

**Nikolai  
Dennis Wild**

4<sup>th</sup> September

Dear Mama,

You should know I had one of my attacks again. What Dr Feistelmann calls a seizure. Mama, I will explain how it happened but please understand before you become too anxious that everything has turned out just wonderfully, more so than anyone could ever, ever imagine.

My seizure happened three days after you were taken to hospital to die, Mama. Without you around to remind me, somehow I forgot to take my medications. It happened on the Monday, following my mathematics lecture. I had wandered down to the university duck pond, as a whole hour in that stuffy lecture theatre had made me feel quite dizzy. You know, Mama, how I love fresh air and open skies. It must have happened just as I reached the water's edge. I returned to consciousness lying face down with blood dripping from my forehead. The strange thing, Mama – I couldn't remember who I was. I became very agitated. To be a non-person – nameless, truly it is terrifying. I stood up and called out.

'Who am I?' The passing cockatoos screeched away as if I'd said nothing at all. I saw two ducks paddling by and called out to them.

'Who am I? Who am I?'

Again, no reply.

I stooped down and picked up a stone. I threw it at those wretched ducks, shouting once more.

'Who am I?'

No response. Not a single solitary quack. Ah! I felt so alone, Mama – a cosmic orphan – homeless, anonymous, lost. I bent down again to find another stone. It was then I saw him. A bright green frog. I grabbed him by the neck and questioned him, 'Frog, tell me, who am I?' No reply. I squeezed his neck tightly and screamed into his ugly bloated face.

'Tell me, tell me, who am I?'

And Mama, his mouth opened and I heard him croaking ...

'Goh-Goh-Goh!'

I squeezed harder.

'Goh-Goh-Goh! L-L-L-L-L-L-L!'

And harder.

'Goh-Goh L-L-L-L-L-L-L! Goh-Goh L-L-L-L-L-L-L!'

Mama, it was then I understood. This odious dying reptile was telling me I was – Gogol. Nikolai Gogol! The great Russian writer returned, reincarnated into MY very own flesh. Mama, your only son is Nikolai Gogol! A great honour for you. After so many disappointments, after all those humiliations and catastrophes at my schools and work

places, at last you can rest, Mama. You can know your son is one of the greatest writers this world has ever known.

Read on, Mama. My story becomes even more interesting. I researched in the library and found that Gogol was born in the Ukraine, that he loved to eat borscht and would often entertain his family and friends at parties by dancing in the Cossack style. Oh Mama, you know how I love beetroot soup. You remember how I danced like this as a child at our long ago family parties. Everyone would sing that old Russian ‘Tum bala, tum bala, tum balalaika’ song and I’d squat down and kick my little legs out so furiously – and once I heard Uncle Lavros say to you ‘Oy Oy, my sister, that little one, he make some crazy fool Cossack some day.’ And everybody laughed. Everybody. Ha Ha! Ha Ha!

Mama, I raised my hands to the heavens. I accepted this astounding revelation. ‘My name is Nikolai,’ I called out. ‘I am – Nikolai GOGOL – returned to planet Earth. Aaaaaa-men!’

So now, Mama, I am learning to see this world through different eyes. Everything is shifting. It feels like my old self is falling away. I am two people becoming one – a kind of miracle. Dr Feistemann would have a name for it I’m sure, but how tired I am of names. I’ve been called so many names over these past forty years. Now they are ghosts, flimsy good riddance ghosts. Now I have one name only. It is – Nikolai.

I will write again soon, Mama.  
I will. Very soon.

Your loving and only son ...

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nikolai Gogol". The letters are dark and fluid, with a distinct loop for the 'G' and a long tail for the 'l'.

11<sup>th</sup> September

Dear Mama,

Life is full of coincidences you would tell me. ‘Three is not a crowd,’ you’d say, ‘it is a coincidence’. Well, very soon after I last wrote to you something so startling happened that it was hard to believe. I had just walked across Kurrangoo Avenue on my way home from the library when I saw a large van with a trailer parked outside our house. Just before I crossed the road, who should climb out of the van but Uncle Lavros – Uncle Lavros who I’ve not seen for nearly THIRTY years – after mentioning him in my last letter to you only ONE week ago! He recognised me instantly.

‘Hey, you know me? Your Mama’s brother, Uncle Lavros. Remember?’ He looked at my book, ‘So, still reading are you, crazy boy?’

He pulled the book from me.

‘Old book this. Who was writer?’

‘I was,’ I told him. ‘I wrote this book.’

He screwed his eyes and peered at the book title, *Dead Souls*.

‘So, when you write this, crazy boy?’

I told him about one hundred and sixty years ago, when I had a different name, when I was called Nikolai.

‘Hoy,’ he said. ‘You still half-brain joker. You still have empty screw up here?’ He pointed to his head, Mama, and twisted his hair in a funny way. But not a funny way for laughing.

