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Vladimir
Nabokov
The Defense



The Defense

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vladimir Nabokov was born in St Petersburg in 1899, the elder son of an aristocratic, cultured, politically liberal family. When the Bolsheviks seized power the family left Russia and moved first to London, then to Berlin, where Nabokov rejoined them in 1922, after having completed his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. Between 1923 and 1940 he published novels, short stories, plays, poems and translations in the Russian language and was recognized as one of the outstanding writers of the emigration. In 1940 he and his wife and son moved to America, where he was a lecturer at Wellesley College from 1941 to 1948. He was then Professor of Russian Literature at Cornell University until he retired from teaching in 1959. His first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, was published in 1941 and his best-known novel *Lolita* brought him worldwide fame. In 1973 he was awarded the American National Medal for Literature. He died in 1977 in Montreux, Switzerland.

His works include, from the Russian novels, *The Defense* and *The Gift*; from the English novels, *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada or Ardor*; the autobiographical *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Beheading*; translations of *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian and *Eugene Onegin* into English; and lectures on literature. All of the fiction and *Speak, Memory* are published in Penguin.

Nabokov is one of the great writers of the twentieth century. As Martin Amis has written, 'the variety, force and richness of Nabokov's perceptions have not even the palest rival in modern fiction. To read him in full flight is to experience stimulation that is at once intellectual, imaginative and aesthetic, the nearest thing to pure sensual pleasure that prose can offer.'

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VLADIMIR NABOKOV

The Defense

*Translated from the Russian by Michael Scammell in
collaboration with the author*



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To Véra

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Foreword

The Russian title of this novel is *Zashchita Luzhina*, which means ‘the Luzhin defense’ and refers to a chess defense supposedly invented by my creature, Grandmaster Luzhin: the name rhymes with ‘illusion’ if pronounced thickly enough to deepen the ‘u’ into ‘oo.’ I began writing it in the spring of 1929, at Le Boulou – a small spa in the Pyrenées Orientales where I was hunting butterflies – and finished it the same year in Berlin. I remember with special limpidity a sloping slab of rock, in the ulex- and ilex-clad hills, where the main thematic idea of the book first came to me. Some curious additional information might be given if I took myself more seriously.

Zashchita Luzhina under my pen name, ‘V. Sirin,’ ran in the émigré Russian quarterly *Sovremennye Zapiski* (Paris) and immediately afterwards was brought out in book form by the émigré publishing house Slovo (Berlin, 1930). That paper-bound edition, 234 pp., 21 by 14 cm., jacket a solid dull black with gilt lettering, is now rare and may grow even rarer.

Poor Luzhin has had to wait thirty-five years for an English-language edition. True, there was a promising flurry in the late thirties when an American publisher showed interest in it, but he turned out to belong to the type of publisher who dreams of becoming a male muse to his author, and our brief conjunction ended abruptly upon his suggesting I replace chess by music and make Luzhin a demented violinist.

Rereading this novel today, replaying the moves of its plot, I feel rather like Anderssen fondly recalling his sacrifice of both Rooks to the unfortunate and noble Kieseritsky – who is doomed to accept it over and over again through an infinity of textbooks, with a question

mark for monument. My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity. In this connection, I would like to spare the time and effort of hack reviewers – and, generally, persons who move their lips when reading and cannot be expected to tackle a dialogueless novel when so much can be gleaned from its Foreword – by drawing their attention to the first appearance of the frosted-window theme (associated with Luzhin's suicide, or rather sui-mate) as early as Chapter Eleven, or to the pathetic way my morose grandmaster remembers his professional journeys not in terms of sunburst luggage labels and magic-lantern shots but in terms of the tiles in different hotel bathrooms and corridor toilets – that floor with the white and blue squares where he found and scanned from his throne imaginary continuations of the match game in progress; or a teasingly asymmetrical, commercially called 'agate,' pattern with a Knight move of three harlequin colors interrupting here and there the neutral tint of the otherwise regularly checkered linoleum between Rodin's 'Thinker' and the door; or certain large glossy-black and yellow rectangles whose H-file was painfully cut off by the ocher vertical of the hot-water pipe; or that palatial water closet on whose lovely marble flags he recognized, intact, the shadowy figurations of the exact position he had brooded upon, chin on fist, one night many years ago. But the chess effects I planted are distinguishable not only in these separate scenes; their concatenation can be found in the basic structure of this attractive novel. Thus toward the end of Chapter Four an unexpected move is made by me in a corner of the board, sixteen years elapse in the course of one paragraph, and Luzhin, suddenly promoted to seedy manhood and transferred to a German resort, is discovered at a garden table, pointing out with his cane a remembered hotel window (not the last glass square in his life) and talking to somebody (a woman, if we judge by the handbag on the iron table) whom we do

