According to Vadim Vadimovich (the narrator and main character in VN’s novel *Look at the Harlequins!*), he was brought up by his grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow:

I saw my parents infrequently. They divorced and remarried and redivorced at such a rapid rate that had the custodians of my fortune been less alert, I might have been auctioned out finally to a pair of strangers of Swedish or Scottish descent, with sad bags under hungry eyes. An extraordinary grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy, amply replaced closer blood. As a child of seven or eight, already harboring the secrets of a confirmed madman, I seemed even to her (who also was far from normal) unduly sulky and indolent; actually, of course, I kept daydreaming in a most outrageous fashion.

"Stop moping!" she would cry: "Look at the harlequins!

"What harlequins? Where?"

"Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together--jokes, images--and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!"

I did. By Jove, I did. I invented my grand-aunt in honor of my first daydreams, and now, down the marble steps of memory's front porch, here she slowly comes, sideways, sideways, the poor lame lady, touching each step edge with the rubber tip of her black cane. (1.2)

The name Bredov comes from *bred* (delirium; ravings; gibberish). Jove is an alternative name of Jupiter (the supreme God in the Roman mythology pantheon). In Chekhov’s play *Chayka* (“The Seagull,” 1896) Arkadina calls Treplev’s avant-garde play *dekadentskiy bred* (a decadent nonsense) and Dorn calls Arkadina “Jupiter:”

Аркадина. Теперь оказывается, что он написал великое произведение! Скажите пожалуйста! Стало быть, устроил он этот спектакль и надушил серой не для шутки, а для демонстрации... Ему хотелось поучить нас, как надо писать и что нужно играть... Наконец, это становится скучно. Эти постоянные вылазки против меня и шпильки, воля ваша, надоедят хоть кому! Капризный, самолюбивый мальчик.
Сорин. Он хотел доставить тебе удовольствие.
Аркадина. Да? Однако же вот он не выбрал какой-нибудь обыкновенной пьесы, а заставил нас прослушать этот декадентский бред. Ради шутки я готова слушать и бред, но ведь тут претензии на новые формы, на новую эру в искусстве. А, по-моему, никаких тут новых форм нет, а просто дурной характер.
Тригорин. Каждый пишет так, как хочет и как может.
Аркадина. Пусть он пишет, как хочет и как может, только пусть оставит меня в покое.
Дорн. Юпитер, ты сердишься...
Аркадина. Я не Юпитер, а женщина. (Закуривает.) Я не сержусь, мне только досадно, что молодой человек так скучно проводит время. Я не хотела его обидеть.

ARKADINA. And suddenly, he’s produced a masterpiece. Really! So it wasn't a lark. He put together this extravaganza and choked us with sulphur not to amuse us, but to make a point. To teach us how plays should be written, and acted. I'm so tired of the constant insults and blatant disrespect - it would try the patience of a saint. He's an impetuous, pretentious little boy.
SORIN. He was trying to please you.
ARKADINA. Really? Then why couldn't he choose a proper play? Why make us sit through this decadent nonsense? I am perfectly willing to listen to a nonsense if it's meant to entertain, but this apparently was meant to be a new theatrical form, the art of the future. Since when has the exhibition of a morbid personality been a new art form?
TRIGORIN. Every writer must write what they know, as best they can.
ARKADINA. He's welcome to continue writing. I just pray I won't be subjected to his future works.
DORN. When Jupiter is angry, Jupiter is wrong.
ARKADINA. I'm not Jupiter, I am a woman. [She lights a cigarette] And I'm not angry. I just hate to see a young man wasting his time like that. I never meant to hurt his feelings. (Act One)

A character in Chekhov’s play, Nina Zarechnyi is an amateur actress (who leaves home and goes on the stage). According to Vadim, Ivor Black (a fine amateur actor who goes to Hollywood) asked him if *Revizor*, the Russian title of Gogol’s play “The Inspector” (1835), came from the French for ‘dream,’ *rêve*:

Some time during the Easter Term of my last Cambridge year (1922) I happened to be consulted, "as a Russian," on certain niceties of make-up in an English version of Gogol's *Inspector* which the Glowworm Group, directed by Ivor Black, a fine amateur actor, intended to stage. He and I had the same tutor at Trinity, and he drove me to distraction with his tedious miming of the old man's mincing ways--a performance he kept up throughout most of our lunch at the Pitt. The brief business part turned out to be even less pleasant. Ivor Black wanted Gogol's Town Mayor to wear a dressing gown because "wasn't it merely the old rascal's nightmare and didn't *Revizor*, its Russian title, actually come from the French for ‘dream,’ *rêve*?" I said I thought it a ghastly idea. (1.1)

According to Treplev, on the stage life should be represented as it appears in dreams:

Нина. В вашей пьесе трудно играть. В ней нет живых лиц.
Треплев. Живые лица! Надо изображать жизнь не такою, как она есть, и не такою, как должна быть, а такою, как она представляется в мечтах.