I never liked Uncle Lavros, Mama. When we were poor, after Father died, he never helped us, he never called round to see how we were. I decided in that moment I hated him. I hated his jokes about me being crazy boy and having half a brain. But I was polite, Mama. You always taught me to be polite. Even though I felt the anger rising from my belly, up to my chest and then to my throat, making me want to scream and scream. Instead, I took back my Nikolai Gogol book and curled my lips into a half smile. It was then his two sons, my cousins Stefan and Theo, climbed out of the van. Uncle Lavros introduced me. I nodded towards them. They said nothing, just stood smirking at me as if I was something to be pitied – as if I was contemptible in some way. I could feel my fingers clenching with rage but I held my ground, Mama – nodded my head – curled my lips one more time.

‘We drive across from Geelong last night,’ Uncle Lavros said, ‘To see my sister before she to be taken.’

‘Before she dies,’ Stefan said.

‘Before she leaves us – forever,’ said Theo.

‘And now,’ Uncle Lavros said, ‘we’ve come to collect grandmother’s – my *own* mother’s – furniture.’ He shifted his feet. He coughed and spat on the ground. ‘You people had it from beginning. Your Mama was favourite. I get nothing. Not a chair. Not a pillow. Now it comes to me. I am second child. It’s right. It’s what happen in old Greece country.’

Theo moved towards me pulling a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket. ‘We’ve got a list. Your Mama couldn’t speak but she understood. We read it out to her in hospital. She blinked twice so we know she understands.’

I didn’t know what to say, Mama. For some reason the hospital is not allowing me to visit you. Not even to telephone you. Did two blinks mean you understood? If you understood, does this mean you agreed? It was three to one – Uncle Lavros, Stefan and Theo against only me. I took the list and read:

Six dining room chairs  
Wardrobe with mirrored door  
Marble topped hallstand  
Japanese teapot  
Mahogany desk  
Great grandfather’s wheelbarrow  
Rosewood display cabinet with china plates  
Elephant’s foot umbrella stand  
Ornaments (including brass horses)  
Grandfather clock

There were more things listed but what could I do? I walked up the pathway and opened the door. Theo backed the trailer close to the veranda and they all crunched into our hallway with their big ugly boots. The first thing to go was our marble topped

hallstand, then the six dining room chairs. The dining room looked so empty. I sat in the old cane chair and watched as half of everything we owned was carried out of the house. When Theo came towards me and pointed to my chair and then to his list I shouted, 'No! No!' You remember how I used to play trains and buses on that chair, Mama? I couldn't let it go. So many memories.

Uncle Lavros heard the noise and walked up to me. 'That chair, it is my mother's. She fed me from breast when she sit in this chair. Seventy two years ago.'

'No. No,' I shouted. He looked at me with so much anger. I wanted to tell him I didn't care about his mother or his mother's breast, but before I could say a word I heard a voice inside me – so clear – 'I am Nikolai, Nikolai Gogol. A chair is nothing to Nikolai Gogol. It is nothing. Let it go, Nikolai. Let it go.'

I looked at Uncle Lavros. I looked him in the eye. 'Damn the chair,' I said, 'you can take it to hell and back for all I care.'

Twenty minutes later, Mama, their list was complete, everything was packed. The house was like a museum – full of echoes – I could hear every breath, every footstep. Stefan and Theo were outside tying ropes around the furniture, making sure it would hold when they drove back to Geelong. Uncle Lavros stretched out his hand to say goodbye. I stood up slowly and turned away from him towards the wall. I felt tears in my eyes, Mama. I didn't want him to see. I wanted to be strong. I wanted to be strong for you.

Then I heard him stop and turn. 'Aah!' he cried out. 'The icon. This is family icon, from my home village, before Australia.'

You know that old icon, Mama – the one that Father screwed to the wall above the piano just before he died – the one I could see from my bedroom when I was a child? I remember the face of that old saint looking at me through the crack in the door – Saint Nektarios with his dark eyes. How he disturbed me Mama. I never told you. I wanted him to go away and leave me alone. I had many bad dreams.

'That icon,' said Uncle Lavros, 'it is family, for my family.'

I turned towards him and oh, I was astonished. For a few seconds, everything around me looked so radiant, so bright and shining. And in that moment I saw, not Uncle Lavros, but an old man – an old man standing before that scary saint in his dusty silver frame. Sometimes I can see beyond seeing, Mama. It has happened since I was young. You called it my 'special gift'. When I looked at him I saw someone lost in memories – your brother looking back towards his own beginnings – but not understanding. Mama, not understanding how his ending was only a whisper away. I felt this in my bones. Something told me his end was near but I said nothing. He would not have understood. In an instant my hatred turned to pity. 'Uncle Lavros,' I said, 'take it. After these many years, my mother and me, we pass this holy icon on to you. For family. For *your* family.'