not meet till Chapter Six. The retrospective theme begun in Chapter Four shades now into the image of Luzhin's late father, whose own past is taken up in Chapter Five when he, in his turn, is perceived recalling his son's early chess career and stylizing it in his mind so as to make of it a sentimental tale for the young. We switch back to the Kurhaus in Chapter Six and find Luzhin still fiddling with the handbag and still addressing his blurry companion whereupon she unblurs, takes it away from him, mentions Luzhin senior's death, and becomes a distinct part of the design. The entire sequence of moves in these three central chapters reminds one – or should remind one – of a certain type of chess problem where the point is not merely the finding of a mate in so many moves, but what is termed 'retrograde analysis,' the solver being required to prove from a back-cast study of the diagram position that Black's last move *could not* have been castling or *must* have been the capture of a white Pawn *en passant*.

It is unnecessary to enlarge, in this elementary Foreword, on the more complex aspects of my chessmen and lines of play. But the following must be said. Of all my Russian books, *The Luzhin Defense* contains and diffuses the greatest 'warmth' – which may seem odd seeing how supremely abstract chess is supposed to be. In point of fact, Luzhin has been found lovable even by those who understand nothing about chess and/or detest all my other books. He is uncouth, unwashed, uncomely – but as my gentle young lady (a dear girl in her own right) so quickly notices, there is something in him that transcends both the coarseness of his gray flesh and the sterility of his recondite genius.

In the Prefaces I have been writing of late for the English-language editions of my Russian novels (and there are more to come) I have made it a rule to address a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation. The present Foreword shall not be an exception. Analysts and analyzed will enjoy, I hope, certain details of the treatment Luzhin is subjected to after his breakdown (such as the curative insinuation that a chess player sees Mom in his Queen and Pop in his opponent's King), and the little Freudian who mistakes a Pixlok set for the key to a novel will no doubt continue to identify

Foreword

my characters with his comic-book notion of my parents, sweet-hearts and serial selves. For the benefit of such sleuths I may as well confess that I gave Luzhin my French governess, my pocket chess set, my sweet temper, and the stone of the peach I plucked in my own walled garden.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Montreux

Dec. 15, 1963

I

What struck him most was the fact that from Monday on he would be Luzhin. His father – the real Luzhin, the elderly Luzhin, the writer of books – left the nursery with a smile, rubbing his hands (already smeared for the night with transparent cold cream), and with his suede-slipped evening gait padded back to his bedroom. His wife lay in bed. She half raised herself and said: ‘Well, how did it go?’ He removed his gray dressing gown and replied: ‘We managed. Took it calmly. *Ouf*. . . that’s a real weight off my shoulders.’ ‘How nice . . .’ said his wife, slowly drawing the silk blanket over her. ‘Thank goodness, thank goodness . . .’

It was indeed a relief. The whole summer – a swift country summer consisting in the main of three smells: lilac, new-mown hay, and dry leaves – the whole summer they had debated the question of when and how to tell him, and they had kept putting it off so that it dragged on until the end of August. They had moved around him in apprehensively narrowing circles, but he had only to raise his head and his father would already be rapping with feigned interest on the barometer dial, where the hand always stood at storm, while his mother would sail away somewhere into the depths of the house, leaving all the doors open and forgetting the long, messy bunch of bluebells on the lid of the piano. The stout French governess who used to read *The Count of Monte Cristo* aloud to him (and interrupt her reading in order to exclaim feelingly ‘poor, poor Dantès!’) proposed to the parents that she herself take the bull by the horns, though this bull inspired mortal fear in her. Poor, poor Dantès did not arouse any sympathy in him, and observing her educational sigh he merely slitted his eyes and rived his drawing paper

with an eraser, as he tried to portray her protuberant bust as horribly as possible.

