

# Who Is the “Cute Little Redhead”?

## *A Literary Conversation*

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*Abstract:* The present article offers two interpretations of Nina Sadur’s 1990 story “Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii” (“The Cute Little Redhead”). These readings are partially complementary (coinciding in their understanding of the story as focused on the protagonist’s sexual initiation), but also partially divergent (in their concentration on different textual details and external references.)

### Introduction

“Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii” (“The Cute Little Redhead”),<sup>1</sup> a tale of sexual awakening that must be deciphered through the recognition and interpretation of its references to the Russian folk tradition, was first published in 1990 as part of *Pronikshie (Touched)*, a cycle of ten stories largely concerned with the supernatural written by Nina Sadur (b. 1950). The text of the story nominally relates how the narrator’s trade-school classmate, Natashka Solov’eva, lives eerily and uncomfortably in a rented corner of an apartment that is owned and otherwise occupied by a meddlesome and unpleasant anonymous old woman. Natashka eventually resolves to marry a young man named Serezha Koloskov, moves out of the old woman’s apartment, and tells the narrator about her life there, thus enabling the narrator to share that story with the reader.

The present article emerged from a discussion between the authors about the meaning and significance of certain events in this story. In Reading #1, below, David J. Birnbaum argues on the basis of specific textual evidence for an interpretation of these events as constituting a coded representation of the protagonist’s sexual initiation.<sup>2</sup> In Reading #2, Karin Sarsenov argues for a reading that partially overlaps with and partially diverges from the first, also on the basis of specific textual material, including excerpts from Sadur’s radio play version of the story (1992).

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<sup>1</sup> Although “The Cute Little Redhead” is the translation of the title used in Gessen’s (1995) edition, a more accurate rendering might be “Darling, Little Redhead.” The definite article in Gessen’s version prohibits a vocative reading that the Russian permits, and even suggests, and that is supported by the comma in the original.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Helena Goscilo, Dawn Seckler, and Sibelan E. S. Forrester for their discussion of many of these issues, and for comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

The polemical nature of our dialogic reading imposes an ordering paradox, and we have adopted an expository style that not only reproduces the ontogeny of the article, but also arranges the arguments and counterarguments in a logical “point-counterpoint” order. In an expository section, Reading #1 advances a set of positions, after which Reading #2 responds explicitly to Reading #1 and proposes original alternative interpretations. A following Discussion section then continues the dialog between the authors. The last section of the article summarizes the two positions, identifying both the common core and the specific areas of disagreement.

## **Exposition: Two Interpretations**

### ***Reading #1: “Milen'kii, ryzhen'kii” and Sexual Initiation***

#### **Introduction**

The interpretation of “Milen'kii, ryzhen'kii” as representing Natashka’s acceptance of her own sexuality, which eventually enables her to marry, relies significantly on two scenes. The first of these is a rainy, nocturnal, bedroom encounter between Natashka and Murzik, the landlady’s grey cat. The second, also a nocturnal bedroom encounter, involves Natashka and the physically peculiar and spiritually unsettling eponymous Cute Little Redhead. According to this reading, the story is not ultimately about Natashka’s relationship with her landlady, although they are the two most prominent characters in the tale. Rather, it is about 1) how Natashka’s relationship with her landlady enables (or, more precisely, forces) her to accept her sexuality, and thus to enter married life, and 2) how Natashka’s transition to married life creates the eventual literary narrative, transforming what would otherwise have been a modern horror story about the grotesque privations imposed by housing shortages into a tale about Natashka’s preparation for marriage. The interpretation of Natashka’s experiences as evocative of a fairy-tale quest is supported by two additional textual features: the similarity between Natashka’s landlady and Baba Iaga and Natashka’s use of sleep as a way of forestalling maturity.

#### **Murzik**

Murzik is a grey (emphatically not black, and therefore not evil) cat, and may be seen as a representation of a *domovoi* (house spirit); he is small and furry, a sort of marginal member of the household, and he regulates the old lady’s behavior and thus the general domestic scene: “Вот Наташка моя заметила, что, когда кота дома нет, бабка деньги берет

за квартиру. А когда кот дома, то не берет. И еще заметила, что *при коте у бабки другой характер*” (220).<sup>3</sup>

Beyond Murzik’s regulatory functions, Natashka’s interactions with him might be seen as an inversion of an important *domovoi* commonplace. Ivanits notes that “[the *domovoi*’s] soft, furry touch at night signaled good fortune; a cold, prickly touch misfortune or death” (1989, 55). In Sadur’s story, however, Natashka is not merely the passive recipient of Murzik’s mantic touch—soft and furry though it is. Instead, she is an active participant in that contact, as is clear from the extent of her agency in the excerpt from the text reproduced below. Furthermore, that the Redhead concludes an intimate physical encounter with Natashka by ordering her to pronounce the key evaluative phrase of “к добру или к худу?”<sup>4</sup> suggests that physical and social contact in this story, like a peasant’s physical contact with a resident *domovoi*, is capable of signifying by its nature either good or bad fortune (or perhaps a combination of the two: “маленько к добру”<sup>5</sup>).

Sexuality is a domestic matter, and therefore proper business for a *domovoi*, but Murzik may also be seen as even more directly representative of sexuality, a significance suggested by his fur, by the way Natashka strokes him, by the way he hits the blanket with his tail, and by the way he pushes his head against Natashka, leaving her wet (because he was out in the rain, but not only because he was out in the rain). Note that Natashka’s response to this sexual initiation is ambivalent, and although she succumbs and then collapses in post-coital lassitude, and realizes afterwards that something significant has happened, she nonetheless refuses to admit it:

[before she let Murzik into her room] А Наташка ... уселась на постели, *трясется, зубами стучит и чувствует, что у нее уже у самой глаза горят*, [she is excited] *а ничего поделать не может—тянет ее к занавеске ... сил нет* [she cannot resist] (222).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Then my Natashka noticed that *when the cat wasn’t around*, the woman would take money for the apartment. And *when the cat was home*, she wouldn’t. Also, she noticed that *with the cat around the woman was different*” (235).

Translations of excerpts from the story are taken from the 1995 Gessen edition; translations from the radio play are ours. All emphasis is ours.

<sup>4</sup> “Good thing or bad?”

<sup>5</sup> “A little bit good.”

