

Lena Gorelik

## THE COLLECTOR OF LISTS

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Sofia doesn't know if she's coming or going. She still doesn't feel comfortable in her role as a mother, her own, annoyingly fussy mother is more of a hindrance than a help and her elderly grandmother is already suffering from dementia. But Sofia's foible for creating lists saves her sanity: the most embarrassing pet names, the funniest neuroses, the worst restaurants. Her lists bring a semblance of structure to her life. One day she makes an intriguing discovery in her grandmother's flat: a collection of lists written in Cyrillic script on musty, yellowed paper. Not so surprising, seeing as the family left the Soviet Union in the 1970s. But the find leads Sofia to an uncle no one in her family ever talked about, the mysterious Uncle Grischa, a weird old man who was a member of the underground resistance, endangered the entire family and yet was still loved by everyone around him. Using clues supplied by the lists, she unearths Grischa's murky past, and finds that history can have a powerful effect on the present.



- > A heart-warming, funny book about family and family life, populated by engagingly quirky characters that pull us in from the first page.
- > 20,000 copies sold.
- > Rights sold to France (Les Escales)



**Lena Gorelik** was born in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and emigrated in 1992 to Germany with her family. Her debut novel garnered her widespread acclaim as a major new talent. *Wedding in Jerusalem* (2007) was nominated for the German Book Prize. For her 2013 novel, *The Collector of Lists*, Gorelik received the annual book prize awarded by the trust of the Ravensburger games company.

## **The Collector of Lists**

**by Lena Gorelik**

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**English sample translation by Frances Jackson**

Chapter four: p. 57-65

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The lists gave me strength and a sense of tranquility like other people would get from prayer, alcohol, drugs, therapists, cigarettes or shopping. I knew that both drugs and psychotherapists were more socially acceptable than lists. But then again lists, especially lists of this kind, are rare. No-one apart from me writes so many lists, no-one arranges, no-one nurtures them – at least as far as I'm aware. Supplying your body with a certain amount of alcohol and nicotine in order to unwind or take your mind off things would seem to be somehow acceptable. But someone who needs nothing more than a piece of paper and a pen to calm their nerves and recover their inner poise is viewed as peculiar. Neurotic. Something which, by the way, I'm happy to be if that's also what Woody Allen is. Neurotic as a matter of principle, as it were. I think that Woody would like my lists.

I can't remember when it all began – my collecting of lists, my collection of lists, my passion for them – even if I ought to, as I was already able to write by then. Where did the idea for my first list come from? Where, with what, on what and above all why on earth did I write it down? I've been told twice by Flox that I should discuss the whole thing with a therapist – once in earnest, pleadingly, once during an argument. The first time, I didn't talk to him for a week. It was more difficult for me than for him. I was working from eight a.m. until nine in the evening, thirteen hours with coffee and sandwiches at my desk. Afterwards, I'd go to a late showing at the cinema. I saw the same David Lynch film three times that week. I tried desperately to understand

its logic. A distraction, of sorts. When I got home, I would turn to my lists – I wasn't talking to Flox, you see – and begin to edit them, crossing out, making additions, copying out, sorting, arranging and researching until I fell asleep over the lists, which I would then attempt to smooth out the next morning and would end up having to rearrange all over again. His rejection of my lists felt like a rejection of me and the fact that he couldn't comprehend this – for me – perfectly logical consequence caused my conviction that he was the man that I wanted to go on living and travelling and being with to falter. For quite a while afterwards, Flox said nothing more about my lists. That was once we'd not exactly sorted things out, but were at least back on speaking terms, tentatively at first and then as though those days without talking had never happened. In time he began, though initially still erring on the side of caution, and then more and more often because it relaxed us both, to poke a little fun at them. It was a kind of banter, and only once during an argument did he tell me for a second time "You're off your rocker! You and your lists! You know what, you could do with a serious course of therapy!"

