



Cipher Me This

Signs and Symbols
by: Vladimir Nabokov

Some of the
spies
 are detached
observers,
 such are glass
surfaces
 and still
pools

Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.

The incalculable amount of
 the incalculable amount of tenderness contained
 For the fourth time in as many years they were confront-
 ed with the problem of what birthday present to bring
 a young man who was incurably deranged in his mind.
 He had no desires. Man-made objects were to him
 either hives of evil, vibrant with a malignant activity that
 he alone could perceive, or gross comforts for which
 no use could be found in his abstract world. After
 eliminating a number of articles that might offend him
 or frighten him (anything in the gadget line for instance
 was taboo), his parents chose a dainty and innocent
 trifle: a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten little
 jars. At the time of his birth they had been married
 already for a long time, a score of years had elapsed,
 and now they were quite old. Her locks of hair was
 done anyhow. She wore cheap black dresses. Unlike
 other women of her age (such as Mrs. Sol, their next-
 door neighbor, whose face was all pink and mauve
 with paint and whose hat was a cluster of brookside
 flowers), she presented a naked white countenance to
 the fault-finding light of spring days. Her husband, who
 in the old country had been a fairly successful business-
 man, was now wholly dependent on his brother Isaac,
 a real American of almost forty years standing. They
 seldom saw him and had nicknamed him "the Prince."
 That Friday everything went wrong. The underground
 train lost its life current between two stations, and for
 a quarter of an hour one could hear nothing but the
 dutiful beating of one's heart and the rustling of news-
 papers. The bus they had to take next kept them wait-
 ing for ages, and when it did come, it was crammed
 with garrulous high-school children.

amount of tenderness con-
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It was **raining hard** as they walked up the brown path leading to the sanitarium. There they waited again, and instead of their boy shuffling into the room as he usually did (his poor face blotched with acne, ill-shaven, sullen, and **confused**), a nurse they knew, and did not care for, appeared at last and brightly explained that he had again attempted to take his life. He was all right, she said, but a visit **might disturb him**. The place was so miserably understaffed, and things got mislaid or **mixed up** so easily, that they decided not to leave their present in the office but to bring it to him next time they came. She waited for her husband to open his umbrella and then took his arm. He kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way he had when he **was upset**. They reached the bus stop shelter on the other side of the street and he closed his umbrella. A few feet away, under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny **half-dead** unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle. During the long ride to the subway station, she and her husband did not exchange a word; and every time she glanced at his **old hands** (swollen, veins, brown-spotted skin), clasped and twitching upon the handle of his umbrella, she felt the mounting pressure of tears. As she looked around trying to hook her mind onto something, it gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder, to notice that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, **was weeping** on the shoulder of an older woman. Whom did that woman resemble? She resembled Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married one of the Soloveichik - in Minsk, years ago. The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of **inventiveness**; he would have succeeded, had not an **envious fellow** patient thought he was learning to fly - and stopped him.

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What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his
in world and escape. The system of his delusions had
been the subject of an elaborate paper in a scientific
is monthly, but long before that she and her husband
had puzzled it out for themselves. "Referential mania,"
Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the
patient imagines that everything happening around him
is a veiled reference to his personality and existence.
He excludes real people from the conspiracy - because
he considers himself to be so much more intelligent
than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him
wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit
to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly
detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts
are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by
darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun
flecks form pattern representing in some awful way
messages which he must intercept. Everything is a
cipher and of everything he is the theme. Some of the
spies are detached observers, such are glass surfaces
and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows,
the are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others
again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the
point of insanity; have a distorted opinion of him and
grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always
on his guard and devote every minute and module of
life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The
very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If only
the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate
surroundings - but alas it is not! With distance the
rents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility.
The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a
million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther, great
mountains of unbeatable solidity and height, sum up in
terms of granite and groaning firs the ultimate truth of
his being.

The incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the

When they emerged from the thunder and foul air of the subway, the past drizzle of the day were mixed with the street lights. She wanted to buy some fish for supper, so she handed him the basket of jelly jars, telling him to go home. He walked up to the third landing and then remembered he had given her his keys earlier in the day. In silence he sat down on the steps and in silence rose when some ten minutes later she came, heavily frodding upstairs, wanly smiling, shaking her head in deprecation of her silliness. They entered their two-room flat and he at once went to the mirror. Straining the corners of his mouth apart by means of his thumbs, with a horrible masklike grimace, he removed his new hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate and severed the long tusks of saliva connecting him to it. He read his Russian-language newspaper while she laid the table. Still reading, he ate the pale victuals that needed no teeth. She knew his moods and was also silent. When he had gone to bed, she remained in the living room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums. Across the narrow yard where the rain tinkled in the dark against some battered ash cans, windows were blandly alight and in one of them a black trousered man with his bare elbows raised could be seen lying supine on a untidy bed. She pulled the blind down and examined the photographs. As a baby he looked more surprised than most babies. From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiance fell out. Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting house front badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger.