<sup>6</sup> “[before she let Murzik into the room] ... Natashka ... sat upon the bed, *shaking, her teeth chattering, feeling that her own eyes were burning now*, [she is excited] and *she*

The text continues:

... Мурзик ... *понюхал* Наташку и запел. *Наташка его погладила, он ласкается*, головой в ладонь *тыкается* ... *Наташка его к себе прижала и дрожит* ... *А Наташка еще крепче его прижимает*, хоть у него и блохи, и он грязный, по помойкам таскается. Ей все равно. *У нее слезы текут*, а Мурзику смешно, он ей щеки *нюхает*. Потом ему надоело, он вырвался и ушел от нее, на пол спрыгнул, потянулся и туда пошел, а *Наташка буквально рухнула на постели, вся взмокла и отключилась* (222).<sup>7</sup>

That this scene marks a liminal moment in Natashka’s life is clear from the text that follows immediately: “А бабка на нее смотрит *особо как-то*, будто спрашивает глазами что-то. И Наташка чувствует, что *сегодня можно сказать: «Я слышала, я видела.»* Что *вроде бы старуха ей разрешает* ...” (222).<sup>8</sup> That Natashka continues to resist acknowledging the sexual initiation is clear from the continuation of that paragraph: “... *но не хочет Наташка говорить*, и все тут ... а потом Наташка купила себе эти снотворные таблетки и стала их пить, и *вроде бы все произошло*” (222).<sup>9</sup>

It is not accidental that the *siuzhet* (plot progression) of the tale, although not the *fabula* (story line), moves immediately from the encounter with Murzik to a digressive flashback about the trade school that Natashka and the narrator attend. The intrusion of the flashback at this moment can be considered a narrative counterpart to the separation of lovers that takes place in fairy tales when they are not ready for sexual maturity, as in “Tsarevna-liagushka” (“The Frog Princess”). In that ani-

*couldn't do anything about it—she was feeling pulled toward the curtain so hard ... she just couldn't hold back [she cannot resist]”* (237).

<sup>7</sup> “... Murzik ... *sniffed* Natashka and started singing. *Natashka petted him and he was rubbing up to her, pushing his head against her hand. Natashka held him against her and shook* ... And *Natashka was holding him tighter* against her even though he had fleas and was dirty and hung around garbage dumps. She didn't care. She had *tears running down her face*, which Murzik thought was funny, and he kept *sniffing* her cheeks. Then he got bored and wiggled out of her arms and left—jumped down onto the floor, stretched, and went back toward the curtain, and *Natashka literally collapsed onto the bed, all wet, and she was out*” (238).

<sup>8</sup> “Then the woman looked at her *special* somehow, like she was asking something with her eyes. And Natashka sensed that *today she could say, ‘I heard, I saw.’* Like the old woman was *letting her*” (238).

<sup>9</sup> “Natashka *didn't want to say anything*, and that was that ... Then Natashka got herself those sleeping pills and started taking them, and everything seemed to get better” (238).

mal bride tale, Prince Ivan returns first from the ball and burns his wife’s frog skin, which forces her for the first time to spend a night with her husband as a human:

Легла спать с Иваном-царевичем; перед утром и говорит ему:  
«Ну, Иван-царевич, немного ты не потерпел; твоя бы я была, а  
теперь бог знат. Прощай!» (262)<sup>10</sup>

In Sadur’s text Natashka’s sexual encounter with Murzik is similarly premature, and it similarly requires that she be separated temporarily from further sexual encounters, in this case by a narrative digression.

### The Cute Little Redhead

“*Milen'kit'*” (“darling”) is a common endearment for a husband or lover, and the little Redhead’s appearance in Natashka’s room introduces a second representation of sexual initiation, one that ultimately propels Natashka from sleepy security to womanhood and marriage:<sup>11</sup>

А тот стоит<sup>12</sup> у нее в ногах ... Наташка тихонько стала ноги подтягивать, чтоб от него подальше, [she is resisting because she is nervous] хотела свернуться калачиком, а он вдруг взял и *потянул за одеяло*. Легонечко так, но Наташка тоже вцепилась в одеяло. Он к себе потягивает, а она к себе. Он дергает, а она не пускает и видит, что она сильнее, не очень уже боится, даже сердиться начала, как он *хулиганит там*. Но тут *чувствует, рука затекла, сил нет, колет всю, пальцы онемели*. [she is becoming excited] Тут он дернул, и одеяло с лица у нее сползло. Ну она решила тихонечко посмотреть в ноги—кто там ее дергает. Приподнялась чуть-чуть и видит малюсенького непонятно кого, *личико* у него было, а сам какой-то *рыженький, грязненький, какой-то тряпечкой обмотанный* ... и в разрезе *рыжая шерстка торчит, как у мужичка* [the reference to erect masculine body hair—actually fur—evokes associations with pubic

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<sup>10</sup> “She lay down to sleep with Prince Ivan, but before daybreak she said to him: ‘If you had waited a little, I would have been yours; now only God knows when we will be together again. Farewell!’” (122)

<sup>11</sup> More than just providing a comforting sleepy security, Natashka’s willful ignorance preserves the mystery—and even the sacred or occult quality—of sex, which is never mentioned or acknowledged explicitly, and which is restricted to dreams, the night, her bedroom, and her bed.

<sup>12</sup> The verb *стоять* ‘stand’, which is repeated several times in the description of this encounter, is also commonly used to describe an erection (although with somewhat different syntax). The same is true of *торчать* ‘stick up’, used here to describe the Redhead’s chest hair.

