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The Domsday Button

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In grandfather's garage did Savely find a button, which upon pressing hard enough could destroy the entire world. Happened it thusly:

Savely had a childhood → this childhood was given him by his parents → someone amongst these parents also had parents, at least several, one of them being by coincidence Savely's grandfather → this grandfather had a village, or rather he lived there, meaning in some sense he belonged to the village → as did a garage, which belonged both to the village and to grandfather, an enormous-ginormous garagery, a garagello even, one might say → in this grandfather's garagello everything there could be found and everything could be lost → but Savely was no fool, lost nothing, found lots, including this very button.

The button was dusty, red, round, or rather "cylindrical", attached to a rust-coloured base: clearly no one had used it for ages. However, upon the button itself were scratches, notches, knots and splinters, worn and smoothed edges, indicating that once upon a time it had indeed been most actively used. To press it Savely hadn't the strength. He even placed it on the dusty concrete floor and stepped on it — didn't work, jumped on it — effect zero. Perhaps, he thought, probably-presumably,

only a grown-up would have strength enough to press it. When he grows up he'll press it proper, but for now... for now circumstances had thus arranged themselves.

You see, the button had surroundings: old televisions, radio receivers, video players, gramophones, jars of nails, bolts and nuts, originals of great masters' paintings, fishing tackle, an old rusty Moskvich "Combi" without wheels, separately wheels, tyres, carburettors, jerry cans of petrol, paraffin, spirits, sulphuric acid, dozens of crates with all manner of thingamajigs. In one of them, this button lay amongst other uncatalogueable items, which grandfather, by virtue of possessing an uncountable quantity of objects, the limited space of house, and free time in retirement, piled and dumped in the garage and successfully forgot. So at least thought Savely; grandfather remembered everything though: his memory was remarkable.

Grandfather was a poet-mechanic, kept a diary where he wrote down how to fix automobiles and poems, but the poems themselves he wrote nowhere — he memorised them. To recall them, he'd drink a shot or two or three, stand before guests at his birthday party, and for several hours recite from memory. He did it with no scratch, notch, knot, or splinter, though somewhat worn and smoothed, indicating that these poems had indeed been mostly actively used.

— Poems, — grandfather would say, — are like a carburettor from a motor-tiller, a Soviet one, unfixable. All you can do is pour oil on the fire and wait. Perhaps it'll blaze up and the bugger will start. Same thing

with motor-tillers, — grandfather would say, and then go to the garage, bring out from there a real actual carburettor from a motor-tiller, all black, oily, stinking like the oil depot nearby, and tell about why amphibrach and iambic trimeter are worse than anapaest, how everything worked without lumbago and senile short-sightedness, and with larger, bottomless engine capacity.

For little Savely, not yet possessing a sufficient dose of consciousness, entry to grandfather's garage was strictly-utterly forbidden. What if he'd hurt himself, the little lad? What if he'd climb somewhere, get stuck, drink petrol, paraffin, spirits or sulphuric acid, knock a crate with his little foot, end up under an avalanche of the uncatalogueable? In a word, dangerous. Such things are not for children; children are the flowers of life, they must be watered, raised with no knot, no notch, no splinter, no scratch, notch. Well never mind, thought Savely, when I grow up I'll get into the garage and find everything there, even the button I so want to press... but for now... for now one must grow... nothing can be done, one can only wait, sit on/in one's pot like a flower of life, until bloom.

And so we come full circle and return to the moment when Savely had grown a little, gathered courage to climb without permission into the dangerous garage and found the dangerous button. With it he'd become "somebody", cock of the walk in the village, a character exponentially interesting. Everyone wanted to be friends only with the interesting ones, and with the uninteresting they didn't. Friendship is essentially the cultivation of mutual trust through exchange of interestingnesses,

including interesting time. Savely had nothing of the sort: no ball, no bicycle, no games console, no pistols, even toy ones — nothing, not even interesting time. It was as if he himself didn't even exist. But now, look — he existed, and not just existed, but with a button, a buttonzilla, one that not a single flower of life in the vicinity possessed. So he walked about with it demonstrating to everyone, saying look what proper button I have, at the sight of which you have no choice but to forge with me a firm friendship for ages eternal.

— Blimey, — his peers marvelled. — That's quite a contraption.

— I'll say! A thingamabob.

— That's a device alright!

— Nothing more interesting have I seen in my nine years of life!

