd been a mess since Sissy's birth—post-partum depression, her doctor had said—and she had just started to come back, to be herself again, when Sissy was diagnosed. Her meds were a square dance at this point: Prozac helped for a while, then made her worse than ever. Paxil worked, but

they couldn't get the dosage regulated, and the doctor warned them that taking her off it early would result in a major crash. They'd gone on a date a few weeks ago—left Sissy with Mia's mother, tried to dress up and make a night of it—and at the movie, *Million Dollar Baby*, Mia had stared, emotionless, through all the parts that would have had her sobbing a few years before. Theo had asked her what she thought of the story on their drive home, and she seemed confused by her own answer—or not even confused, exactly. Perplexed. Like the changes in her were a cause for a scientific kind of curiosity and nothing else. *I don't know what I thought of it*, she'd said. *I could see that it was sad, but I didn't feel sad. It was intellectual. Is this what being a man is like?*

"Looks like sugar to me," Theo said now.

"Figures."

"You could try making that," Theo told her. "Doesn't look hard. I bet it's real good."

Mia kept rocking. "No, I couldn't do it," she said.

Theo left her and went to the kitchen, unbuttoning his shirt cuffs and rolling up the sleeves to his elbow. He started organizing the dishes and cleaning the counters, pitching empty Lean Cuisine boxes and a Tropicana carton and Ramen noodle bags into a Hefty sack. He couldn't get Josie out of his head, not even for a second. Too easy to think of her, to feel her warm hips between his hands even as he plunged them down into scalding dishwater. He pictured her in the hallway that morning, with Jatarius, and tried to remember the exact look on her face. *You'll take care of this, right?*

He noticed the wet circle in the driveway as he was taking out the trash, but the detail didn't click into place until he was closing the lid of the garbage can, and he realized that Joe wasn't there

to meet him. It occurred to him that there wasn't any strewn garbage out back, no sign of disturbance at all, and he remembered the wet spot then—not oil, not water, but anti-freeze, probably leaked out while his car was warming up that morning. He peered into the dark shadows of the far corner of the yard, where the security light didn't hit. "Joe," he said. "Joe, old boy."

There was a tire propped up against the toolshed—Theo had been meaning to take it to the rubber yard behind Kip's Garage for months now—and he found Joe curled up in the space between it and the concrete wall, the thin scrim of green foam on his jowls barely visible in a sliver of moonlight. "Joe," Theo said. He looked at the still body. "Joe," he said again.

The first time he kissed Josie was in August, two weeks before Sissy's diagnosis. Someday, he might be able to blame the whole affair on his difficult home life, on the fear of losing his baby girl before she could have a home and family of her own. Someday, he might be able to forget that those two weeks existed.

When it happened, though, he wasn't thinking of Sissy, or of Mia. He'd known Josie for four years by then, pulling her from JV when she was still in eighth grade—she was that talented—and letting her start power forward on her first game as a high school student. He had recognized in her the quality that would later attract him: the blend of rawness and refinement, power and grace. In the beginning, though, she'd only seemed a grand kind of experiment. What could he turn her into?

The girls came in for mandatory weightlifting in the summer and through September, before real practice started, and the kiss came after one of these late-afternoon sessions. She was

telling him about her father—how he left her mother in June to move to Nashville with his new girlfriend, a thirty-year-old wannabe country singer. How her mother had been struggling since then to make ends meet. She wasn't crying, but Theo could tell she wanted to, and the desire he felt for her—until this moment hypothetical and even harmless, like a childhood crush—was overwhelming. So he kissed her. He did it because she looked like she needed it. He did it because he knew he could get away with it.

Now, two days after the dog's death, Theo was determined to make it through a full practice without stopping early or fading out mid-speech, which had been his habit since Josie dropped her news. Some of the girls were beginning to look at him strangely, though he actually wondered more about the ones who weren't. He wondered if Josie had told a friend about the two of them, and if that friend had told a friend. She had always promised him complete secrecy, but he'd worked with young girls long enough to understand how unlikely that was, especially among teammates. Before the news of her pregnancy, he and Josie had fallen into a strange sort of complacency with one another, an ease that he was now terrified to remember. How careless they had been—with the sex, of course, but also with too-long looks, knowing smiles, risky, ridiculous moments between classes when they passed in the hall and let their fingers brush. They should have been caught already, he knew. They would get caught.