hair] ... Он стоит, дергает ее за одеяло, насупился, губы *оттопорил* [he sticks, pokes, and otherwise pushes and protrudes] и не видит, что *она уже давно на него смотрит*. [even though she is apprehensive, she is ready for maturity, and sufficiently curious, and even unfrightened, that she does not look away] Наташка *рот разинула*, [she opens, receptively, more than once] а *вдохнуть не может*. [mixture of excitement and fear at a first sexual experience] Она видит, что *он на нее немножко похож*, [he is *her* sexuality, and thus part of her] и *что-то ласковое появилось, и в то же время страшно до кошмара какого-то*. [a combination of feelings appropriate for a first sexual experience] *Только захотела дух перевести, вздохнула потихонечку, а он как вздрогнет, увидел ее, ручонки опустил и глазенки вылупил на нее. И не уходит. Стоял, стоял, потом насупился, смотрит исподлобья, а мордочка, как у Наташки, носик, бровки, как у нее самой!* [another reminder that he is part of her, and thus looks like her] Рубашонка с плеча сползает, он ее назад натягивает, нервничает, почесывается, мнетя, а *Наташка лежит, рот разинула и глаза выпучила*. [the open mouth is a receptive gesture, the bulging eyes a reciprocation of his “sticking”] (223–24)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “... he was standing at her feet ... Natashka started pulling her feet up away from him little by little [she is resisting because she is nervous]; she wanted to curl up, and then he went and *pulled on the blanket*. He pulled lightly, but Natashka grabbed onto the blanket too. He yanked, but she didn’t let go, and she realized that she was stronger and got less scared and even started getting mad that he was *playing pranks down there*. But then *she felt her whole body going numb and she had no more energy and her whole body was prickly and she lost feeling in her fingers*. [she is becoming excited] That’s when he yanked, and the blanket slid off her face. So she decided to peek at her feet—to see who was yanking. She rose a bit and saw an itsy-bitsy can’t say what: he had a *little face*, and he was kind of *red*, filthy, wrapped up in some rag ... there was *red fur sticking out through the opening, like on a man* [the reference to erect masculine body hair—actually fur—evokes associations with pubic hair] ...He was standing there pulling her by the blanket, scowling, *sticking out* [he sticks, pokes, and otherwise pushes and protrudes] his lips, not even noticing that *she’d been looking at him for a long time now*. [even though she is apprehensive, she is ready for maturity, and sufficiently curious, and even unfrightened, that she does not look away] Natashka *opened her mouth* [she opens, receptively, more than once] but *couldn’t sigh*. [mixture of excitement and fear at a first sexual experience] She saw that he *looked like her a little bit*, [he is *her* sexuality, and thus part of her] and she *felt a little tenderness, and at the same time she felt scared something awful*. [a combination of feelings appropriate for a first sexual experience] *She wanted to catch her breath, so she gave a quiet little sigh, and he shuddered because he saw her*. He lowered his arms and *stuck his little eyes out* at her. And he wouldn’t leave. He stood there, then started scowling, glowering at her, and Natashka could see that *his face was like hers—his little nose, his eyebrows like her own!* [another reminder that he is part of her, and thus looks like her] His shirt was sliding

Note that the Russian text is studded with diminutives, which serve several related functions. Most conspicuously, Natashka’s three intimate partners, Murzik, “milen’kii, ryzhen’kii” (‘darling, little redhead’), and Serezh(k)a (the name of Natashka’s eventual husband), are all identified by affectionate diminutives, which is appropriate in light of Natashka’s physical relationship with them.<sup>14</sup> Second, the narrator consistently refers to the protagonist with the affectionate diminutive “Natashka,” which is consistent with the narrator’s portrayal of herself as a friend and classmate of Natashka’s. In this context, note also that Natashka is introduced with the possessive “У нас еще одна девчонка была” (220),<sup>15</sup> and is identified subsequently with a possessive pronoun: “Вот Наташка моя заметила” (220).<sup>16</sup> The narrator’s use of diminutives and possessives, whether in her own voice as a reflection of her personal closeness with Natashka or in her rendition of Natashka’s thoughts through direct-indirect speech, contributes to the *bylichka* quality of the text, constructing a context that implies that the narrator is relating real events that actually happened to a personal friend of hers.<sup>17</sup> The first-person plural possessive constructions, in addition to establishing the narrator and Natashka as friends, also assert a familiarity between the characters and the reader, and this, in turn, implies that the reader also participates of the folkloric world that permeates the story.

It is only after the encounter with the Redhead that Natashka has, at last, begun to understand and accept the reality of her situation, as is clear from her recognition of his *authenticity*: “И она тогда хрипло, дико

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off his shoulder, and he kept pulling it on, embarrassed and nervous, scratching himself, hemming and hawing, while *Natashka was lying there with her mouth open and her eyes bulging out*” [the open mouth is a receptive gesture, the bulging eyes a reciprocation of his “sticking”] (239–40).

<sup>14</sup> Note that Natashka’s three “lovers” become progressively less diminutive in size and manner as she matures, even as they all remain grammatically diminutive. Murzik, the first, is small and furry, and characterized by “мягк[ие] лап[ы]” (222) ‘soft paws’ (237), and although Natashka is confused and agitated by her encounter with him, he is not overtly threatening. The Redhead is much more physically aggressive than Murzik, but nonetheless smaller than a full-grown man, and from a grammatical perspective, not only are the adjectives *milen’kii* ‘darling’ and *ryzhen’kii* ‘little redhead’ diminutive, but so are the terms used to describe his facial features: “мордочка ... носик, бровки” (224) ‘his [little] face ... his little nose, his [little] eyebrows’ (240). Finally, Serezhka is a full-grown man, and the specifics of Natashka’s encounters with him are left to the reader’s imagination.

<sup>15</sup> “We had this other girl” (235).

<sup>16</sup> “Then *my* Natashka noticed” (235).

<sup>17</sup> These features are also evocative of the *strashilka*, a genre that shares alleged truthfulness with the *bylichka*, but differs from it by virtue of a contemporary urban setting (cf. Trykova 2000).

от страха в это *настоящее*, хоть и грязненькое и малюсенькое личико рычит: «К добру или к худу?» (224).<sup>18</sup> The Redhead’s response, “Маленько к добру” (224),<sup>19</sup> confirms the ambiguous thrill that accompanies Natashka’s sexual initiation, at the end of which she collapses, (sexually) exhausted. When Natashka awakens the next day, the old lady is meaner than ever, and essentially forces her to move out, which we know is because Natashka now, after this initiation, is ready to leave the care of a knowledgeable old woman and become an adult (married) woman herself: “И буквально через два дня Сережка Колосков делает ей предложение, и она переезжает к нему. Вот и все” (224).<sup>20</sup>

### Impossible Tasks, Natashka’s Landlady, and Baba Iaga

Natashka’s landlady assigns Natashka a traditional “impossible” fairy-tale task, sweeping flour that the landlady has spilled on the floor deliberately as a way of controlling her lodger’s activities. Note that sweeping is not merely a traditional impossible task, but also specifically a domestic task, and thus one that a woman might have to perform in a fairy tale to prove her womanhood.

