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MIRCEA ELIADE

DIARY OF A SHORT-SIGHTED ADOLESCENT

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with reference to an original translation by
Christopher Bartholomew




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PART I

I

I Must Write a Novel

As I was all alone I decided to begin writing *The Novel of the Short-Sighted Adolescent* this very day. I'm going to work on it every afternoon. I don't need inspiration; I only need to record my life, the life I know; besides, I've been thinking about the novel for quite some time. Dinu knows this: I've been keeping a *Diary* since I was in the Fourth Form¹, when I had freckles like a Jewish boy and studied chemistry in a laboratory in a recess beside the stove. Whenever I felt sad feelings coming on, I would write in my *Diary*. And that *Diary*, which is now two years old, has always had one purpose: to describe the life of an adolescent who suffers from being misunderstood. But this isn't all it contains. My *Diary* flatters me, satisfies my longing for revenge; just revenge on those who misunderstand me.

But the novel will be different. I'll be the hero, naturally. Yet I'm worried that my life – stifled by writing and books – won't be of interest to my readers. For me, everything I've been deprived of, everything I've wished for up in my attic in the restless, sultry

twilight, is worth more than all the years my classmates wasted on playing cards, family parties and naïve romance. But what of the reader? Even I realize that the sufferings of a short-sighted adolescent won't touch any hearts if the adolescent doesn't fall in love and suffer. That's why I created a character who I initially called Olga. I told Dinu everything that would happen in the presence of this girl. But he cut me short and begged: 'If we really are friends, please change the heroine's name to Laura.'

At first I was very agitated, because I didn't know exactly *what kind of girl* would touch the heart of a short-sighted adolescent. The only girls I knew were the bootmaker's daughters from next door, and under no circumstances could they be characters in a novel. The oldest, Maria, was skinny and sharp-tongued: she terrorized her brothers, stole green apricots, and screamed at the top of her voice when she chased after trams. The other one, Puica, was fat and grubby. Neither of them would beguile an adolescent; no one knew that better than I did.

Dinu insisted that he could help. He said he had known a great many girls. But how can I write a novel based on a heroine that Dinu knows? I decided that while I was writing, I would think about my cousin. For several weeks I have been questioning her whenever I see her. I told Dinu that I had her under observation.

'If you want to write a novel', she advised me, 'you should make the hero handsome and kind. And call him Silviu.'

But when I told her the title and subject of the novel, she didn't like it.

'There should be two heroes', she said. 'One handsome, the other ugly. And the title should be: *Love between Children*, or *Spring Flowers*; or *Seventeen*.'

My explanations were to no avail: 'Vally, my dear, this is an intellectual novel, full of internal turmoil', etc. All to no avail. And then I listened to her girlish confidences. It was very useful, because I learnt the vocabulary that girls use, and began to understand something of her dreams, longings, and troubles. It was as if I were listening to confessions that I had heard a long time ago. I remember thinking that my cousin wasn't much different to

the heroines in novels, or the sort of character that any lovesick soul could imagine. But how could I be sure that my cousin was really the same person who appeared in these girlish fantasies that she occasionally confided to me?

I know that she yearns to be friends with a kind young girl from a noble family, who would have a large country estate where she lives with her brother, a dark, courageous young man. He would lead them through the forest. He would teach them to hunt, and address them by the familiar form of 'you'. She told me that, one night, she would like to be in the house when it was raided by a gang of thieves. She would grab a revolver and burst into the drawing room just as her friend's brother was being strangled by a gypsy. She would save the brother's life and nurse him back to health in a white bedroom where there was a small table covered with coloured flasks. His parents would be very grateful, and, smiling, would leave them alone together.

At this point my cousin stops. She doesn't want to tell me if she would blush, or shyly withdraw her hand when her friend's brother whispers in her ear: 'I love you!'

I have no idea what else my cousin might imagine about this dark, convalescing boy, watched over by his younger sister and a beautiful friend.