On the court, the girls were running a pass drill. Josie caught the ball, made it around Lisa in three easy strides, and pistoned upward, sinking a two-pointer. She landed hard, and Theo felt his heart wallop. "Josie?" he said.

Her expression was bewildered. "What?"

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said testily, already dribbling again.

He’d buried Joe in the backyard, not far from the spot where he died. Mia cried, which was more emotion than Theo could remember seeing from her in a while. He’d dug the grave; then, still sweaty and dirt-streaked, he’d hosed the greasy patch in the driveway, watching the liquid blur, blend, then run off into the grass, indistinguishable from a light rain. *I couldn’t have known he’d gotten into that*, Mia had said, and Theo had stripped off his old University of Kentucky sweatshirt and bluejeans without a word, wadding them into a ball and throwing them in the hamper. His muscles, once long and powerful, ached now. *Sissy was coughing again, and I had my hands full. You know how it is*. He’d nodded and started the shower running. *It was your car, for fuck’s sake*.

The girls thundered down the court, mechanized, rehearsing a series of dribbles and passes: Sasha to Rebecca, Rebecca to Carrie, Carrie to Josie. Josie was in top form, her gold braid snapping behind her with each lunge and jump. Her breasts quivered under her jersey and spandex sports bra, and each time she landed—each time the ball connected with her hands, rattling her—Theo felt his chest tighten. If he and Mia ever had another child—as if they’d want another child together—there was a twenty-five percent chance that it would have CF like Sissy. *Chance, chances*. A gamble. Josie was a gamble, too, or maybe just a stupid risk, but she was carrying their child, and Theo felt—no, he *knew*—that their baby wouldn’t be sick. Their baby would be okay.

Josie caught the ball and Lisa slid into her, knocking them both out of bounds. Theo ran over, and Josie quickly jumped to a stand. “I’m okay,” she said. She still had the ball.

"I think you should take a break," he told her. The gym was suddenly very quiet.

"I'm fine," she said, tapping a nervous rhythm on the orange skin. She started to dribble and put a hand out to block Lisa. "Come on, babe. Let's do this."

Theo leaned forward and knocked the ball out of the way, mid-bounce. "I told you to take a break," he said. The ball rolled across the floor, and he imagined that every eye in the gym was following its path. "So take one, unless you'd rather be running laps."

Josie stared at him, face bright with sweat, then bounced on her toes. "All right," she said. She started to jog, and the rest of the girls looked at each other, then at Theo, and he knew he had to go on with practice or lose them all completely. He clapped his hands two times. "Back to the court," he said. He pointed to Amanda, who was on the bench. "Take her spot."

The girls resumed their drill, and Josie ran laps. Theo lifted his eyes every time she rounded the corner and passed in front of him, and her speed actually seemed to be increasing instead of slowing. Her braid trailed behind her.

"Pace yourself, Jo," Theo yelled.

She didn't look at him.

They started a new drill, and while he tried to focus as the players ran lay-ups, he watched for Josie in the periphery of his vision, sure that she would lose steam and stop at any moment. But she kept going. Thirty minutes passed this way, and though the practice shouldn't have been over yet—they had a big home game coming up against Franklin-Simpson—he called it to a halt. The girls, who normally would've been happy to have a long evening ahead of them, hovered

mid-court, looking at him. "Hit the showers," he told them.

"I'd like to get a little more time in, Coach," Carrie said. "I don't feel ready for Saturday yet."

"Practice at home," he said, and pointed to the locker room. "Go on, now."

The girls jogged off court, and Josie continued to run. Her face was dripping, her hair dark now with sweat, and her pace was finally beginning to flag. Her big leg muscles trembled with every jolt against the polished wood floors.

"Stop now," Theo yelled to her. "Practice is over."

She shook her head.