I could see tears in his eyes. He was overwhelmed, Mama. Then he shook his head from side to side, as if returning from a trance, and I watched as he took a screwdriver from his pocket and tried to loosen those screws. They wouldn't budge. Not even a quarter turn. Father must have done such a good job those many years ago.

'You got power drill?' Uncle Lavros asked me.

'We've got one in the shed but Mama locked it away.'

He told me that you would never come back home and I should get the keys. I remembered the old blue cupboard in the shed, where you hid all the dangerous things from me – methylated spirits, weed killer, power drill. I went into your bedroom to find the key. Ah, your bedroom was so empty. Even your bed had been taken and Stefan and Theo had thrown your precious patchwork quilt on the dirty floor. I picked it up and put

it round my shoulders. I felt you were close by, Mama. I even have it around me as I write this letter.

Mama, I found the key and went out to the shed to unlock that old blue cupboard for the first time in my life. What a surprise! The mice had been there and eaten everything they could; even the green plastic sheet you protected the power drill with had been nibbled to shreds. And the rain had made everything damp and smelly like a public toilet, even worse. I pulled the drill from beneath the sodden boxes of weed killer and polished it up with my pullover sleeve. It shone up well but it still smelled so bad, like a thousand mice had left their droppings inside. I wondered what to do, whether to go next door and ask Mr Kronig if I could borrow his new drill. Too late, Uncle Lavros was in the garden shouting.

‘Come here, crazy boy. Run, run. Bring drill. Now, now.’

So I took it to him, Mama, and he climbed up on the piano stool whilst I plugged the cable into the socket by the fire. Uncle Lavros put an attachment into the drill and placed it into the screw just near Saint Nektarios’ halo. It was then he flicked the switch on the drill and, Mama, there was a huge orange and yellow flash, and such a crack, Mama, like a whip, and Uncle Lavros was thrown backwards and landed on the floor with such a horrible thud, the smouldering icon lying by his side.

Oh, Mama. Oh, Mama, he is kaput. Truly he is gone. Uncle Lavros was lying at my feet, kicking and twitching and then so very still – dead. There was a big panic, telephone calls and Theo and Stefan banging on his chest and blowing into his mouth, his lips all purple then blue. As the ambulance men wheeled him away I heard the police saying the power drill was a dynamite stick waiting to happen, that it was so corroded they wondered how it held together in one piece. Theo cried, Mama. He sobbed like a baby. Stefan walked up to me and put a fist in my face. He cursed me, Mama. He cursed me in the old language. The police had to pull him away. Theo joined in from the hallway, yelling and cursing: it was like a madhouse. Truly, our home, it was like a madhouse.

When they left I kicked the icon under the piano. Mama, I know I shouldn’t have done this. Saint Nektarios was a good man. I remember the stories you told about him, how he helped the poor and sick, but it had all gone so wrong, so very wrong. I slammed the icon with my foot. ‘Two’s a crowd,’ I said and watched it disappear beneath the piano.

Mama, don’t be shocked. He was only there for a day and a night. Yesterday I placed your icon back on top of the piano. The frame is melted along one side but besides this it is still recognisably your own special saint, though he’s more sombre now, there’s more sadness in his eyes, more sorrow.

This is my news. And now I will go to the kitchen and make a coffee the way you liked it – lots of sugar – dark and gritty. But no cakes. Our pantry is bare. How I miss your cooking my own sweet, sweet Mama.

Your only son



16<sup>th</sup> September

Dear Mama,

I'm reading *Dead Souls*, a book I wrote many years ago. I must reread it now to discover how I used to think. I have forgotten so much. And what have I found in these precious pages? That I had such a mind, so imaginative he is, this Nikolai son of yours. My *Dead Souls*, truly it is an epic, a work of true and sublime genius. Oh, you must be proud, Mama. Even though you can't speak as you read these words, you must feel a song of thankfulness deep inside, for truly I have aspired to greatness. And yet, and yet ...

... today, as he sits beneath your beautiful quilt, Mama, your only son feels so lost and alone. At night he's woken by bad dreams. Huge flashes he sees, Uncle Lavros falling to the floor moaning and choking, a smell of hideous burning. Your Nikolai, Mama—he feels Stefan's fist pushed hard up against his face – your very own Nikolai. Such vivid and scary dreams.

So many tears, Mama. Why is this world so full of tears? When will life turn a corner? *My* life? A *good* corner? When will your Nikolai's own dead soul spring to life once more? Please pray to your special saint, Mama. To the one who helped me those many times when everything seemed so impossible and beyond repair. Please pray for a turning – for a season of hope and new beginnings – without tears.

Your loving son



**P.S.**

**1:17 a.m.** No stars tonight. Only the moon. Tonight she looks so distracted, almost desperate – as if she wants to tumble down from the sky and roll all the way to our front door – as if she wants to tell me something URGENT.