NINA. Your play is very hard to act in; there are no live people in it.
TREPLEV. That’s the whole point! Life shouldn’t be represented as it is and not as it should be, but as it appears in dreams. (ibid.)

In a letter of Nov. 25, 1892, to Suvorin Chekhov says that the best writers are realists who paint life as it is, but, through every line’s being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, besides life as it is, the life which ought to be:

У нас нет «чего-то», это справедливо, и это значит, что поднимите подол нашей музе, и Вы увидите там плоское место. Вспомните, что писатели, которых мы называем вечными или просто хорошими и которые пьянят нас, имеют один общий и весьма важный признак: они куда-то идут и Вас зовут туда же, и Вы чувствуете не умом, а всем своим существом, что у них есть какая-то цель, как у тени отца Гамлета, которая недаром приходила и тревожила воображение. У одних, смотря по калибру, цели ближайшие — крепостное право, освобождение родины, политика, красота или просто водка, как у Дениса Давыдова, у других цели отдаленные — бог, загробная жизнь, счастье человечества и т. п. Лучшие из них реальны и пишут жизнь такою, какая она есть, но оттого, что каждая строчка пропитана, как соком, сознанием цели, Вы, кроме жизни, какая есть, чувствуете еще ту жизнь, какая должна быть, и это пленяет Вас.

We lack “something,” that is true, and that means that, lift the robe of our muse, and you will find within an empty void. Let me remind you that the writers, who we say are for all time or are simply good, and who intoxicate us, have one common and very important characteristic; they are going towards something and are summoning you towards it, too, and you feel not with your mind, but with your whole being, that they have some object, just like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, who did not come and disturb the imagination for nothing. Some have more immediate objects — the abolition of serfdom, the liberation of their country, politics, beauty, or simply vodka, like Denis Davydov; others have remote objects — God, life beyond the grave, the happiness of humanity, and so on. The best of them are realists and paint life as it is, but, through every line’s being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, besides life as it is, the life which ought to be, and that captivates you.

An empty void under the muse’s robe brings to mind tsar Nikita’s forty daughters in Pushkin’s frivolous poem *Tsar’ Nikita i sorok ego docherey* (“Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters,” 1822) who lack something between their legs. Thar Nikita’s forty daughters have different mothers. The first three of Vadim’s three or four successive wives seem to be the daughters of Count Nikifor Nikodimovich Starov, who, as Vadim himself suspects, can be his real father. Iris Black, Annette Blagovo and Louise Adamson are thus Vadim’s half-sisters. Chekhov is the author of *Tri sestry* (“The Three Sisters,” 1901), a play known on Antiterra (aka Demonia, Earth’s twin planet on which VN’s novel *Ada*, 1969, is set) as *Four Sisters*.

In the film version of Chekhov’s *Four Sisters* Marina Durmanova (Van’s, Ada’s and Lucette’s mother) played sister Varvara, a garrulous *originalka* (odd female). The name Durmanov comes from *durman* (thorn-apple; drug, narcotic; intoxicant). In “The Seagull” Treplev speaks of his mother Arkadina (a professional actress) and mentions *durman* (intoxicant):

Треплев. Ей уже досадно, что вот на этой маленькой сцене будет иметь успех Заречная, а не она. (Посмотрев на часы.) Психологический курьез - моя мать. Бесспорно талантлива, умна, способна рыдать над книжкой, отхватит тебе всего Некрасова наизусть, за больными ухаживает, как ангел; но попробуй похвалить при ней Дузе! Ого-го! Нужно хвалить только её одну, нужно писать о ней, кричать, восторгаться ее необыкновенною игрой в "La dame aux camelias" или в "Чад жизни", но так как здесь, в деревне, нет этого дурмана, то вот она скучает и злится, и все мы - её враги, все мы виноваты. Затем она суеверна, боится трех свечей, тринадцатого числа. Она скупа. У неё в Одессе в банке семьдесят тысяч - это я знаю наверное. А попроси у неё взаймы, она станет плакать.