"Do it, goddammit!" he said. "Unless you want to ride the bench Saturday."

That did it, as he knew it would. She lunged off a final three or four steps, then hunched over, grasping her knees. She coughed, the sound seeming to rise from the bottom of her stomach, scraping her insides raw. Theo ran over and put a hand on her neck.

"Get the fuck off me," she gasped, knocking his hand away. Her freckled face was scarlet across the nose and cheeks, her forehead and chin still ivory. Her neck was red-streaked, too, welts that could have been made by a claw.

"You happy now?" Theo asked. He could hear a couple of the girls sneak out of the locker room behind him, could feel their eyes on his back and on Josie, who had since laid on her side and was pulling her knees to her chest. "You're going to kill that baby," he said, keeping his voice low and steady, more steady than he felt. "You're going to bleed him out right here on this gym floor you love so much, if you aren't careful."

"Good." Her eyes darted to his and away, childlike.

"You stupid bitch," he said, thinking, absurdly, of Joe. He hadn't wanted a dog—hadn't seen the sense in committing to another responsibility—but Mia had insisted, and he'd gone along. And the dog was all right. Not man's best friend, exactly, but good enough. Joe didn't get walked much, but when the walking got done, he was always full-steam-ahead, too. Didn't matter where they were going, or coming, he wanted to dig into the ground with his toenails and drag, *mush*, himself forward. Joe didn't care about the destination, so long as he was moving. "Maybe you don't know what's good for you," he told Josie.

She looked up at him, her cooling face now bleached, the freckles like tiny bullet holes in her fair skin. "What do you mean?"

"Have you made an appointment yet?" he whispered.

She stood up and brushed off her shorts. "I was going to tell you after practice."

"Come to my office," he said, leading them off the court.

He could still hear showers running in the locker room as they walked to his office, so he closed and locked the door behind them, hoping anyone remaining would assume he and Josie had both gone home. Unlikely, given the public nature of their weird argument, but he couldn't think about that right now. "What did you find out?" he asked her.

"It'll be four hundred," she said.

He nodded, relieved but detached. This wasn't as bad as it could be.

"I found out about this clinic in Louisville online," Josie said. "So I called them, and they told me I'd have to come in for counseling, then wait twenty-four hours, because of some law.

The closest day I could get was next Friday for the counseling, then Saturday for the other.”

“Saturday’s the Todd County game,” Theo said.

“We’ll just have to miss it.”

He rubbed his forehead and laughed. “You can miss it, maybe. But I can’t, hon. What would people think, both of us gone? It wouldn’t look right.”

She was very still. “It would look a lot worse if I started to show.”

She was right, of course. But part of him was picturing his future, *their* future, and how quickly a thing like this—her one remaining semester of high school, the fifteen years between them—would blow over in this town. People would probably be more upset if they found out about Mathias’s little stash in the Head Coach’s lounge, the nicer office near the boys’ locker room, with the windows. People in this town would understand that there’s a difference between taking drugs, being purposefully incompetent, and falling in love with the wrong person. Because he *did* love Josie, he was sure of it. He wanted to do right by her, and he wanted to hold on to her. People here would understand that, too. And if they didn’t, so what? There was always Bowling Green or Lexington or somewhere else.

“No, it wouldn’t look right at all,” he said, mostly to himself.

Her face crumpled—that was the only word for it—but she still didn’t understand him, still didn’t realize what he was proposing. She drew an invisible line on his desk with her finger, trembling, and then the action turned loopy, and her face drew into her old sexy look that Theo knew so well, and he was fascinated by how he could follow her thought process with that

one nervous finger, like she was a planchette, divining messages from a supernatural power.

"We could make a whole weekend out of it," she said. "We could go early, you know? Maybe go to Kentucky Kingdom—"

"They'll be closed," Theo said. "For winter."

"Aw, that doesn't matter. Not there, then. We'll have dinner somewhere nice. And I can wear something for you. Real special."

"What would you wear?" Theo asked. He sensed his cruelty, but he was also following her, imagining with her. Honey-moon: the word seemed silly, ridiculous, even, but he thought it anyway.