I remember your fairy tales, Mama, your wonderful fairy tales. 'The moon is so high,' you told me, 'she can see EVERYTHING, even into the FUTURE.'

Tonight I hear her calling in her silvery voice, 'Danger! Danger!' Who is she speaking to? What is this DANGER? Or is it another word she's calling? Moon language is never too easy to understand. It has such a long way to travel.

**2:22 a.m.** Why do we only have *one* moon? *One* is such a cruel number. Why only *one* moon, Mama? I can see her through the branches of our frangipani tree – alone – suspended in the deep, dark endlessness of night.

**2:55 a.m.** When you are gone, Mama, after you are buried, I'll write to the moon. I'll tell her everything. I'll tell her more than I ever told Dr Feistemann. I'll explain to her my latest mathematical theories, I'll write down my new equations concerning irrational numbers and with these I'll prove to her that the planet Neptune sits at the very centre of our universe. Although I think she understands this already. She is so wise.

Oh and, Mama, I'll ask the moon to look out for our cat, Yelena, who vanished a week ago. How thin she was, every day thinner and thinner until the day of my

birthday when she disappeared and never returned. No goodbye. No nod of the head. Not a telltale squint in her Siamese eyes.

**3:17 a.m.** My friends – only you and the moon, Mama. Only you and la luna, moona, moona.

**3:74 a.mm.** Soooooo tired. I want to sleep but canott. Quiet now – the moon. She nothing to say ...

**44:95 a.moon.** ... nothig morr. She nothig to say.

22<sup>nd</sup> September

Dear Mama,

The new beginning is come. Your prayers have been answered – in this little corner of the world – a season of miracles. Oh listen, Mama, listen.

I ran a computer search and discovered a blog site titled *I wish I could go back in time so I could marry Nikolai Gogol and have his babies*. Can you imagine this? I felt goose bumps all over. I sent an email. I told Svetlana, who writes this online diary, that I'm back – that I, Nikolai, am alive and writing and living in Australia. At first, Mama, she didn't believe me but I persisted, sent many emails. Oh, such emails Mama. Such writerly and poetic emails. Eventually she started asking me questions. Most of these questions were about money but I realised a young Russian woman needs to be mindful of such things. She sent a photograph. Oh my, so beautiful – her hair, her eyes, her lips. In one message she wrote, 'I am thirty years and still sexual virgin. If we to marry can this offend you?' I said no. I told her that I'm a man of the world and understand how these things can happen, even to the most innocent and upstanding of Russian girls. You would have been proud of me, my own dying and virtuous Mama.

This is our plan. We will be married on the twenty sixth of October, the day of my final lecture. Svetlana's flight arrives at midday, just enough time to climb into a taxi and be driven to my university.

She will fly into Adelaide wearing a Ukrainian peasant wedding dress studded with 947 Siberian diamonds. She says Nikolai Gogol's wife deserves nothing less. Yesterday I transferred a bank loan of \$160,000 to Svetlana against the estimated value of our family home, enough to allow her to buy such a costume.

Mama, please don't worry about the money. Svetlana says this dress can be sold for three times the price in Australia. We'll be married and we'll be rich. Very stinking bourgeois rich, Svetlana says. And Mama, she says that her brother owns a little workshop outside St Petersburg which repairs broken icons. He was a monk but left his monastery to dedicate his life to painting and restoring church icons that were damaged by the Communists. She says we can post your icon to Dimitri after our honeymoon and he will repair it for free as a wedding gift. Oh, so much happiness, so many blessings. And, Mama, Svetlana says to keep all our plans secret, very secret. Not to tell a soul. But I must tell you. How can I not tell you? Please, Mama, please – not a whisper. This must be our final, final secret.

The twenty sixth of October falls on a Tuesday, Mama. Svetlana will arrive at lecture's end – our very first meeting. She will walk into the lecture theatre wearing her magnificent dress. Imagine that, Mama. What a sight! It is then I will stand and confess to my lecturers and to all my fellow students that I have fooled them all along – that really I am the illustrious Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, and that this majestically sparkling Svetlana is to become my wife. After this we will walk down to the lake together and scatter rose-petals on the waters in memory of that green frog I told you about in my first letter. This is Svetlana's idea. Such a compassionate heart she has. So loving to all creatures, dead or alive.

So now, my dearest Mama, in these your final days, you can rest peacefully knowing your son will be alone no longer. He is to be married to a very clever and oh so beautiful Russian woman called Svetlana Nataliya Zuprachenko.

To you, Mama – gigantic (Russian) hugs

From your favourite and only (and medication-free) loving son

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nikolai Gogol". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The word "Nikolai" is on the top line, and "Gogol" is on the bottom line, with a long horizontal stroke underlining the "G" and extending across the width of the signature.