Sewing is also a traditional domestic task, and Natashka’s participation in this activity can be seen as another test of her readiness for womanhood. She fails that task initially because she is not yet ready for marriage, and then completes it later (Russian 222–23, English 238). That completion of the task is a requirement for her eventual marriage is clear from the appearance of the shirt on the little Redhead, who himself represents the acceptance of adult sexuality that is necessary for marriage: “... грязненький, какой-то *тряпочкой обмотанный*. Тряпочка ей показалась знакомой, она пригляделась, а это *ее сорочечка*, за которую ее чуть не выгнали из училища” (223).<sup>21</sup>

That the sewing is not simply a domestic task, but, in this case, specifically an impossible domestic task, is clear from the description of Natashka’s project as sewing “маленькие костюмчики, как будто для этих

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<sup>18</sup> “Then hoarsely from fear, she growled into this face, which was *real* despite being tiny and dirty: ‘Good sign or bad?’” (240).

<sup>19</sup> “a little bit good” (240). The “little bit” might suggest the mixture of pleasure and suffering that comes with physical maturity and adulthood.

<sup>20</sup> “And then literally two days later Serezha Koloskov proposed to her, and she moved in with him. That’s it” (241).

<sup>21</sup> “... he was kind of red, filthy, *wrapped up in some rag*. She thought the rag looked familiar, so she looked closer and saw that *it was her little shirt*, the one she’d almost gotten kicked out of the trade school over” (239–40).

маленьких инфузориюков” (222).<sup>22</sup> Here it is the exaggerated diminutive size (the figures in the school project were surely larger than literally microscopic infusorians) that renders the sewing impossible (although Natashka nonetheless eventually completes it, albeit only with difficulty).

“Но сама бабка странная” (220)<sup>23</sup> tells us that Natashka’s landlady is not a normal person. More specifically, she is inscrutable, she has knowledge (she alone understands the voices at night), and she knows in particular about signs: “... она говорит: «К добру или к худу?» Это на разные предметы, ей одной заметные.” (220)<sup>24</sup> The point of the story is that the landlady has knowledge, that she forces that knowledge on a reluctant Natashka, and that once Natashka has acquired the knowledge, she is ready for marriage. Thus, the encounter with the little Redhead ends with the Redhead demanding that Natashka herself now “Спрашивай, а то как дам!” (224),<sup>25</sup> and this time it is Natashka who asks “К добру или к худу?” (224),<sup>26</sup> signifying by her use of the old woman’s mysterious question that she now understands what only the old woman had understood previously.

Certain other details associate Natashka’s landlady with an ambiguous Baba Iaga, a stock figure in Russian fairy tales, who, unlike the traditional western fairy-tale wicked witch, may appear malevolent (a Proppian villain) while ultimately proving helpful (a Proppian donor):<sup>27</sup>

1. “... бабка Наташку часто кормит” (220),<sup>28</sup> much as Baba Iaga traditionally feeds the fairy-tale characters whom she takes into her hut and to whom she assigns domestic tasks. In this case the fact that the landlady looks out for Natashka’s nutritional welfare creates the twin associations of a wicked witch fattening up a captive child for eventual consumption, on the one hand, and a nurturing mother protecting her child from hunger, on the other.
2. The old lady would “пересчитает [the rent money] раз сто” (220).<sup>29</sup> Compulsive counting is an action occasionally associated with Baba Iaga (see “Baba Iaga i zhikhar” [“Baba Yaga and the Brave Youth”]),

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<sup>22</sup> “little itsy-bitsy suits for those little infusoricks” [infusorians] (238).

<sup>23</sup> “The woman herself was weird” (235).

<sup>24</sup> “The old woman would say, ‘Good sign or bad?’ She’d say this about all sorts of things *that only she noticed*” (235).

<sup>25</sup> “Ask or else!” (240).

<sup>26</sup> “Good sign or bad?” (240).

<sup>27</sup> See Johns 1998 concerning Baba Iaga’s ambiguous nature.

<sup>28</sup> “... the old woman fed Natashka pretty often” (235).

<sup>29</sup> “take the money and count it a hundred times” (235).

and, more generally, it is a traditional way of occupying the attention of unclean spirits or forces. (cf. Ivanits 1989, 97)

In light of the landlady’s resemblance to Baba Iaga, Murzik might be regarded as reminiscent of the old crone’s familiar, and the fact that he is grey, rather than black, is consistent with the fact that just as the Baba Iaga figure in this tale is not exclusively evil, neither is her feline companion.

## Latency

Natashka’s attempt to resist maturity specifically through sleep is consistent with Bruno Bettelheim’s interpretation of sleep in fairy tales as representative of sexual latency: “The turning inward, which in outer appearance looks like passivity (or sleeping one’s life away), happens when internal mental processes of such importance go on within the person that he has no energy for outwardly directed action” (1989, 225).

Although maturity cannot be rushed, it also cannot be delayed artificially, and it is the landlady who knows when Natashka is ready to become an adult, rather than Natashka herself. Thus, early in the story, before her encounter with Murzik, Natashka understands correctly that she is not yet supposed to acknowledge hearing voices on the landlady’s side of the apartment: <sup>30</sup> “Конечно, бабка прекрасно знала, что Наташка все [the voices at night] слышит, но ей нужно было, чтоб Наташка не выдала себя, и Наташка это понимала” (221).<sup>31</sup> But when Natashka later takes medication to avoid what the landlady then wants her to see (“Глотаю по три таблетки и сразу вырубаюсь” [221]),<sup>32</sup> the landlady in response forces that knowledge on Natashka by taking away her pills, and she does this angrily (“Сон души! Бесовская дрянь!” [223])<sup>33</sup> because she has grown impatient with Natashka’s use of drugged sleep not only as a refuge from maturity, but also as a withdrawal even from conversation about maturity (a conversation that is conducted entirely on the landlady’s terms). In fact, not only does Natashka resist ac-

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<sup>30</sup> Asking the right questions, and doing so only at the right time, is traditional evidence of the wisdom of fairy-tale heroines. Cf. von Franz’s analysis of “Vasilisa the Beautiful” (1995).

<sup>31</sup> “Of course the woman knew perfectly well that Natashka could hear everything [the voices at night], but she needed Natashka not to let on, and Natashka understood that” (236).

<sup>32</sup> “I take three pills and I’m dead to the world” (236).