She tilted her head. "You know," she said, blushing, "like a nightie or something. The night before won't matter. We can really live, right? It'll be the best time."

"And that sounds like living to you," Theo said. "Dinner and a movie and then we get this baby taken care of. Might as well make a big weekend out of it, right? You want to tour the Slugger museum while we're there?"

She stopped tracing with her finger. "You're screwing with me, aren't you?"

"No way," he said.

"You're not going to take care of this."

"I'm going to take care of you," he told her. "I just don't know that this is the way to do it."

She started to cry, the first time he had ever seen her do it. "You bastard. You selfish asshole. I'll tell. I'll tell the principal."

"Tell her," Theo said. She wouldn't, he felt sure. She had as much at stake as he did. He thought about Sissy, his insurance.

I don't care, he told himself. *None of that has to matter anymore*. There were other schools, other jobs—positions at factories, right in this very county, that paid better than teaching did. He saw it all suddenly: an apartment like the kind he'd had in college—a house was too much, why had he and Mia been so dead set on mortgaging one?—Josie on the bed beside him, Sissy on the weekends. He could be a better father to his child on the weekends. And she'd have a brother or sister to play with and love, maybe a boy who could help look out for her. Was it wrong for him to imagine this life? Was he crazy for thinking that he could save himself by saving this baby?

Josie picked his cup of pencils up off his desk and threw it against the wall, but the sound was small, lightweight, and Theo could tell that the gesture embarrassed her. "I'll tell my mom!" she yelled.

"Calm down," he said, waving his hands at her, open palms patting air.

"My scholarship," she whispered.

"Honey," he said, "you can still use it. We could do this."

She ran out of his office. He didn't follow her, but he felt certain she would come around. He wasn't being reasonable, exactly, but this was the right thing to do. His adrenaline was high—he hadn't felt this way since college, when his own feet pounded the court, matching his heartbeat.

When he came home from that night's practice, Mia was in the kitchen, scrubbing the counters, and Sissy was in her bassinet across the room. Much as he'd been disgusted by the state of

the house for the last several months—and the dog, the dog had been the most senseless, irresponsible kind of loss—it hurt him to see his wife like this: so ardently domestic, so desperately sorry. She raised a finger to her lips when he walked into the kitchen, and he wondered if he was supposed to play a part in this sweet little moment: tip-toe across the linoleum in his sneakers, silently plant a kiss on her forehead, then her mouth. She had an apron on, for Christ's sake; should he untie the neat bow, unbutton her clean blouse? He remembered her as she'd been before the burden of Sissy's birth and disease had landed so heavily on them both: not his soulmate, maybe, but a woman to feel proud of. A woman to feel good about coming home to. Mathias had called her "eleven different kinds of fine" just after Theo came to Rome High School, and that was maybe the best compliment he'd ever been paid. She'd been dark-haired and lively and lovely. She'd been a thing worth beholding.

Her eyes now, though, were just as empty to him as they'd been the night Joe died. She smiled and turned back to the counter, yellow rubber gloves brushing the bends of her elbows as she scrubbed hard water stains out of the grooves around the faucet, SOS pad rasping against the stainless steel. Maddeningly single-minded. He went to the bassinet, leaned over his daughter, and brushed his lips against the satiny skin of her temple. She was gorgeous, tiny, doll-like. Mia took good care of her. Theo worried for them both—and already, the thrill of deciding to be with Josie and raising their child was ebbing, becoming entangled and complex. Sissy sighed in her sleep: a luxurious sound that made Theo ache. He wished he could have done better by her. He'd spent the first few months of her life resenting

her, despite himself; he'd expected hard work and lost sleep, but he hadn't been prepared for the sudden changes in Mia, who cried so often that her face always shined and who told Theo one night, with a calm that chilled him, that she was thinking about swallowing a bottle of pills. He understood that what he and Mia had was fine in the good times, when they could rent movies and eat out and shop for a new car together. Hard times were another matter. Then Sissy started getting sick, and he realized at some point that he wasn't thinking of her as a child anymore, or as his daughter: she was a hypothetical, a baby who may or may not live to see thirty, and if he expected too much, or loved her too much, he'd be disappointed. Her weakness dismayed him, but he was weaker. "Night, baby," he whispered, and Sissy sighed again. He went straight to bed.