Many years later, in an unexpected year of lucidity and enchantment, it was with swooning delight that he recalled these hours of reading on the veranda, buoyed up by the sough of the garden. The recollection was saturated with sunshine and the sweet, inky taste of the sticks of licorice, bits of which she used to hack off with blows of her penknife and persuade him to hold under his tongue. And the tacks he had once placed on the wickerwork seat destined, with crisp, crackling sounds, to receive her obese croup were in retrospect equivalent with the sunshine and the sounds of the garden, and the mosquito fastening onto his skinned knee and blissfully raising its rufescent abdomen. A ten-year-old boy knows his knees well, in detail – the itchy swelling that had been scabbled till it bled, the white traces of fingernails on the suntanned skin, and all those scratches which are the appended signatures of sand grains, pebbles and sharp twigs. The mosquito would fly away, evading his slap; the governess would request him not to fidget; in a frenzy of concentration, baring his uneven teeth – which a dentist in St Petersburg had braced with platinum wire – and bending his head with its heliced crown, he scratched and scraped at the bitten place with all five fingers – and slowly, with growing horror, the governess stretched toward the open drawing book, toward the unbelievable caricature.

‘No, I’d better tell him myself,’ replied Luzhin senior uncertainly to her suggestion. ‘I’ll tell him later, let him write his dictations in peace. “Being born in this world is hardly to be borne,”’ Luzhin senior dictated steadily, strolling back and forth about the school-room. ‘Being born in this world is hardly to be borne.’ And his son wrote, practically lying on the table and baring his teeth in their metallic scaffolding, and simply left blanks for the words ‘born’ and ‘borne.’ Arithmetic went better; there was mysterious sweetness in the fact that a long number, arrived at with difficulty, would at the decisive moment, after many adventures, be divided by nineteen without any remainder.

He was afraid, Luzhin senior, that when his son learned why the founders of Russia, the completely featureless Sineus and Truvor,

were necessary, as well as the table of Russian words taking the letter 'yat' and the principal rivers of Russia, the child would go into the same tantrum as had happened two years before, when, slowly and heavily, to the sound of creaking stairs, crackling floorboards and shifting trunks, filling the whole house with her presence, the French governess had first appeared. But nothing of the kind occurred now; he listened calmly; and when his father, trying to pick out the most interesting and attractive details, said among other things that he would be called by his surname as grown-ups are called, the son blushed, began to blink, threw himself supine on his pillow, opening his mouth and rolling his head ('Don't squirm like that,' said his father apprehensively, noting his confusion and expecting tears), but did not break into tears and instead buried his face in the pillow, making bursting sounds with his lips into it, and suddenly rising – crumpled, warm, with glistening eyes – he asked rapidly whether at home, too, they would call him Luzhin.

And now, on this dull, tense day, on the way to the station to catch the St Petersburg train, Luzhin senior, sitting next to his wife in the open carriage, looked at his son and was ready to smile immediately if the latter should turn his stubbornly averted face toward him, and wondered what had caused the boy suddenly to become so 'stiffish,' as his wife expressed it. He sat opposite them on the front seat, wrapped in a dark woolen tweed cloak, wearing a sailor cap which was set askew but which no one on earth would have dared to straighten now, and looked aside at the thick birch trunks spinning past along a ditch that was full of their leaves.

'Aren't you cold?' asked his mother when the road turned toward the river and a gust of wind set up a downy ripple in the gray bird's wing of her hat. 'Yes, I am,' said her son, looking at the river. His mother with a mewling sound was about to reach out and arrange his cloak, but noticing the look in his eye she swiftly snatched her hand back and merely indicated with a twiddle of her fingers in mid-air: 'Close it up, close it tighter.' The boy did not stir. Pursing her lips to unstick her *voilette* from her mouth – a constant gesture, almost a tic – she looked at her husband with a silent request for support. He was also wearing a woolen cloak; his hands encased in thick gloves rested

on a plaid traveling rug which sloped down gently to form a valley and then slightly rose again, as far as the waist of little Luzhin. 'Luzhin,' said his father with forced jollity, 'eh, Luzhin?' and tenderly nudged his son with his leg beneath the rug. Luzhin withdrew his knees. Here come the peasant log cabins, their roofs thickly overgrown with bright moss, here comes the familiar old signpost with its half-erased inscription (the name of the village and the number of its 'souls') and here comes the village well, with its bucket, black mud and a white-legged peasant woman. Beyond the village the horses climbed the hill at a walk and behind them, below, appeared the second carriage in which, sitting squeezed together, came the governess and the housekeeper, who hated one another. The driver smacked his lips and the horses again broke into a trot. In the colorless sky a crow flew slowly over the stubble.