<sup>33</sup> “The dream of the soul! Demon scum!” (239). The first phrase (“Сон души”) is engagingly ambiguous; in addition to meaning “the dream of the soul,” it might alternatively be glossed as “stifle your sleep” or “stifle your dream,” indicating the landlady’s contempt for Natashka’s efforts to postpone, and even avert, her spiritual awakening.

quiring knowledge, but she also resists even acknowledging that she is being confronted with knowledge that she does not want: “А Наташка глаза отводит и молчит, как будто ей не разрешили отвечать” (221).<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion to Reading #1

That the story is about female initiation and rites of passage leading to marriage is telegraphed not only by the ending (proposal and marriage, Russian 224, English 241), but also by the fact that it is Natashka’s marriage that allows the narrative itself to exist: “Но потом мы все узнали. Наташка неожиданно вышла замуж за Сережу Колоскова, переехала к нему жить и тогда все нам рассказала” (221).<sup>35</sup> It is immediately after this statement that the narrator begins to tell the reader what she has been withholding because she hadn’t known it until then: “Это бабка полкомнаты отгородила ...” (221).<sup>36</sup> The story thus involves the transfer of information at three levels: Natashka acquires knowledge from the old woman, the narrator acquires Natashka’s story from Natashka herself, and the reader, in turn, learns that story from the narrator.

## Reading #2: *The Garden of Eden*, “*The Snotty Goat*,” and the *Phallus*

### Introduction

Reading #1 presents three major theses:

1. The “Cute Little Redhead” is about sexual initiation.
2. Murzik and the Redhead figure as representations of sexuality.
3. The landlady is evocative of Baba Iaga.

The thesis that the story is a tale of initiation at first glance seems counter-intuitive: Natashka’s alleged maturity, acquired through the initiatory ordeal, is manifested in her impromptu marriage, incited, as it seems, more by deficient living conditions than by a heroically obtained new spiritual status. At second glance, though, we see that all the required constituents for the archaic rite are present: The initiate is removed to a secluded, unclean space (the old woman’s single room apartment) and put to trial. According to Mircea Eliade (1959, 187), initiation requires the subject to “die to his first (natural) life and be reborn to a

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<sup>34</sup> “Natashka looked away quietly, like someone wasn’t letting her talk” (236).

<sup>35</sup> “But then we found out everything. *Natashka got married* to Serezha Koloskov suddenly and moved in with him *and then told us everything*” (236).

<sup>36</sup> “The old woman had cordoned off half the room ...” (236).

higher life, which is at once religious and cultural.” This element of re-birth could be detected in Natashka’s hiding under her blanket as if curled into a fetal position in her mother’s womb: “хотела свернуться калачиком” (223).<sup>37</sup>

The pattern of death-resurrection may also be traced to the two central scenes, where Natasha becomes exposed to the supernatural. The first of these ends in her losing consciousness, followed by a period of muteness (refusing the old woman’s invitation to speak about her experiences) and constant sleepiness, i.e., a state close to death. In the second scene, the little Redhead literally wakes her up by pulling her blanket and slapping her cheek.

That Baba Iaga shows up in a story devoted to the theme of initiation conforms neatly to Vladimir Propp’s understanding of the origins of Baba Iaga: he asserts that they are to be found in ancient initiation rites, and that she is a development of the figure of the initiator. Propp’s statement has been contested on the basis that no evidence has been found to support his assumption that the pre-Christian Slavs performed any such rites (cf. Johns 1998 and the discussion there of Propp 1946). That a contemporary author furnishes her story about a girl’s stumbling over the threshold to adult life with Baba Iaga paraphernalia speaks to the fact that at least in the contemporary imagination, Baba Iaga’s role as an initiator is taken for granted.

In some respects, the Redhead merges with the cat Murzik (both are filthy, *guliaiut* [are promiscuous, alcoholics or both]), and therefore figure on equal terms as embodiments of the horrors of adult life that Natashka has to confront. In Reading #1, above, both Murzik and the Redhead appears as representations of sexuality, but in slightly different ways: Murzik has the regulating function of the *domovoi*, while the Redhead, through his physical resemblance to a hirsute and disheveled adult male, emerges as an embodiment of the phallus.

In response to Reading #1, I propose three divergent interpretations of issues raised above. First, I would like to develop the argument about the structure of initiation present in Sadur’s text, and propose that the process of trial recalls a very specific myth, the biblical story of the Garden of

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<sup>37</sup> “she wanted to curl up” (239). The association of Natashka’s retreat under the covers with an attempt to return to an embryonic state is even stronger in the radio play based on the story than in the story: “я решила, свернусь калачиком, как тогда, в маме, и пускай все будет от меня далеко-далеко...” (470) ‘I decided to curl up as I once had in my Mum[’s womb], so that everything would become far, far away from me ...’

Eden. Second, although Murzik evidently recalls the *domovoi*, I argue that he also manages to become an independent symbol of the groom. Third, I discuss the phallic connotations of the Redhead, and assert that only a Lacanian reading of the story fully qualifies the Redhead as phallic, and as part of this discussion I propose an answer to the somewhat bewildering fact that the phallic Redhead is said to resemble Natashka. To support my reading I draw occasionally on Sadur’s reworking of the story as a radio play (1999). Although this is a separate work of art, it follows diligently the structure of the short story, quoting the crucial lines verbatim. I therefore consider the play to be an adaptation to the radio medium of basically the same authorial ideas as the short story.

### The Garden of Eden

During a rainy night, when Natashka’s first encounter with the supernatural is about to take place, her desire for knowledge is awakened: “И так хочется узнать, какие же слова он там пищит? ... И очень хочется расслышать, какие слова он пищит” (221).<sup>38</sup> The moment of obsessive curiosity is emphasized in the play: “Может, я втянулась уже и мне самой охота? [...] Хочу туда, за занавеску, тянет аж из живота”(467).<sup>39</sup> The ancient association between knowledge and sexuality, as expressed in the myth of the Garden of Eden, is here actualized. The words Natashka yearns to hear are intimately connected with violent sexuality, cf. this passage from the short story, adjacent to Natasha’s articulation of curiosity: “Бабка ворочается на пружинах, бубнит, ноет, а голосок не слезает с нее, долбит свое” (221–22).<sup>40</sup> The voice here becomes personified as a man on top of a woman, who in a literal translation “won’t climb down from her” and “batters” at her. Natashka’s curiosity makes her first let go of her blanket, i.e., undress, but then, like Eve, Natashka is punished for her desire: when the curtain flaps, she becomes paralyzed, something has “grabbed” her. Now she wants to cover herself (remember the fig leaves?), but she cannot. Overhearing the Redhead’s sexual torment of the old woman becomes equivalent to opening Pandora’s Box, or entering into Bluebeard’s forbidden chamber, or, finally, picking the forbidden fruit. Some unnamed power has got hold of Natashka, and it is when she is in this state that Murzik enters and makes advances. Na-

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<sup>38</sup> “And she really wanted to know what kind of words those squeaks were ... And she really wanted to be able to tell what it was squeaking about” (237).