TREPLEV. Yeah, she’s in a snit because Nina will be in the spotlight tonight. Seriously, even out here, on this little stage. [Looking at his watch] My mother’s so neurotic. She may be talented, and sensitive and if you’re sick she’s like an angel of mercy; but don’t you dare praise another actress in her presence! Did I mention that she’s competitive? That only she can be applauded, or written about, or raved over. She doesn’t get any of that out here. There’s no that intoxicant here in the country, so she gets grumpy and bad-tempered. Then she thinks we’re all out to get her, and claims, “everything’s our fault”. Neurotic and incredibly superstitious. She flips out if someone lights up three cigarettes with one match, or if she realizes it’s Friday the thirteenth, or if someone utters Macbeth backstage. And, she’s incredibly stingy; she has seventy thousand rubles in a bank in Odessa, I’ve seen the bank statements, but ask her to lend you a penny and she breaks into tears. (Act One)

The name Sorin (of Arkadina’s brother) brings to mind Sirin, VN’s Russian nom de plume. In LATH Vadim writes under the penname V. Irisin (in honor of his first wife). In Part Five of LATH Vadim says that spying had been his “*clystère de Tchékhov*” even before he married Iris Black and mentions two Soviet “diplomats,” Tornikovsky and Kalikakov. In a letter of October 22, 1896, to Suvorin Chekhov speaks of the flop of the first performance of “The Seagull” in the Aleksandrinsky Theater and in the same letter mentions *gromadnye klistiry* (the huge clysters) that on the previous day he made to a rich peasant whose bowel was blocked with *kal* (faeces). *Clystère de Tchékhov* is a play on *violon d’Ingres* (a hobby). Jean Ingres is the author of *Jupiter et Thétis* (1811). Jupiter’s wife Juno was his sister.

Describing Flavita (the Russian Scrabble), Van Veen (the narrator and main character in *Ada*) compares the letter J on two joker blocks to a blank check signed by Jupiter or Jurojin:

The set our three children received in 1884 from an old friend of the family (as Marina’s former lovers were known), Baron Klim Avidov, consisted of a large folding board of saffian and a boxful of weighty rectangles of ebony inlaid with platinum letters, only one of which was a Roman one, namely the letter J on the two joker blocks (as thrilling to get as a blank check signed by Jupiter or Jurojin). It was, incidentally, the same kindly but touchy Avidov (mentioned in many racy memoirs of the time) who once catapulted with an uppercut an unfortunate English tourist into the porter’s lodge for his jokingly remarking how clever it was to drop the first letter of one’s name in order to use it as a *particule,* at the Gritz, in Venezia Rossa. (1.36)

Gritz blends the luxurious Ritz hotels with Madame Gritsatsuev, in Ilf and Petrov’s novel *Dvenadtsat’ stuliev* (“The Twelve Chairs,” 1928) a passionate woman, a poet’s dream whom Ostap Bender marries in Stargorod. The city’s name and the name Starov come from *staryi* (old). Baron Klim Avidov is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. Walter C. Keyway, Esq. (the unfortunate English tourist who was catapulted by Avidov) believed that Avidov’s real name was Davidov. Ingres was a pupil of Jacques-Louis David (the author of “The Death of Marat”). On Antiterra Jean-Paul Marat is blended Tolstoy’s Haji Murad and with General Murat (Napoleon’s brother-in-law):

He [Van] struggled to keep back his tears, while AAA blew his fat red nose, when shown the peasant-bare footprint of Tolstoy preserved in the clay of a motor court in Utah where he had written the tale of Murat, the Navajo chieftain, a French general’s bastard, shot by Cora Day in his swimming pool. What a soprano Cora had been! (1.28)

In his “Memoirs” (1953) Prince Felix Yusupov (Rasputin’s murderer whom a French friend nicknamed Charlotte Corday) says that he performed in a variety show dressed a girl and singing songs in a soprano voice. According to Yusupov (a descendant of Mohammad’s brother-in-law Ali), *dazhe v bredu* (even in a delirium) he could not have imagined such a thing as his canonization (by a member of the sect that worships Ali). Even in a delirium Vadim could not have imagined that his wives were his sisters.

Yusupov’s full name was Prince Felix Felixovich Yusupov Count Sumarokov-Elston. In “The Twelve Chairs” Persitski suggests that the poet Nikifor Lyapis-Trubetskoy (“Lapsus”) should change his pseudonym to Nikifor Sumarokov-Elston and mentions *bred* (a piece of rubbish):

Да, кстати. Ляпсус, почему вы Трубецкой? Почему вам не взять псевдоним ещё получше? Например, Долгорукий! Никифор Долгорукий! Или Никифор Валуа? Или ещё лучше: гражданин Никифор Сумароков-Эльстон? Если у вас случится хорошая кормушка, сразу три стишка в «Гермуму», то выход из положения у вас блестящий. Один бред подписывается Сумароковым, другая макулатура — Эльстоном, а третья — Юсуповым… Эх вы, халтурщик!..

“Anyway, why are you called Trubetskoy? Why don't you choose an even better name? Nikifor Dolgoruki. Or Nikifor Valois. Or, still better, Citizen Nikifor Sumarokov-Elston. If ever you manage to get some easy job, then you can write three lines for Gerasim right away and you have a marvelous way to save yourself. One piece of rubbish is signed Sumarokov, the second Elston, and the third Yusupov. God, you hack!" (Chapter XXIX “The Author of the Gavriliad”)

Alexey Sklyarenko