The station was about a mile and a half from the manor, at a point where the road, after passing smoothly and resonantly through a fir wood, cut across the St Petersburg highway and flowed farther, across the rails, beneath a barrier and into the unknown. 'If you like you can work the puppets,' said Luzhin senior ingratiatingly when his son jumped out of the carriage and fixed his eyes on the ground, moving his neck which the wool of his cloak irritated. He silently took the proffered ten-kopeck coin. The governess and the housekeeper crawled ponderously out of the second carriage, one to the right and the other to the left. Father took off his gloves. Mother, disengaging her veil, kept an eye on the barrel-chested porter who was gathering up their traveling rugs. A sudden wind raised the horses' manes and dilated the driver's crimson sleeves.

Finding himself alone on the station platform, Luzhin walked toward the glass case where five little dolls with pendent bare legs awaited the impact of a coin in order to come to life and revolve; but today their expectation was in vain for the machine turned out to be broken and the coin was wasted. Luzhin waited a while and then turned and walked to the edge of the tracks. To the right a small girl sat on an enormous bale eating a green apple, her elbow propped in her palm. To the left stood a man in gaiters with a riding stick in his hand, looking at the distant fringe of the forest, whence in a few

minutes would appear the train's harbinger – a puff of white smoke. In front of him, on the other side of the tracks, beside a tawny, second-class car without wheels that had taken root in the ground and turned into a permanent human dwelling, a peasant was chopping firewood. Suddenly all this was obscured by a mist of tears, his eyelids burned, it was impossible to bear what was about to happen – Father with a fan of tickets in his hands, Mother counting their baggage with her eyes, the train rushing in, the porter placing the steps against the car platform to make it easier to mount. He looked around. The little girl was eating her apple; the man in gaiters was staring into the distance; everything was calm. As if on a stroll he walked to the end of the station platform and then began to move very fast; he ran down some stairs, and there was a beaten footpath, the stationmaster's garden, a fence, a wicket gate, fir trees – then a small ravine and immediately after that a dense wood.

At first he ran straight through the wood, brushing against swishing ferns and slipping on reddish lily-of-the-valley leaves – and his cap hung at the back of his neck, held only by its elastic, his knees were hot in the woolen stockings already donned for city wear, he cried while running, lisping childish curses when a twig caught him across the forehead – and finally he came to a halt and, panting, squatted down on his haunches, so that the cloak covered his legs.

Only today, on the day of their annual move from country to city, on a day which in itself was never sweet, when the house was full of drafts and you envied so much the gardener who was not going anywhere, only today did he realize the full horror of the change that his father had spoken of. Former autumn returns to the city now seemed happiness. His daily morning walks with the governess – always along the same streets, along the Nevsky and back home, by way of the Embankment, would never be repeated. Happy walks. Sometimes she had suggested to him they begin with the Embankment, but he had always refused – not so much because he had liked the habitual from earliest childhood as because he was unbearably afraid of the cannon at the Peter and Paul Fortress, of the huge thunderlike percussion that made the windowpanes in the houses rattle and was capable of bursting one's eardrum – and he always contrived (by

means of imperceptible maneuvers) to be on the Nevsky at twelve o'clock, as far as possible from the cannon – whose shot, if he had changed the order of his walk, would have overtaken him right by the Winter Palace. Finished also were his agreeable after-lunch musings on the sofa, beneath the tiger rug, and at the stroke of two, his milk in a silver cup, giving it such a precious taste, and at the stroke of three, a turn in the open landau. In exchange for all this came something new, unknown and therefore hideous, an impossible, unacceptable world where there would be five lessons from nine to three and a crowd of boys still more frightening than those who just recently, on a July day, here in the country, right on the bridge, had surrounded him, aimed tin pistols at him and fired at him sticklike projectiles whose rubber suction cups had perfidiously been pulled off.