<sup>39</sup> “Maybe I’ve got entangled already and feel like it myself? [...] I want to go there, on the other side of the curtain, I feel it right from the stomach”

<sup>40</sup> “The woman was turning about on the springs, muttering, whining, but the little voice wouldn’t let up, kept hammering away at her” (237).

tashka is literally pushed into intimacy with Murzik, although it is emphasized how repulsive he is: “хоть у него и блохи, и он грязный, и по помойкам таскается” (222).<sup>41</sup> As in the Bible, where Eve is punished with the toils of childbirth, the woman’s punishment is connected with sexual activity.

The pattern of female curiosity followed by the intrusion of supernatural powers and coercive, random intimacy is repeated in a later story by Sadur, “Veter okrain” (1997, translated as “The Wind from the Suburbs”). The female character’s desire for knowledge seems perfectly innocent: “Просто это невозможное всю жизнь хотение узнать а у продавца с его стороны (где не видно) что лежит? Пирожок надкусанный? Гребешок? Ползеркальца?!!” (90).<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, supernatural powers incite the rushed development of a marriage plot, and a story that usually needs the space of a whole novel to unfold becomes reduced to a single sentence: “И я побрела слепая и слезная, уцепившись в тьме за Диму-поводыря, ай-яй-яй, Дима-Дима-Дима, и стала жить с инм, ай-ай-яй, как было больно” (93).<sup>43</sup> The romantic climax here is transformed into a catastrophe: the reason for their uniting is not attraction, but blindness, caused by a hostile force. The whole process is perceived as painful.

In the radio play, the sexual union between Natashka and the cat/lover receives a more detailed treatment than in the short story. When the landlady finds out about the sleeping pills, she pours flour on the floor, but this time she adds water, commenting: “Тили-тили тесто, жених и невеста” (464)<sup>44</sup> Natashka and the cat are glued together by the sticky dough, and it begins to rise. In a hallucination-like scenario, the dough surrounds Natashka and devours her, and then, suddenly, she is the dough, and she encompasses everything from heaven down to earth, evoking an unmistakable association with pregnancy. Murzik ends Natashka’s swelling by scratching her cheek until it bleeds, which seems to puncture the bubble, so that the dough disappears, and there is a sense of relief: “Плоско, просто, часики тикают... Оказывается, я прибралась

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<sup>41</sup> “even though he had fleas and was dirty and hung around garbage dumps” (238).

<sup>42</sup> “it’s just the eternal, impossible, capricious desire to see what people are selling on the other side of the street—a cake with a bite out of it? A comb? Half a make-up mirror?” (76).

<sup>43</sup> “I stumble along clutching at Dima’s shadow. Dima the leader, Dima the boss, so blow me down if I didn’t move in with him, oh the pain” (80).

<sup>44</sup> “Doddy-doddy dough, bride and groom”

и не заметила как” (465).<sup>45</sup> This outcome merges pregnancy with defloration: now everything is “flat” (as a belly after delivery), but there is no baby. Instead Natashka’s scratched cheek bleeds, similarly to a hymen after the loss of virginity.<sup>46</sup>

This enigmatic way of conceptualizing female sexuality also receives an elaboration in “Veter okrain.” This time the bread imagery is replaced by associations with the preparation of wine: fermentation takes place in a bubble, which the male character sticks to the radiator: “В пузыре все время что-то булькало, бродило, сквозь желтоватую муть его я видела тайные какие-то шевеления” (94).<sup>47</sup> As in the radio play version of “Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii,” the male character punctures the bubble, but the outcome is now more painful: “А то, что из пузыря, пролилось, и я стала липкая, и мне стало страшно. И смертельная тоска охватила меня” (95).<sup>48</sup> Here the process of defloration/pregnancy is intimately associated with stickiness, evoking disgust and repugnance. Sexuality becomes a force that literally glues people together with its sticky fluids, and then does not let them part.

### “The Snotty Goat”

This sense of disgust in connection with sexuality brings to mind the fairy-tale subgenre featuring animal grooms, as exemplified in the Russian tradition by “Soplivyi kozel” (“The Snotty Goat”). The youngest daughter in this tale has to wipe the goat’s slobber, in the same way that Natashka has to press Murzik’s flea-teeming fur against her.<sup>49</sup> Marina Warner (1994, 276) interprets this subgenre, epitomized in “The Beauty and the Beast,” as reflecting a strategy employed by women narrators to deal with fear of the male Other. The fear originated in the institution of arranged marriages, which forced young girls to be intimate with often physically repugnant, older, but wealthy men. Warner’s model is well

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<sup>45</sup> “Everything is flat, simple, the clock ticks ... It turned out that I had cleaned up without noticing it.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. the Grimm Brothers’ Snow White, where Snow White’s birth is prefigured by her mother’s accidentally pricking her finger and letting a drop of blood fall on the snow under her window.

<sup>47</sup> “through its yellow murk I see something gurgling and fermenting inside. I squat gloomily on the floor for ages watching the bubble stirring” (81).

<sup>48</sup> “as the bubble stuff spreads and becomes sticky, and I am overwhelmed by mortal sadness” (81).

<sup>49</sup> Note that Natashka, like the protagonist of “The Snotty Goat” and unlike the heroine of the French “Beauty and the Beast,” is not at all squeamish about affectionate contact with her “animal groom” despite the explicit description of his physical repulsiveness. He may be disgusting, but she is not disgusted.

suiting to Sadur’s contemporary urban tale: even if Russian girls nowadays are not subject to coercion to the same extent as Warner’s French noblewomen, the deficit of marriageable men and proper housing often puts girls in a position when a marriage proposal is hard to turn down. In his modern guise, however, the male Other is no longer horrifying; rather is he a sanitary problem—the old, frightening eighteenth-century groom in Warner’s example, represented as a wolf or a rhinoceros, has given way to the harmless but filthy Soviet man, now appearing as a *guliashchii* (outdoor/promiscuous) cat.

