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FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

Born 1821, Moscow, Russia

Died 1881, Saint Petersburg, Russia

'White Nights' was first published in its original Russian as *Belye Nochi* in 1848. 'Bobok' first appeared in 1873; the title means 'little bean.' Both are taken from the *The Gambler and Other Stories*, translated by Ronald Meyer.

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FYODOR  
DOSTOYEVSKY

*White Nights*

*Translated by*  
Ronald Meyer

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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

This edition published in Penguin Classics 2016  
034

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Set in 9.5/13 pt Baskerville 10 Pro  
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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

ISBN: 978-0-241-25208-6

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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*White Nights*

A SENTIMENTAL LOVE STORY  
(FROM THE MEMOIRS OF A DREAMER)

... Or was his destiny from the start  
To be but just one moment  
Near your heart? ...

– Ivan Turgenev

## THE FIRST NIGHT

It was a wonderful night, the kind of night, dear reader, which is only possible when we are young. The sky was so starry, it was such a bright sky that looking at it you could not help but ask yourself: is it really possible for bad-tempered and capricious people to live under such a sky? That is also a young person's question, dear reader, a very young person's question, but may the Lord ask it of your heart more often! ... Speaking of capricious and sundry bad-tempered gentlemen, I could not help but recall my own commendable conduct throughout the whole day. From early morning an astonishing

melancholy had started to torment me. It suddenly seemed that I, so alone, was being abandoned by everyone – that everyone was deserting me. Well, of course, anyone is entitled to ask: who is ‘everyone’? Because I’ve been living in Petersburg eight years now and I’ve hardly been able to make a single acquaintance. But what do I need acquaintances for? I’m acquainted with all of Petersburg as it is; that’s why it seemed to me that everyone was abandoning me when all of Petersburg suddenly up and left for their dachas. I was terrified of being left alone, and for three whole days I wandered about the city in a state of deep melancholy, not understanding in the least what was happening to me. No matter whether I went to Nevsky Prospekt, or the park, or wandered along the embankment – there wasn’t a single person of those whom I have been accustomed to meet for a year now in the same place, at a certain time. Of course, they don’t know me, but I know them. I know them intimately; I have practically learned their faces by heart – and I admire them when they are cheerful, and I’m crestfallen when they grow sad. I almost struck up a friendship with a certain little old man, whom I meet every blessed day, at a certain hour on the Fontanka. His face is so dignified and thoughtful; he’s always whispering under his breath and gesticulating with his left hand, while in his right hand he holds a long gnarled walking-stick with a golden knob. He’s even noticed me and shows a cordial concern for me. Should it happen

that I’m not at the same place on the Fontanka at a certain hour, I’m positive that he would be crestfallen. That’s why we sometimes almost greet each other, particularly when we’re both in a good mood. The other day, when we had not seen each other for two whole days and met on the third day, we almost reached for our hats, but, thank goodness, we came to our senses in time, lowered our hands and passed each other by in sympathy. I also have houses that are my acquaintances. As I walk, it’s as if each one I come to runs out into the street in front of me, looks out at me with its windows wide open and almost says: ‘Hello, how do you do? And I, thank God, am well, but in May they’re going to add a floor to me.’ Or: ‘How do you do? And I’m having some repairs done tomorrow.’ Or: ‘I almost burned down and I was so scared’, and so forth. I have favourites among them, some are intimate friends; one of them intends to be treated by an architect this summer. I’ll make it a point to drop by every day so that, God forbid, they don’t kill it in the process! . . . But I will never forget what happened to a certain very pretty, light-pink little house. It was such a sweet little stone house; it looked at me so cordially, and so haughtily at its ungainly neighbours, that my heart would rejoice when I chanced to walk past. Suddenly, last week, I was walking down the street and upon turning to look at my friend – I heard a plaintive cry: ‘But they’re going to paint me yellow!’ The scoundrels! Barbarians! They spared nothing: neither the columns, nor

the cornices, and my friend had turned as yellow as a canary. I almost had an attack of jaundice myself, and to this day I do not have the strength to see my poor disfigured friend who was painted the colour of the Celestial Empire.

So now you understand, reader, how I am acquainted with all of Petersburg.

I have already said that for three whole days I was tormented with anxiety until I guessed the reason for it. And on the street I was in a bad way (this one's gone, that one's gone, where's so-and-so got to?) – and I wasn't myself at home either. For two evenings I tried to put a finger on what it was I found wanting in my room. Why was I so uncomfortable staying there? And with bewilderment I examined my green, sooty walls, and the ceiling from which hung a cobweb that Matryona had been cultivating with such resounding success; I looked over all my furniture, examined every chair, wondering if that was the problem (because I'm not myself if even one chair isn't in the same place as it was the day before); I looked out the window, but it was all in vain . . . I didn't feel any better. I even took it into my head to summon Matryona and give her there and then a fatherly reprimand for the cobweb and for her slovenliness in general; but she merely looked at me in amazement and walked away without a word in response, so that the cobweb hangs there safe and sound to this day. It was only this morning that I finally guessed what the matter was! Oh! Why,