The wood was still and damp. Having cried his fill, he played for a while with a beetle nervously moving its feelers, and then had quite a time crushing it beneath a stone as he tried to repeat the initial, juicy crunch. Presently he noticed that it had begun to drizzle. Then he got up from the ground, found a familiar footpath and, stumbling over roots, started to run with vague vengeful thoughts of getting back to the manor: he would hide there, he would spend the winter there, subsisting on cheese and jam from the pantry. The footpath meandered for ten minutes or so through the wood, descended to the river, which was all covered with circles from the raindrops, and five minutes later there hove into sight the sawmill, its footbridge where you sank in up to the ankles in sawdust, and the path upward, and then – through the bare lilac bushes – the house. He crept along the wall, saw that the drawing-room window was open, climbed up by the drainpipe onto the green, peeling cornice and rolled over the windowsill. Once inside the drawing room, he stopped and listened. A daguerreotype of his maternal grandfather – black sidewhiskers, violin in hand – stared down at him, but then completely vanished, dissolving in the glass, as soon as he regarded the portrait from one side – a melancholy amusement that he never omitted when he entered the drawing room. Having thought for a moment and moved his upper lip, which caused the platinum wire on his front teeth to travel freely up and down, he cautiously opened the door, wincing at

the sound of the vibrant echo which had too hastily occupied the house upon the departure of its owners, and then darted along the corridor and thence up the stairs into the attic. The attic was a special one, with a small window through which one could look down at the staircase, at the brown gleam of its balustrade that curved gracefully lower down and vanished in the penumbra. The house was absolutely quiet. A little later, from downstairs, from his father's study, came the muffled ring of a telephone. The ringing continued with intervals for quite a while. Then again there was silence.

He settled himself on a box. Next to it was a similar case, but open and with books in it. A lady's bicycle, the green net of its rear wheel torn, stood on its head in the corner, between an unplanned board propped against the wall and an enormous trunk. After a few minutes Luzhin grew bored, as when one's throat is wrapped in flannel and one is forbidden to go out. He touched the gray dusty books in the open box, leaving black imprints on them. Besides books there was a shuttlecock with one feather, a large photograph (of a military band), a cracked chessboard, and some other not very interesting things.

In this way an hour went by. Suddenly he heard the noise of voices and the whine of the front door. Taking a cautious look through the little window he saw below his father, who like a young boy ran up the stairs and then, before reaching the landing, descended swiftly again, throwing his knees out on either side. The voices below were now clear: the butler's, the coachman's, the watchman's. A minute later the staircase again came to life; this time his mother came quickly up it, hitching up her skirt, but she also stopped short of the landing, leaning, instead, over the balustrade, and then swiftly, with arms spread out, she went down again. Finally, after another minute had passed, they all went up in a posse – his father's bald head glistened, the bird on his mother's hat swayed like a duck on a troubled pond, and the butler's gray crew cut bobbed up and down; at the rear, leaning at every moment over the balustrade, came the coachman, the watchman, and for some reason the milkmaid Akulina, and finally a black-bearded peasant from the water mill, future inhabitant of future nightmares. It was he, as the strongest, who carried Luzhin down from the attic to the carriage.

Luzhin senior, the Luzhin who wrote books, often thought of how his son would turn out. Through his books (and they all, except for a forgotten novel called *Fumes*, were written for boys, youths and high school students and came in sturdy colorful covers) there constantly flitted the image of a fair-haired lad, 'headstrong,' 'brooding,' who later turned into a violinist or a painter, without losing his moral beauty in the process. The barely perceptible peculiarity that distinguished his son from all those children who, in his opinion, were destined to become completely unremarkable people (given that such people exist) he interpreted as the secret stir of talent, and bearing firmly in mind the fact that his deceased father-in-law had been a composer (albeit a somewhat arid one and susceptible, in his mature years, to the doubtful splendors of virtuosity), he more than once, in a pleasant dream resembling a lithograph, descended with a candle at night to the drawing room where a *Wunderkind*, dressed in a white nightshirt that came down to his heels, would be playing on an enormous, black piano.

It seemed to him that everybody ought to see how exceptional his son was; it seemed to him that strangers, perhaps, could make better sense of it than he himself. The school he had selected for his son was particularly famous for the attention it paid to the so-called 'inner' life of its pupils, and for its humaneness, thoughtfulness, and friendly insight. Tradition had it that during the early part of its existence the teachers had played with the boys during the long recess: the physics master, looking over his shoulder, would squeeze a lump of snow into a ball; the mathematics master would get a hard little ball in the ribs as he made a run in *lapta* (Russian baseball); and even the headmaster