### The Phallus

That the Redhead looks and acts like a penis is convincingly argued above. It could also be argued, but with some reservations, that he is a phallic figure. Basing her claim on the historical origin of the word in Greek ecstatic religious practices, Susan Bordo (1999, 87) claims that to understand a representation of a penis as a phallus requires both that it express masculine power and that it demands reverence from the viewer. This definition disqualifies the erect penis of a satyr, for instance, from phallic status because it is comical, rather than majestic. In the Lacanian sense, the phallus is the point of reference in every semiotic system, the embodiment of the symbolic order. Both senses have relevance for how the Redhead in Sadur’s story is portrayed, though a Lacanian reading makes the stronger case for a phallic interpretation. With his masculine phallic powers, the Redhead masters the old woman and Natashka, and in doing this, he uses his *voice*, i.e., language. During his assault on the old woman he is metonymically represented by his voice, which is “funny and horrifying” at the same time. Using Bordo’s definition, one might argue that the Redhead becomes deprived of his phallic status here because the comical is incompatible with the phallic, but in spite of its comical qualities, the voice nonetheless becomes the object of Natashka’s desire (cf. “And she really wanted to know what kind of words those squeaks were,” quoted above). During the culmination of the story, the Redhead forces Natashka to enter into a secret semiotic system by pronouncing the coded question “Good sign or bad?,” i.e., a system that understands everything as a sign for something else. It is only when Natashka enters this symbolic order that she can abandon her peripheral status as an orphan out of town, and assume a different role, that of a speaking subject who is able to recount her story.

The plot is organized around two occasions when Natasha is involuntarily exposed to supernatural powers, to which she responds at first with awe, then with curiosity, and at last with anger. The last feeling is apparently the required one, as only after that response is she released from

her confinement. Even though the story tells us about the feelings of disgust that have to be suppressed in order to enter marriage, it also hints at the importance of woman's aggression for a successful completion of the female plot. The crucial role of aggression is emphasized by the peculiar fact that the Redhead looks like Natashka. If this fact is to be interpreted as evidence that the Redhead represents her own sexuality, why does he create a range of associations with *male* genitals, and not female? One possible answer is that mature sexuality incorporates both phallic and feminine elements, and only an encounter with her phallic Other makes Natasha ready for an adult life. Even though Natashka is offered only “маленько к добру” (“a little bit good”), her anger has provided her with the required maturity to enter marriage.

## **Conclusion to Reading #2**

By identifying the motive of female curiosity followed by punishment and forced sexual contact in this and other stories by Nina Sadur, I propose to see “Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii” as yet another attempt by the author to come to terms with the troublesome myth of the Garden of Eden. I then elaborate on the thesis presented in Reading #1, claiming Murzik to be a representation of sexuality. Drawing on Marina Warner's interpretation of the fairy-tale's animal groom as a prophylactic device, preparing young maidens for the horrors of the conjugal bed, I argue that Murzik fulfils a corresponding function in Sadur's story. Finally, I investigate the reliability of Reading #1's presupposition that physical resemblance to a penis is equivalent to phallic qualities. I conclude that only if “phallus” is not interpreted in its original, religious context, but rather in a contemporary, Lacanian, one, is this presupposition valid. The solution of the phallic question, in turn, contributes to an elaboration of the thesis in Reading #1, which states that the Redhead's resemblance of Natashka is due to his status as a representation of her own sexuality. I agree with this reading, but I emphasize its consequences for an interpretation of the story's view on sexuality: if the Redhead is phallic, then it turns out that Natashka's sexuality also has a phallic component, presumably the one component missing before she is released into married life.

## **Discussion**

### ***Response to Reading #2***

#### **Why Does Natashka Marry?**

Reading #2 suggests that Natashka's sudden decision to marry might initially appear to have been motivated by her appalling living conditions,

an interpretation that the author of Reading #2 then rejects. In fact, the argument against the “housing shortage” impetus toward marriage is even stronger; at no time in the text is Natashka’s decision to marry attributed to her living conditions, and her domestic circumstances are at most only slightly more appalling when she decides to marry than they were at any previous time in the story. More precisely, although in their final scene together the landlady is particularly angry and particularly abusive, and again spills flour on the floor, she then throws away the broom that Natashka would otherwise have used to clean up the mess, so that “они весь день шлепали по муке, наследили по всей квартире” (224).<sup>50</sup> In other words, Natashka has now become the landlady’s equal, and she no longer needs to prove her womanhood by completing a traditional impossible domestic task.

What has happened, then, in a way that allows (or even impels) Natashka to marry at a particular moment in the unfolding of the plot is not a substantial worsening of her housing conditions, but her final acquisition of sexual self-awareness, and this motivation is connected through contiguity with Natashka’s transition from waif to wife. It is precisely Natashka’s coded sexual experiences immediately before she decides to marry that prevent us from interpreting that decision as motivated in any significant way by lack of space, lack of privacy, her landlady’s abusive behavior, etc.

### The Garden of Eden Revisited

Natashka’s acquisition of sexual awareness necessarily intersects with Eve’s (and Adam’s) acquisition of the knowledge of “good and evil” in Genesis in that both stories involve a transition from naïveté to an adulthood characterized by sometimes painful knowledge. Nonetheless, the interpretation of the former as specifically a reworking of the latter is difficult to accept. Most significantly, many of the salient features of the Genesis legend that distinguish it from generic coming-of-age texts are absent from Sadur’s tale. Thus, although one might regard Murzik or the Redhead as fulfilling the role of the serpent insofar as they introduce Natashka to knowledge she did not previously possess:

1. Natashka emphatically does not live in a paradise from which she risks expulsion.
2. Natashka does not corrupt her mate (unlike Eve, who entices Adam to eat the apple).

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<sup>50</sup> ‘they stepped on the flour all day long, got their footprints all over the apartment’ (240–41).

3. While Eve and Adam (and Pandora and Bluebeard’s wives) are warned not to surrender to curiosity, there is no comparable prohibition in Sadur’s story. On the contrary, Natashka’s landlady not only wants Natashka to pursue knowledge, but actively forces that knowledge on her, angrily throwing away Natashka’s sleeping pills when she tries to cling to her innocence. In this respect, Natashka’s transition to adulthood is overseen (and even directed) by a powerful old woman who has no biblical counterpart.
4. The pain of childbirth in Genesis (chapter 3) is described explicitly as punishment for disobeying God’s command, which is clear because it is situated in a context where God imposes other explicit punishments on Eve, Adam, and the serpent. In comparison, Natashka’s sexual experiences, both the coded encounters with Murzik and the Redhead and the real encounters with Serezha that are not depicted in the text, do not occur in a context that forces an interpretation as punishment. The encounters with Murzik and the Redhead might, for example, be interpreted as initiation, and although Natashka is clearly overwhelmed, it is less clear that she perceives the experience as one of pain, suffering, or punishment.
5. Unlike in other Sadurian tales, there is no explicit reference or allusion to any signature feature of the Genesis narrative.