Throughout all the summer holidays whilst Savely spent time in the village, almost every day one of them would come as a pilgrim to grandfather's garden, to the vegetable patch, to the surrounding area, to meet there with Savely and his mysterious rusty button. Pressing — even touching — the button was strictly-utterly forbidden due to its external decrepitude and wear, for who knows — it might break. In that case, the punishment could be as severe as a thrown nail or a wooden block, a good thrash with a belt, a swearsy poem about vices of childhood, mandatory weeding of the vegetable patch, for you shouldn't, lad, take grandfather's things without asking.

See, Grandfather was kind but strict, with a poet's soul, a mechanic's heart, a poet-mechanic's body, fair but intolerant of mischief of such ilk, tomfoolery, hooliganism, childish schemes of degenerate suits. Frowning, bushy eyebrows bunching together, he observed the crowds of small fry idly gallivanting about his modest domain. The friendless grandson suddenly with friends, not bad. Savely, besides childhood, grandfather, village, now indeed also had friendship: ball games (one ball for all ball-based entertainments, be it football, volleyball, basketball), guided walks in the forest, gathering of edible berries, watching cartoons on the big neighbour's telly, sly glances from pigtailheaded girlfriends, firm handshakes from aspiring young lads, access to the treehouse, and another couple-triple thousand-million words about exchanges of interestingnesses, all thanks to the rusty button.

Grandfather, however, remembered everything, about his garagello, the crates with the uncatalogueable untouchable, and about the button. Thus it happened, he needed it right now, urgently-importantly: whether a poem wouldn't write, the rhyme refused to lie down, or the vodka had run out, or life had become loathsome, or the motor-tiller wouldn't start in the morning, or the news from the television suddenly became such that clear understanding came — time to press. A day he spent in the garage, rummaging in crates, in cupboards, on shelves, in jerry cans, combed through the rubbish bin, the house, the banya, the garden, the vegetable patch, every corner, every crack in the oak floorboards. Upon such a thorough inspection, he confirmed the

button's absence, wasn't thrilled by such a metaphorical blow, accumulated suspicions, mustered Savely in for a reckoning.

— Grandson, tell me now, young lad, have you been in my garagello?

— Haven't been, never, not once. What are you saying, grandfather, I know perfectly well — it's forbidden... Has something happened?

— Not yet. From my entire catalogue I cannot locate in its place but one single item.

— I can help look for it, my dear, beloved grandfather.

Grandfather frowned; grandson trembled, from within, absolutely invisibly, only his neck seized up, the back of his head tensed, as if his spine had weakened.

— Haven't you seen, my grandson, an old button? It's dusty, red, round, or rather "cylindrical", attached to a rust-coloured base, couple of scratches, notches, knots and splinters, worn and smoothed is one of its edges.

Savely only shook his head.

— Haven't seen and haven't taken?

— I haven't seen such a thing. And haven't taken it, what are you saying, grandfather. I? — never.

— This button, Savely, is very important. This button is the doomsday

button. If you press it — that's it, curtains, kaput, complete *corps de ballet*, fiasco and tragedy: for you, for me, for your friends and girlfriends who gallivant here — for everyone and everything at once proper the end, all earthly and essential will sink into Lethe.

— What are you saying, grandfather, how awful. I definitely didn't take such a thing. I'm not even allowed in the garagello...

— You watch yourself... If you took it, I'll sell you to the gypsies, to their camp or circus, and they'll take you, put you in a carriage, take you abroad, for why do I need such-and-such a grandson-thief?

— What are you saying, grandfather...

— You watch yourself, lad... Someone climbed into my garagello, someone found my button. Maybe it was one of those little rascals? You brought them here after all — your pigtailheaded girlfriends, aspiring young lads, all this contingent of yours. If they climbed into my garage — then we must call the police.

— No, what are you saying, grandfather, no need for police, it's definitely something else, it's definitely not them, they're decent, not such-and-such, not thieves, not one bit.

— Ask them, maybe someone's seen my button. I can ask them. Bring them here.

— No need to ask them, grandfather. Maybe you just don't remember it. You are old after all, even if a poet, even if a mechanic, even if a

mechanic-poet.

— Poet-mechanic it is. My memory's tip-top, better than before. If you see it — bring it, don't dare press.