On one occasion, I did in fact see a therapist for that very reason. I must have been about eleven or twelve, my mother had dragged me there. I can remember that. And I can remember exercise books that I would cram with scribbled lists and confine to the vault, a lockable compartment in my writing desk. I was proud of that desk, it made me feel like a real writer, a writer with lists and a secret compartment. I used to wear the key on a leather band around my neck. The other girls would hang colourful little stones or Mickey Mouse pendants on that sort of band. I even wore it at night. In the evening before bed, but after I'd brushed my teeth, I would sit down at the desk, specially cleared of all debris, unlock the compartment and add to the lists, compile new ones, revise the old. When I was finished, I would lock them up and rehang the key around my neck. That was what seemed to have got my mother worried – the fact that I not only insisted upon writing these lists, but that I also had to lock them up, conceal them. Frank wasn't bothered, very little worried him. He waved such matters aside, literally: he would dismiss my mother's concerns with a floppy-wristed wave of his hand, a trademark gesture that would later strike me as being a bit camp, "Oh, let her be." Frank wanted to be let be and let others be in return. At first, my mother was delighted by the lists, that I can remember as well – how I would run out of my room, down the stairs and into the kitchen to show her a new list, how she would pick me up and put me on her lap (so I must have still been quite young), push her tea to one side and go through every item on the list with me, even making suggestions for new additions. Some I incorporated, other lists were mine and mine alone, not open to amendment. It used to

make her laugh. When did she begin to worry? When the lists didn't stop? When I hit puberty? Had she hoped that it was just a phase? That I would grow out of it, like I did of being frightened of the dark? She didn't tell me where we were going. She'd picked me up from school and said I had to go to doctor. Did I ask her why? Did I trust my mother so blindly that, aged twelve or thirteen, I was still simply accepting her decisions, the course that she set for me? We got off the bus at Kapuzinerstraße and I followed her, without so much as a question, past the bookshop, the Italian restaurant, the kiosk, and the pet shop where we used to buy Natascha's food, talking all the while about the new biology teacher who was so fat, as fat as a whale. And then I remember the grey metal sign at the entrance to the building:

STEPHAN SPITZING  
Chartered Psychologist  
Child / Adolescent Psychotherapy  
(*NHS approved*)

I didn't twig straight way, only in the hall. While I was getting my head around it, committing the sign to memory, I asked "Why're we going there anyway?", although I had my suspicions.

My mother stood still in the semi-darkness of the corridor, turned around abruptly to face me, as if she had been waiting for this question and already had the answer ready-prepared, and placed both hands on my cheeks, a gesture and habit that to this day I haven't been able to get her to break. Did it bother me even then, though I didn't dare squirm out of her grasp? Just like for years I let her spit on a tissue to wipe the remains of ice cream or chocolate from the corners of my mouth, and later, far worse, how I used to let her fix my much too bushy eyebrows with her fingertips, which she would also moisten with spit, trying to make the offending eyebrows look neat and tidy, stopping me, as she put it, from looking quite so much like Tolstoy? At any rate, she placed her hands on my cheeks and said: "It's just a man, he's just going to have a little chat with you. It's nothing bad, it won't hurt", and I thought to myself, I'm not daft, I can tell the difference between a psychologist and a dentist, and asked, "But what am I supposed to talk to him about?"

"Whatever you fancy."

"But I don't fancy it at all!"

"Come now. First things first, let's just go in there. Just get to know him for starters."

"But I don't want to!" My mother had turned back to the lift and pressed the button. I got panicky and took a couple of steps backwards. My voice probably also sounded more forceful

and too loud. When I get nervous, I get loud. It's still the case today. The last time it happened was at Dr. Steinmann's and I know that for a fact because Flox gave me a warning just like my mother did back then: "Psst. The whole building'll hear you! We're going to go up there now and you'll just say to hello to the man. Chin up, it's nothing it's nothing to worry about."

Why do people always say that, "Chin up"? Whether you're dealing with a child who's fallen over and burst into tears, fears about your own critically ill child or the fact that you've been dragged without any warning to a psychologist, it's always the same: "Chin up."