Mia slipped in beside him an hour later, skin still faintly redolent of Windex and Lysol. "I do the best I can," she whispered against his back, and the sensation stirred him, surprised him. She ran her fingers lightly across his ribs, tickling.

"I know you do," Theo said. He rolled over and kissed her, slipped his hand into the open neck of her gown, touching the familiar slope of her breast—the first time in a long time, and maybe, he thought, the last. He traced the line of her collarbone, making a chart in his head, two-columned: *Mia, Josie*. One bigger in the chest, one taller. One with lines at the corner of her eyes, one with acne clustered around her temples. He thought about songs they liked—songs he thought they liked—and the way they wanted to be touched. One of them liked him to flick his tongue lightly across the nape of her neck, where her real hair turned into the fuzzy, baby-down of soft skin. One liked him to breathe into the cup of her ear, not words, just heat.

He couldn't remember which was which right now. Sissy slept, and as he pushed the gown up around his wife's hips, raking his boxers down at the same time with his knees and then his feet, he imagined the wet gurgle of her chest as she drew in air, mobile of stars suspended above her, the moon a smiling crescent in neon.

They won the game against Franklin-Simpson. He and Josie had never been so in synch. It seemed like he merely had to *think* an instruction and Josie reacted: cut quickly to the left, passed the ball to Lisa, who was open, took the chance at the three-pointer and made it, sealing the victory. At some point in the game, he looked up at the bleachers, and in a throng of black and gold sweatshirts and flags, he thought he saw Mia. She used to come to his games, unannounced, before Sissy was born, when she was still teaching special ed at Stevenson. She'd sit closer down, though, just behind his row of benched players. He often thought that some of the best moments in their marriage had happened then, unspoken, when the Panthers would score, the crowd would erupt, and the band would kick into "Land of a Thousand Dances," all the sounds punctuated by the occasional slide-whoop of one of those noisemakers the Band Boosters were always selling in the lobby. Amid all of this—his favorite kind of chaos—he'd turn around, savoring his moment, and see Mia just a few paces away; they'd smile at each other, and he'd know that she understood him. That she was feeling the same way he was.

This woman he thought was Mia, though, was up pretty high, just short of the second tier of bleachers that only got full at the

boys' games, and she didn't smile or wave when she saw him, and why would Mia be at the game anyway? She'd no sooner bring Sissy than she'd don sequins and dance to "Tricky" with the cheerleaders at halftime. He turned away from the woman in time to see the other team score, and when he looked back, she wasn't there anymore. A guilt hallucination, he was sure. He wasn't made of stone, after all.

The game ended, and Theo felt someone sidle up beside him, shoulder hitting his shoulder.

"Theo, man," Mathias said.

Theo glanced at him, then back at the court. The girls were filing out, and Josie was already gone. He scanned the crowd for her.

Mathias stuck his hand out and Theo shook it, hesitantly. Mathias wasn't in the habit of coming to girls' games, even when his boys played the occasional Friday night game and the schedules didn't conflict. Theo had always been sore about that, but now he wanted Mathias to leave—to high-tail it back to his bachelor's pad and his dope and his easy life.

"Good game," Mathias said.

"Yeah." Theo looked over his shoulder, where the Mia look-alike had been. "Yeah, the girls did good."

Mathias crossed his arms. He was almost a foot taller than Theo, broad through the chest, and he had a presence—as a player so many years back, now as a coach—that Theo deeply envied: the reason, he knew, that Mathias was coaching boys, though they'd joked a few times together that the boys' team didn't have Josie-style perks. Uncomfortable joking.

"You're out, friend," Mathias said. He didn't lower his voice at all, but parents and teenagers were a churning mass around

them, and the words felt muted, unreal. But Theo understood them.

“Out,” Mathias repeated. Then he looked at the court. “I guess things got around. You know—some parent, then a teacher got involved. Then Rita Beasley.”