Grandfather knew everything, but let it be, waiting for his grandson's moral development. He walked silently about the house, from the window, from the round hole in the shutters kept watch on the children, on Savely, checking if he had the button on him, but Savely had hidden it already, either in the drainpipe, or under the barrel of rainwater, or in his rucksack. To his interesting friends he said — fallen ill, and they went berserk, saying how fallen ill? He answered them, very seriously ill, so seriously that even had to return the button to grandfather. Sat at home, walked in the garden, counted days till September, till departure to the city, to school, to grown-up life. Grandfather still cooked him porridge, made lunch, dinner, peeled apples, cut them into slices, flashing the knife, looking the boy straight in the eyes with suspicion, looking like come on, tell me, I'll forgive everything, just give back the button. Savely only thought about punishment, ashamed that grandfather would find out everything, that parents would find out, would take him to the gypsy court for theft, would give him to the police circus, and he'd remain completely alone, without grandfather, without village, without childhood, without friendship, without parents, without himself even, for why do they all need such-and-such a little boy-thief?

Be it long or be it short, silently, glumly, hunched Savely walked and

decided to try again. Got out the button, pressed it with all his might, jumped on it, sat on it, hit it with a brick — nothing, no result, everything as before: no kaput, no curtains, no corps de ballet, there was only fiasco and tragedy. One way out, forget about it, strike it from reality; years will pass, and it'll be as if there was no garagello, no red and rusty buttonzilla, as if there was no thief-Savely.

Must act, he decided, and did thus:

Went to the shop to buy bread, hiding the button in his bosom, and when walking across the bridge, threw it into the river with all his might — let it float away from getting caught, from confession, from forgiveness, from punishment, float from one river to the next, from next to the subsequent, from the subsequent to the sea, from the sea to the ocean, and there perhaps it'll wash up on another shore to some older little lad who'll take it and one day press it for him.

September 2025

Author's commentary:

I thought I'd try something new and write a complementary commentary on the story's themes: behind-the-scenes, "director's" insights, bonus, etc.

By all means, please think of the whole thing as having two posts in one rather than having a part of a post above and a part below; although on the same topic, they are pretty much standalone!

I obviously don't want to "explain" it or reveal what inspired it and why, but I do want to take a chance and talk about things that don't happen to us and how that keeps dragging behind like tin cans tied to the tail of a dog tortured by children — or grown-ups, should we ditch ageism and be a bit more symbolic.

[In this essay on Chekhov](#), I wrote about a similar thing:

Paradoxically, with the passage of time, what accumulates is not only experience but also the absence of experience, such as unfulfilled dreams, missed opportunities, actions of an untaken nature, which, though they don't exist and have no physical manifestation, often prove more important and defining for a person than those they actually did. Translating from Chekhovian to pop cultural: an immovable object (human) meets an unstoppable force (time), who wins? Clearly, an unstoppable force, for no one has yet been able to stop time. Time thereby can be rendered as "experience", for any experience is "time" in its essence, and any "time" is an experience, should we include both happenings and nonhappenings. If the characters of "Three Sisters", or for that matter "Cherry Orchard", are bogged down in inaction, passively watching how life passes by, epochs change, but they themselves remain the same, avoiding the experience, another character may take a more deliberate action to avoid the experience they fear, such as to avoid a confession, forgiveness,

punishment: ultimately, an absence of a lesson, which is, ironically, also a lesson.

Our culture is focused more on the active conflict, be it internal or external, fights for beliefs or introspective torments over them (Dostoevsky, Dickens) and not enough attention goes to passive conflict like boredom or inaction or nonhappening (Chekhov, Beckett). See, the former is important of course, but it is more apprehensible and cinematic, often pure kino, while the latter is less so and often considered anticlimactic, boring even. However the literary thread of the latter, the subtle linings, indescribable feelings, illogical decisions, non-decisions, fear that's not a fear but stun and ossification, are also an important part of how we experience life — through things that we choose not to do, things that do not happen to us (!), be it avoiding confrontation, avoiding change, avoiding experience. Same with psychological trauma that characters suffer; alongside the violent trauma, there exists a trauma of freezing irrational fear of police circus and gypsy court, a trauma of lessonlessness, not merely guilt or shame but an unlearned tension, an anticlimax that keeps haunting the character until their last breath.

Despite the inflated importance of the active conflict, the universal cultural trope, a deathbed question, points us towards the overlooked Chekhov-Beckett axis, “a passive conflict”: if you ask someone on their deathbed, what are they thinking of, the answer most commonly and poignantly is going to be: “Regrets.”

P.S. For that reason alone, “Youth” by Paolo Sorrentino is a terrifying film.



*“A young boy drinking tea”, Nikolai Bogdanov-Belsky (Russian,
1868–1945)*

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