Nonetheless, my novel still has to be written. 'So after this', said Dinu, 'who else will dare let you down?' Perhaps he takes delight in the important role his character will play in the book. He asked me to call the character inspired by him Dinu, and to make him melancholic.

Apart from that I can write whatever I like about him. In fact he insists that I write whatever I like about him. 'But who could possibly find him interesting?' I wondered, just like a real author.

For quite some time, school has been getting steadily worse. My one hope is that my novel will be in bookshops by the autumn. I'll still fail my exams, but it'll be the last time. My teachers will fear me, they will respect me, and in the staff common room they'll protest if Vanciu, the maths master, or Faradopol, who teaches German, decide to fail me.

This week I haven't had much luck; and the end of the final term is getting closer. In French on Monday there was a grammar test. For the past six years, Trollo has only ever tested us on French grammar. And naturally, for six years I haven't learned a thing. This morning I'll get an 'Unsatisfactory' as usual, just like I got in German when Faradopol asked me to summarize the first act of *Nathan der Weise* in German. He has made us speak German since we were in our second year. But he has never actually taught us any German...

This morning I set off for school in a melancholy mood. The chestnut trees were in leaf, the sky was blue, but I hadn't done my homework. I thought: 'I should go to the Cişmigiu Gardens instead.' But I would have been embarrassed by my school bag. And the whole time I would have been terrified that I would be spotted by a master. It saddens me to think that I'm still so feeble, timid, and indecisive. I'd love to have a will of iron, to run away from home, to work in the dockyards, sleep in boats, and explore faraway lands. But instead I'm content to dream and put off victory for later, to fill the pages of my *Diary*. Lost in these gloomy thoughts, I made my way to school. Then Dinu caught up with me and shouted: 'Hey, Doctor!' He calls me this because I'm short-sighted and read books by lamplight. He was ecstatic: he had managed to get a 'Satisfactory' from Vanciu in the oral test.

Today we have to solve... four difficult, intricate questions.

I changed the subject. I told him that my novel would have four hundred pages and be the first in a series called *Dacia Felix*. I know I'll never write this series, but as I had to somehow get my mind off our difficult homework, I told him that the second volume would take place in a hairdressing salon. Dinu laughed.

'That'll be difficult, seeing you've never been a barber. It would be better for the second volume to be set in a girls' boarding school.'

I protested, and reminded him that I didn't know any girls apart from those in our dramatic society, 'The Muse'. My cousin, my only source of inspiration, had been at a girls' boarding school run by nuns for several years; but whenever I ask her about school life she gives me a vexed look.

Nonetheless, at the end of *The Novel of the Short-Sighted Adolescent*, I agreed to include an appeal to all the girls in the Sixth Form, from whom I might obtain diaries, confidences and other intimate details. With material like this, collected 'sur le vif',* I'd be able to produce the second volume.

When we walked into the schoolyard we had to forget all about the future Novel and get a move on, so as to avoid the new assistant master. We ran through the hall and took the stairs four at a time. Once in class I sat in the front row, while Dinu slipped quietly to the back.

I don't have much luck. Other people are lucky with girls, at cards, and at school. I was quite happy to give up girls and cards in order to have luck at school. But I don't.

Just as I finished copying the first and easiest of the four difficult homework questions from my neighbour, Vanciu walked in. When I saw his register with the black cover and white ends, my courage deserted me. He greeted the class in his usual dignified, magnanimous way, confident of his evident superiority and our imminent misfortune. Every time I see him come in I vow I will study mathematics with a passion, if only to be able to confront him with the same serene, assured expression. Sometimes, – when he asks me a question – I secretly make fun of the belly that he tries to hide beneath the folds of his waistcoat. I realized long ago, however, that Vanciu is a Don Juan. If I were a woman and he my mathematics teacher, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to resist him. He overpowers me with his voice, his calm demeanour, his eyes, with the way he solves the questions that he sets us. Yet it irritates me that he's never hit me, because then I could hate him. Instead he just calls me a 'blockhead' whenever I muddle up algebraic symbols, and 'bird brain' when I get nervous at the blackboard, mesmerized by a geometric diagram whose meaning, value, and solution I have to work out.