“Well don’t draw it out, for Christ’s sake,” Theo said. “What’s going on?”

“They’re having an emergency school board meeting to-night, and I expect that you’ll get a call by tomorrow. That’s what Noel Price told me.” He sighed, and Theo could smell List-erine. “They’ll let you resign. They won’t want a big stir.”

Sissy. Theo couldn’t breathe.

“You okay?” Mathias said.

Theo laughed out loud. “She’s pregnant, Matt.”

“Mia?”

Theo shook his head.

“Goddamn,” Mathias said.

“She’s going to leave me,” Theo said—out loud, but to himself. Saying it, he realized that she probably already had: *Things got around*. Mia had been in the bleachers, watching him, and now she was gone: to her mother’s, with Sissy. He would come home tonight to an empty house, to the lingering smells of Joe’s sickness and Sissy’s baby lotion, and the rest of his life would begin. He didn’t know what kind of life that could be.

“I’m sorry,” Mathias told him.

Theo went to the locker room, where the girls were gathered for his wrap-up talk—Josie, nowhere to be seen—and he said the nonsense things he always said—“Good game, good teamwork, let’s focus on defense at practice this week”—watching the girls’ faces, wondering who among them knew.

All of them, of course, but they made their expressions innocent and blank, and he appreciated them for it. He said a prayer with the girls and called it a night, and he could hear, leaving, their talk shift from *amens* to discussions of parties—Chad's house or Tresten's?—prom dates, and *man, we were so fucked up!* It occurred to him that Josie had a second life, too. On game nights, when Theo went home to Mia, changed a token diaper, and made himself watch Sissy sleep, she was over at some kid's house, nursing a bottle of Boone's Farm that somebody's older brother had charged her eight bucks for. She studied for tests, asked her mother for money. In another month or two she'd start shopping for prom dresses, and whatever she'd find would look awkward and hopeful, and on prom night she'd stand out in the middle of this very gymnasium wearing too much eye-shadow and lipstick, unsure for once, graceless.

He saw her as he was walking to his car, the February night air like Novocain to his bare arms. She was with Jatarius in the parking lot and the light from a security lamp fell over them softly, the scene picturesque, staged. She was still in her jersey—she'd never showered—and Jatarius was working his big hands up and down her bare arms, warming them, and in a moment Theo knew that they would kiss, that Josie was just waiting for him to see it. He could get in his car and follow them—she'd let him, she'd make sure Jatarius slowed down, using any excuse that came to mind; and he'd do it, do whatever she asked, spurred on by the promise of her. He'd do it, because Josie was a girl—a woman—who would, Theo was understanding, have her way: with his help or without it. Now, no more than thirty feet away, she lifted her chin, and Jatarius lowered his, and they were a single dark shadow outlined in a hazy yellow nimbus—

gone already, she was telling him, and he was a fool to think otherwise.

Later, he could turn off on whatever country road they turned off on, drive a little past the thick of trees where they'd park, and pull his own vehicle over to the shoulder, quieting the engine, shutting off the headlights. His overcoat was in the passenger seat. He'd put it on, creep back down the road, take a spot behind the trunk of a leafless water maple. And they'd watch each other through the rear windshield of Jatarius's car: Josie's slow undress, her mount, her gentle rocking, baby between them.

About the Author

WIDELY considered one of the greatest of all Russian writers, Leo Tolstoy is best known to the Western world as the author of two monumental novels: the splendid and tragic tale *Anna Karenina* and the epic saga *War and Peace*. But the shorter works Tolstoy created during his long, prolific lifetime can fill many volumes. Presented here are brilliant examples of his shorter work—such as “Master and Man,” “Alyosha the Pot,” and the title story—that are testaments to the literary genius of this incomparable artist.

WWW.FIFTYTWOSTORIES.COM

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

Credits

Designed by Justin Dodd

Copyright

ALYOSHA THE POT. Copyright © 2009 by HarperCollins Publishers. Translation of “Alyosha the Pot” copyright © 1967 by Sam A. Carmack, 2nd. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader April 2009
ISBN 978-0-06-192063-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>