In the lift, where I had reluctantly followed her – even today I'm still surprised that I didn't turn around and simply leave – I probed again: "But what am I supposed to talk to him about?"

"Whatever you like. You can talk to him about school or about your friends, whatever you fancy. Or about those scraps of paper you're always writing on and locking away in your desk." She didn't look me in eye. She was staring at the door of lift, holding on tight to her handbag.

"My lists?"

"Yes, your lists."

"Have you seriously dragged me here because of the lists?"

Now she turned back towards me, placed her hands again on my face, and parroted the sentences that she had probably prepared in the nights leading up to today, perhaps even written down and read out loud until she found the words best suited to inform me, her twelve-year daughter, that I was mad:

"I've noticed that you're always writing on those scraps of paper. Every single evening. And you lock them up and read them again and again and keep adding to them and you've always got that key with you – even at night. It's just something I've noticed. And when you're working on them and Frank or I come into your room and say something to you, you don't even respond. It's like you're in another world. And there's an illness, you know – it's called neurosis and it might be an explanation for those scraps of paper of yours. And this man here, he can help you. All you have to do is talk to him." So much for her carefully composed justification.

In the man's waiting room there was a poster of Madonna hung on the wall, one of the Pet Shop Boys and one from Dirty Dancing. The trust that these posters probably should have awakened in me remained dormant. Stephan Spitzing had a handlebar moustache and spoke extremely slowly. His gaze constantly veered a little too far to right – past me, as if he had a lazy

eye. My mother had to wait in the waiting room and flick through either Bravo or Donald Duck comics, the only reading material available. Having to wait outside had not been to her liking, but the chartered psychologist and child / adolescent psychotherapist had been quite insistent that we were not here to talk about her, and shut the door behind us. The one thing I liked about him.

He began cautiously enough, asking me about school, about my friends, my favourite subjects and my favourite music. All that was missing was my favourite colour. He also asked about my mother and about Frank too. I chose to mention that Frank wasn't my real father, that he had adopted me. Not because it was something I needed to talk about, but because I thought that the fact might interest him as a psychotherapist. I wasn't far wrong. Did I call Frank "Dad", why not? Did I miss "Dad", why not? Did I wish for siblings, why not? Each one of my answers was followed by a "Why?" or a "Why not?" I got bored after half an hour. I stared at the poster of Madonna. I couldn't imagine that Stephan Spitzing, he of the handlebar moustache, the slightly eccentric, sideways gaze, the gaunt frame (was it possible for adults to get anorexia? I'd just read a book on it), listened to Madonna or had seen Dirty Dancing at the pictures. Or even just smiled every now and again.

"Your mum told me that you like to write things down", he said, looking over my right shoulder. I kept my mouth shut. I felt vastly superior to him already.

"What is it that you write down?"

"This and that. I make lists." I was prepared to talk about it, I wasn't embarrassed, didn't think myself mad. I was proud of my lists, I'd been working on some of them for years. Whole years.

"What kind of lists are they?"

"Oh, all sorts. Well, for example, I've got a list of beautiful people. I've got a list of books that made me cry, one of books that made me laugh, a list of books that I shouldn't have read, one of books that I want to read again. One of books that still need to be written, one of books that I'd like to write. I also have a list of possible allergies, one of tomato dishes because I hate tomatoes, one of dishes that contain onions because Frank can't stomach onions. I have a list of great names for dogs, one of embarrassing nicknames, a list of teachers who would have done better if they'd become something else, one of ideas about what kind jobs the teachers should have gone for instead, a list of terms that I need to look up one of these days because I'm not sure what they mean, a list of the times that I've got up at every morning since 23 December last

year, a list of swear words that the boys in my class use, one of my marks in all subjects. A list of things that I never want to get as a present, one of stars that I'd like to meet, one of stars that I'd like to be, one of sentences that my mother repeats, one of Christina's marks, that's my best friend, one of all the times that Christina's phoned since the beginning of the school year, one of the cakes that my grandmother bakes, she likes trying out new recipes. Should I go on?"

I never had to go back to the psychologist.