I prayed, and realized that I didn't know to whom I was praying. I prayed that Vanciu would turn the page of the register and read out the names of boys from the other end of the alphabet; or that he would be summoned to see the Minister of Education; or that

the school secretary would bring him an unexpected message, and that we would have the whole period free. Or perhaps I was praying for something else altogether.

But of course he called me to the blackboard first, even though I wasn't the only one in the class who hadn't taken an oral test on this chapter. I walked up solemnly, carrying my exercise book, chalk, and eraser. I didn't want the others to know that I was scared of Vanciu.

Yet the closer I got to the board, the calmer I became. My panic evaporated. I looked calmly into the master's eyes, and when he glanced down at my exercise book I gave my classmates an indulgent smile.

'How many homework questions did we have?'

'Four.'

'Where are they?'

'I wasn't able to finish them,' I replied, humiliated, weighing up the look of disappointment in Vanciu's eyes.

'Do the first one then. Do you know what it is?..'

I didn't know, but I nodded that I did. Vanciu turned his chair to face me, crossed his arms and waited. He understood, and began to dictate the question to me: 'In a circle with radius R , the area created by an arc, where the circle runs around the diameter that passes through an extremity of the arc, has at its base a circle whose surface area is equal to a quarter of the area. Calculate the height x of that area.'

I didn't know where to start. I didn't understand a thing, and couldn't concentrate on the question. I fixed my gaze on some symbols at the corner of the blackboard, and racked my whole body so Vanciu would think I was racking my brains. As I was standing there I said to myself: 'To hell with it!' and then my teeth began chattering. It was all I could do.

Vanciu had decided long ago that I was an idiot, so he was lenient. Although perhaps he had worked out that I was faking, that I never paid attention, and from then on refused to indulge my ignorance. Even so, my stuttering, my absent expression and the way I stared blankly at the blackboard had an effect. Vanciu always helped me.

'Not getting anywhere? We have a circle..'

I remembered that I had drawn a similar one in my exercise book, by tracing round the lid of an inkpot with a pencil. I began to draw a circle, constantly erasing, in order to buy some time. But it was pointless because I didn't understand the question.

'Why don't you do some work, boy?'

'I do, sir. But I get confused..'

'He who works hard..'

'I do work hard, sir..'

'Don't interrupt me!... He who works hard doesn't get confused.'

'I know, sir..'

'Out with it then.'

'I know the answer, but when I..'

'Repeat the question!'

A long pause. The other boys held their breath.

'Go and sit down!'

Relieved, I went back to my desk. In his blue book, for the 15th of May Vanciu inscribed a magisterial and painfully legible 'Below standard'. Attentively and with curiosity I pretended to follow the calculations of my neighbour, a short-sighted Italian with red hair who stubbornly refused to wear his glasses. This boy always did his homework. When questioned he would ramble on and on, with an exasperated Vanciu interrupting occasionally: 'Get on with it then!'

After Vanciu had gone, the other boys surrounded me excitedly and asked: 'What are you going to do now, old chap?'

I told them that I didn't give a damn, because *I knew who I was*, and that they were just common-or-garden Fifth Formers. Whenever I feel humiliated I assert my superiority, and make a point of showing my contempt for others. I know this is childish, but I can't help it. As soon as I've calmed down I always reproach myself.

I walked home with Dinu, and on the way we planned out the chapters for my novel. I didn't want to think about the latest 'Below standard' that I would have to show my mother in the morning. We both came to the conclusion that my only hope was *The Novel of the Short-Sighted Adolescent*, and that I ought to start work on it immediately.