they're all making off to their dachas and leaving me behind! Forgive the trivial style, but I'm not up to lofty turns of speech . . . because, you see, everybody in Petersburg had either moved or is moving to their dacha; because after hiring a cab, every venerable gentleman of a solid appearance was immediately transformed before my eyes into a venerable father of a family, who after his daily official duties sets off without luggage to the bosom of his family, at the dacha; because every passer-by now has a quite special air about him, which all but says to every person he meets: 'Gentlemen, I'm only here in passing, but in two hours I'm leaving for my dacha.' If a window opens, upon which slender fingers as white as sugar had just drummed, and out leans the head of a pretty girl, who calls to a pedlar with jugs of flowers – I immediately, there and then, imagine that these flowers are being bought not simply so as to take pleasure in the spring and flowers in a stuffy city apartment, but because everybody is moving to their dacha and they'll be taking the flowers with them. Moreover, I had already made such strides in my new, special sort of discovery that I could already unerringly identify on the basis of appearance alone where their dacha was located. The residents of Kamenny and Aptekarsky islands or the Peterhof Road were distinguished by the studied elegance of their movements, their foppish summer suits and the handsome carriages that brought them to the city. The inhabitants of Pargolovo and further out at first glance 'inspired' one

with their prudence and respectability; the visitor to Krestovsky Island was distinguished by his unruffled, cheerful air. Whether I managed to run into a long procession of carters holding the reins as they lazily walked alongside their carts, loaded with whole mountains of furniture of every description – tables, chairs, couches both Turkish and non-Turkish – and other household goods and chattels, on which, on top of everything, frequently would be sitting at the very summit of the load, the wizened cook, keeping watch over her master's goods as the apple of her eye; whether I looked at the boats, heavily laden with household utensils, as they glided down the Neva or Fontanka to Chernaya River or the islands – the carts and boats increased tenfold, a hundredfold before my very eyes, it seemed as though everything had up and left, that whole caravans had moved to the dacha; it seemed that all of Petersburg threatened to turn into a desert, so that in the end I became ashamed, hurt and sad: I had absolutely nowhere to go and no reason to go to a dacha. I was ready to leave with every cart, to drive off with every gentleman of venerable appearance who was hiring a cabbie, but no one, absolutely no one invited me; it was as if I indeed was a stranger to them!

I had been walking a lot and for a long time, and I had already completely succeeded, as was my wont, in forgetting where I was, when I suddenly found myself at the city gates. I cheered up in an instant, and stepped to the

other side of the barrier, walked between the sown fields and the meadows, oblivious of any fatigue, but sensing with all my being that some burden was being lifted from my soul. All the passers-by looked at me so cordially that we practically bowed to one another; everybody was so happy about something, every last one was smoking a cigar. And I was happy as I had never been before. It was as if I had suddenly found myself in Italy – nature had so strongly affected me, a semi-invalid city dweller who had almost died of suffocation within the city's walls.

There is something inexplicably touching in our Petersburg nature, when with the advent of spring she suddenly displays all her might, all the powers granted her by heaven, when she bursts into leaves, dresses herself up and decks herself out in colourful flowers . . . Somehow I can't help but be reminded of that weak and sickly girl, at whom you sometimes look with pity, sometimes with a compassionate love, and sometimes you simply do not notice her, but then suddenly, for a moment, she somehow, unexpectedly, becomes inexplicably, wonderfully beautiful, and you, startled and intoxicated, unwittingly ask yourself: What power caused those sad, thoughtful eyes to shine with such fire? What summoned the blood to those pale, sunken cheeks? What has suffused those tender features of her face with passion? Why does that breast heave so? What was it that so suddenly summoned strength, life and beauty to the poor girl's face that it began to shine with such a smile, came to life with such

a sparkling, effervescent laugh? You look around, you search for someone, you hazard a guess . . . But the moment passes and perhaps tomorrow you will once again meet the same thoughtful and distracted gaze as before, the same pale face, the same submissive and timid movements, and even repentance, even traces of some sort of deadening melancholy and annoyance at the short-lived exhilaration . . . And you regret that the momentary beauty faded so quickly, so irretrievably, that it flashed before you so deceptively and in vain – you regret this because there was not time for you even to fall in love with her . . .

But nevertheless my night was better than my day! Here's what happened:

I arrived back in the city very late, and it had already struck ten o'clock as I approached my apartment. My path ran along the embankment of the canal, where at that hour you will not find a living soul. True, I live in a very remote part of the city. I was walking and singing, because when I am happy I am sure to hum something to myself, like every other happy man who has neither friends nor good acquaintances and who in a joyful moment has nobody with whom he can share his joy. Suddenly the most unexpected adventure happened to me.

Somewhat to the side, leaning against the railing of the canal, stood a woman. With her elbows resting on the railing, she seemed to be looking very attentively at the canal's turbid water. She was wearing a very pretty

yellow hat and a bewitching black mantilla. 'She's a young girl, she just has to be a brunette,' I thought. It seems she had not heard my steps; she didn't even stir when I walked past, with bated breath, and with my heart beating violently. 'Strange!' I thought, 'she must be completely absorbed by something', and suddenly I stopped, rooted to the ground. I had heard a muffled sob. Yes! I hadn't been deceived: the girl was crying and a minute later there was another whimper and then another. My God! My heart sank. And no matter how great my timidity with women, this was hardly the time! . . . I turned around, took a step in her direction and would certainly have uttered the word 'Madam', but for the fact that I knew that this exclamation had already been uttered a thousand times in all our Russian society novels. That was the only thing that stopped me. But while I was searching for a word, the girl came to her senses, glanced back, recollected where she was, cast her eyes down and slipped past me along the embankment. I set off after her at once, but when she realized this, she quit the embankment, crossed the street and set out walking down the pavement. My heart was fluttering, like a captured little bird. Suddenly a certain incident came to my aid.

On the sidewalk across the street, not far from my unknown girl, there suddenly appeared a gentleman in evening dress, a man with a solid number of years behind him, but whose gait was anything but solid. He walked, reeling, and carefully leaning against the wall. The girl