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interacting illusions

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The incredible, emotional tenderness contained
Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, **wild-eyed** old lady, who had
lived in a **tremulous** world of bad news, bankruptcies,
train accidents, cancerous growths—until the Germans
put her to death, together with all the people she had
worried about. Age six - that was when he drew wonder-
ful birds with human hands and feet, and **suffered** from
insomnia like a grown-up man. His cousin, now a famous
chess player. He again, **aged** about eight, already
difficult to understand, **afraid** of the wallpaper in the pas-
sage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely
showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and
an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a **leafless**
tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. The **shame**,
the pity, the **humiliating difficulties**, the ugly, vicious,
backward children he was with in that special school.
And then came a time in his life, coinciding with a long
convalescence after pneumonia, when those little **phobias**
of his which his parents had stubbornly regarded as the
eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child hardened as
it were into a **dense tangle** of logically **interacting** illu-
sions, making him totally **inaccessible** to normal minds.
This, and much more, she accepted - for after all living
did mean accepting **the loss** of one joy after another, not
even joys in her case - mere possibilities of improvement.
She thought of the **endless waves** of pain that for some
reason or other she and her husband had to endure;
of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some **unimagi-
nable** fashion; of the **incalculable** amount of tenderness
contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness,
which is either **crushed**, or **wasted**, or **transformed into**
madness; of neglected children **humming** to themselves
in unswept corners; of beautiful weeds that cannot hide
from the farmer and helplessly have to watch the shadow
of his simian stoop leave **mangled flowers** in its wake, as
the **monstrous darkness** approaches.

*amount of tenderness con-
tained in the world; of the*

The incalculable amount of
 the incalculable amount of tenderness contained
 It was past midnight when from the living room she
 heard her husband ~~moan~~; and presently he ~~awakened~~
 in, wearing over his nightgown the old overcoat with
 astrakhan collar which he much preferred to the nice
 blue bathrobe he had. "I can't sleep," he cried. "Why,"
 she asked, "~~why can't you sleep?~~ You were tired." "I
 can't sleep because I am dying," he said and lay down
 on the couch. "Is it your ~~doctor's?~~ Do you want me to
 call Dr. Solov? "No doctors, no doctors," he moaned,
 "To the ~~dark earth~~ ~~doctors!~~ We must get him ~~out of here~~
 quick. Otherwise we'll be responsible. Responsible!"
 He repeated and hurled himself into a sitting position,
 both feet on the floor, thumping his forehead with his
~~open hand flat~~. "All right," she said quietly, "we shall
 bring him home tomorrow morning." "I would like some
 tea," said her husband and retired to the bathroom.
 Bending with difficulty, she retrieved some playing
 cards and a photograph of two that had shipped from
 the couch to the floor: knave of hearts, nine of spades,
 ace of spades, Elsa and her ~~bestial beau~~. He returned
 in high spirits, saying in a loud voice: "I have it all
~~figured out~~. We will give him the bedroom. Each of
 us will spend part of the night ~~near him~~ and the other
 part on this couch. By turns. We will have ~~the social~~ ~~un-~~
 see him at least twice a week. It does not matter what
 the Prince says. He won't have to say much anyway
 because it will come out ~~cheaper~~.
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representing messages

messages

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the incalculable amount of tenderness contained he
The telephone rang. It was an unusual hour for their
telephone to ring. His left slipper had come off and he
groped for it with his heel and toe as he stood in the
middle of the room, and ~~exultantly~~ ~~astonished~~ gazed at
his wife. Having more English than he did, it was she
who attended to calls. "Can I speak to Charlie," said a
girl's dull little voice. "What number you want? No. That
is ~~not the right number~~." The receiver was ~~getting~~ ~~cracked~~.
Her hand went to her old tired heart. He smiled a quick
smile and immediately resumed his excited monologue.
They would fetch him as soon as it was day. Knives
in would have to be kept in a locked drawer. Even at his
worst he presented no danger to other people. The tele-
phone rang a second time. The same ~~careless~~ ~~anxious~~
young voice asked for Charlie. "You have the incorrect
tender number. I will tell you what you are doing: you are
turning the letter O instead of the zero." They sat down
to their ~~an unexpected~~ festive midnight tea. The birthday
present stood on the table. He sipped noisily; his face
was ~~flushed~~; every now and then he imparted a circular
motion to his raised glass so as to make the sugar dis-
solve more thoroughly. The vein on the side of his bald
head where there was a large birthmark stood out con-
spicuously and, although he had shaved that morning,
a silvery bristle showed on his chin. While she poured
him another glass of tea, he put on his spectacles and re-
examined with pleasure the luminous yellow, green, red
little jars. His clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent
labels: apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He had got
or wasted to crab apple, when the telephone rang again.
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