For these reasons the apparent intersection of Sadur’s story with the biblical lapsarian myth might most persuasively be viewed not as explicit textual influence, but as an artifact of their both dealing with the acquisition of a sexual knowledge that brings pain as well as pleasure.

### **The Trajectory of Natashka’s Emotions**

Reading #2 argues that Natashka responds to the Redhead’s visit “at first with awe, then with curiosity, and at last with anger,” and ultimately “her anger has provided her with the required maturity to enter marriage.” The difficulty with this interpretation is that the one isolated reference to anger in the description of Natashka’s encounter with the Redhead is both fleeting and contextually constrained, so that anger cannot be said to characterize or describe Natashka’s reception of him in any general sense or to serve any teleological function in her emotional development.

The relevant passage is reproduced in full above, under the section headed “[The Cute Little Redhead](#).” If we examine in order all of the words used in this portion of the text specifically to describe Natashka’s emotions and feelings (and their physical manifestations), we find the following:

... не очень уже боится, даже сердиться начала, что он хулиганит там (angry, or at least annoyed) ... чувствует, рука затекла, сил нет, колет всю, пальцы онемели (overwhelmed and partially paralyzed by unfamiliar sensations) ... она решила тихонечко посмотреть ... она уже давно на него смотрит (curiosity) ... вздохнуть не может (again overwhelmed) ... что-то ласковое появилось, и в то же время страшно до кошмара (ambivalent combination of tenderness and fright) ... Только захотела дух перевести (yet again overwhelmed) ... Наташка лежит, рот разинула и глаза выпучила ... (223–24)<sup>51</sup>

The only manifestation of anger we see in Natashka in the entire story is a brief display of annoyance that someone or something she has not yet seen is tugging at her covers. The more involved Natashka becomes in the experience, the more her feelings manifest not anger, but terrified (although not entirely reluctant) surrender, until she is left essentially paralyzed. By the end of the scene, when Natashka is about to lose consciousness, the Redhead demands that she say something, and she complies “дикот страха” (224),<sup>52</sup> which clearly announces her dominant emotion as something very different from anger.

This concluding representation of Natashka’s state of mind, following, as it does, the accumulated description of her evolving emotions, leaves no doubt that she had long forgotten whatever very specific anger she experienced early in encounter, before she was ready to recognize and acknowledge what was really happening to her. The language of the text reveals that Natashka’s ultimate reception of the Redhead does not manifest a transition from awe to curiosity to anger. Instead, it demonstrates confused and conflicting emotions (including brief and specific anger, or at least annoyance), but culminates in exhausted surrender. The rapid dissipation of whatever fleeting anger she does experience makes it difficult to agree that it is “her anger [that] has provided her with the required maturity to enter marriage.”

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<sup>51</sup> “... got less scared and even started getting mad that he was playing pranks down there (angry, or at least annoyed) ... felt her whole body going numb and she had no more energy and her whole body was prickly and she lost feeling in her fingers (overwhelmed by unfamiliar sensations) ... she decided to peek ... she’d been looking at him for a long time now (curiosity) ... couldn’t sigh (again overwhelmed)... she felt a little tenderness, and at the same time she felt scared something awful (ambivalent combination of tenderness and fright) ... She wanted to catch her breath (again overwhelmed) ... Natashka was lying there with her mouth open and her eyes bulging out ...” (239–40).

<sup>52</sup> “from [terrible] fear” (240).

## ***Discussion of Response to Reading #2***

### **The Genesis Myth**

That salient features of the Genesis myth are absent from the story does not disqualify the myth as a frame of interpretation. As Helena Goscilo has pointed out (1996, 60f), Sadur provides a more orthodox rewriting of the myth in “Chervivyi synok,”<sup>53</sup> which is also part of the *Pronikshie* cycle. Here the cleaning-lady narrator resorts to a simple switch of roles in her attempt to quarrel with the old misogynistic myth: “мужчину укусила бес измены ...Укусила бы лучше женщину. Чтоб она мужчину бы растлевала, лишила бы его невинности ...” (235).<sup>54</sup> In “Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii,” I argue, the narrator is more sophisticated, and shows us the lapsarian chain of events from a woman’s point of view. Instead of placing guilt on anyone particular, she shows Natashka’s naïve and limited field of vision, and the desire that arises when she is confronted with the unknown. Desire is deprived of its stigmatization, and the moment of coercion, so often present in women’s sexual biographies, is stressed. In my view, the fact that the story repeats a series of crucial events from Genesis—female curiosity, punishment, sexual intimacy—is sufficient for my claim that the story recalls this particular myth.

### **Natashka’s Anger**

The difference of opinion about the role of anger in Natashka’s responses reflects a disagreement about where to place the emphasis. There is no doubt that Natashka’s dominant feeling for the supernatural powers, before which she is quite helpless, is the paralyzing terror of a rabbit before a predator, and that her anger does not suffice to conquer the little Redhead. In this general atmosphere of horror, I find it remarkable that Natashka at least selectively is able to free herself from this mental confinement and display both curiosity and anger.

### **General Conclusion**

The two readings described above converge in recognizing in “Milen’kii, ryzhen’kii” a story of female initiation.

Reading #1 emphasizes Natashka’s resistance to recognizing and accepting her own sexuality, even as her landlady attempts to force her into maturity. According to this interpretation, Murzik’s appearance in her

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<sup>53</sup> Literally “Worm-Eaten Sonny,” but translated by Gessen as “The Bad Seed.”

<sup>54</sup> “the man has been bitten by the demon of treachery ... It would have been better if he’d bitten the woman so she’d corrupt the man and take away his innocence ...” (253).

bedroom on a rainy night may be seen as a preliminary (gentle, non-threatening) sexual encounter whose significance Natashka refuses to acknowledge, and it is distinguished in this respect from her subsequent meeting with the more aggressive (although still physically diminutive) Cute Little Redhead, where her acknowledgement of the event enables her (immediately) to marry, at last, a full-grown man.

Reading #2 emphasizes the associations with a specific story of initiation, the biblical story of the Fall. In Sadur’s rewriting of the tale, the accent is no longer on the danger of female curiosity, but, rather, on the sexual character of the punishment: the forced intimacy with a randomly chosen man. Sadur also provides the tale with a continuation: when the heroine changes her response from curiosity to anger, she embraces a phallic sexuality and is able to leave her socially subordinate position.

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