

NINETY-SIX IN THE SHADE

*Translated from the Russian by Isabella L. Yanovsky*

“Mr. Maklovsky, open your mouth and sit still, otherwise I’ll never finish,” said the nurse, and began deftly and quickly to change the dressing.

September. New York. A hospital ward.

“Ah-ah-ah,” the man addressed as Maklovsky groaned agreement. “I won’t bother you.”

A metal tube stuck from his throat near the Adam’s apple; with the flow of air, some bubbles of mucus had come out of it. He wiped the end of the tube with a practiced gesture while attentively following the nurse’s every motion, turning his disheveled head wherever her hand guided him. He was like a big old intelligent dog, and his eyes reflected many feelings—helpless trust, gratitude, and apprehension. Apprehension: with one careless move she might touch the breathing pipe, or she might come too close, drive away the air, displace the walls, the ceiling, and the corners of the long, low, dim ward, and then it would be impossible to breathe (he remembered the night of his emergency operation).

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The nurse finished her work and gathered up her instruments and vessels.

“In the evening... I get my best sleep,” Maklovsky started, his whole countenance expressing fear that she would leave before hearing him out.

“I sleep best in the morning,” she joked absentmindedly, “when the alarm clock rings.”

“Couldn’t you turn off... the radio... sooner?”

“If everyone wants music, I can’t turn it off just for you. What’s the matter, don’t you like music?” She smiled, and worriedly shaking her leonine gray curls, moved impetuously along the line of beds. “Time for visitors to go! All visitors please leave.”

In various places, glum figures stirred; there were only six or seven of them in the whole huge ward. Busily they began to make their farewells, the words tumbling out with senseless animation. Then they moved toward the exit, restraining their steps and their pleasure: soon they would be outside, they would see the sky, breathe genuine familiar air, find themselves living beings among the living. After a few paces they suddenly looked back, nod-

ded their heads significantly, threw out an awkward soothing phrase, and, silencing their shame and pain, hurried away, relieved, with the feeling of having performed a difficult and useless duty.

The patients rested, indifferent and lonely. Some slept a heavy unnatural sleep, others lay staring vacantly before them, still others sat on stools, leaning their heavy heads against the bed, absorbed in the difficult self-imposed task of successfully exhaling air, inhaling fresh air, exhaling...inhaling...

The nurse turned on the radio, and a moment later there resounded the first notes of a familiar symphony—Mozart or Beethoven, at any rate something perfect and sad.

An old man in a striped wrapper staggered slowly, lifelessly, like a winter fly, to the bathroom. He advanced, jumping up and squatting down, stumbling along the endless corridor that adjoined the ward. The trumpets choked the violins. On he moved, sideways, sideways—the old man with his paralyzed limb. It was like an ancient tormenting religious dance before a sacrifice.

The nurse who had gone out to escort the visitors returned unexpectedly soon. Smiling, fresh, big-boned, of good stock, with a mane of gray hair under the crown of her cap, she called from the threshold: “Mr. Maklovsky, someone is asking for you; a friend of yours wants to see you.”

“I have no friends,” he hissed and whistled.

“I’ll let him in, though it’s late,” she said imperiously, in a voice in which maternal, reasonable, mature notes altered with childish willful caprice.

Maklovsky shrugged indifferently. But when the figure of the tardy visitor emerged from the summer twilight in the doorway, he raised himself tensely, and his earth-colored face became somewhat animated.

Nimble and cautiously making his way among the beds, the visitor glanced over the patients. He wore a new dark suit of old-fashioned cut: the coat with padded shoulders narrowing at the waist. In his hands he held several packages tied with colored ribbons. His tiny head with the parted hair seemed to be set back unnaturally because of his long thin neck.

“Here, here,” the nurses impatiently urged him on.

Only when the visitor was close to the foot of the bed did Maklovsky condescend to greet him. “Hello, Peter,” he said. “So it’s you.” He nervously adjusted his tube.

“Mack,” the visitor cried, grinning joyfully, exaggeratedly, theatrically, and hastened to get rid of his packages.

The nurse also smiled. She had light blue eyes, almost silvery, the same color as the eyeballs and for that reason immense, somewhat protruding and pure. "You see, Mr. Maklovsky, you do have a friend," she said, moved, as witnesses of the unexpected meeting of two old friends (countrymen or schoolmates) are wont to be.

Still smiling, Peter and Maklovsky glanced at her in silence. She walked away in a quick loose gait, somehow reminding one of a bird with a broken wing: she limped, dragging one foot—and yet she swept, even flew about the ward, carrying her large well-built body lightly and freely.

"Sit down," Maklovsky said. And, as his visitor looked hesitatingly at the patient sitting close by on a chair (purple face pressed against the bed), he added negligently: "Don't pay any attention...ignore him...it's almost a corpse."

"How did you get in here, Mack?" Peter inquired with sincere interest. Without waiting for an answer, he began to untie his gifts. "Will you have a glass of sherry?"

"Yes, why not...but the tobacco I can't use...I've stopped temporarily. If you sit facing this little gadget...it's easier to talk. Why do you all move to the side...then you don't understand...have to ask again...I must find my aim once more...after all...it's not a machine gun." He caught his breath and said in quite a different tone, almost distinctly: "I thought we would not meet for another four years."

"They let me out sooner, for good behavior."

"Good behavior?" Both men smiled. "How did you find me?"

"Saks got the information."

"Poor Saks. Still wearing those famous suspenders...and when you knock at his door he listens for a long time...before he answers."

"Yes, yes," Peter agreed distractedly.

"Have I changed a great deal?"

Peter hesitated. "At first I didn't recognize you," he said. "But now I can see, it's you. Just as you used to be. Only a little grayer. And now you have a mustache."

"Yes, I've let it grow. I'll shave it off...when I leave the hospital."

"What really is the matter with you?"

"Throat infection," Mack said eagerly. "Bacilli clogged up my throat... When the inflammation is over...they'll take away the tube...and I'll breathe as before. I'm better already...Only it's difficult to swallow solid food...and

this place is disgusting. There were no free rooms. So I was put here. They are all dying around me...they aren't people...just carrion. I would..."

"Where is Stella?" Peter asked abruptly.

Maklovsky adjusted the pipe for a few seconds, wiped it, and then said: "I don't know." He made a gesture intended to express complete sincerity. "After they got you...she moved to my place. I threw her out a week later... tried to scald me with boiling water...the bitch. I don't know how you could...Oh, the doctor is here, my doctor," he exclaimed, convinced that Peter would be as pleased as he was.

Following the nurse who swept ahead, swift, white, and large, a little man with dark glasses was making the rounds of the ward. They stopped at Maklovsky's bed. Turning to the visitor, the nurse said: "If you wish to speak to the doctor, he'll be glad to give you all the information you need."

"To the doctor?" Peter said, surprised. "Why, I've got nothing to tell him."

"No, you won't tell him. He'll tell you. Relatives or friends always want to have a talk with the doctor. About the diet or things like that."

"The diet?" Peter asked in amazement.

"Don't argue with the nurse," said Mack. "Talk to the doctor about my diet." He laughed.

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"All right," Peter agreed, and he, too, laughed.

"Let's go to my office; we'll be more comfortable," the doctor said. He had a distressing German accent, and his eyes, because of the dark glasses, seemed sad and intelligent.

The nurse took Maklovsky's temperature, checked his pulse and respiration, and, in the intervals, explained in a didactic tone: "That's the way it is supposed to be. It's the doctor's duty to inform the relatives about the patient, and it's their duty to be interested in the course of the disease. That's the custom. I mean among civilized people..." and with her large vigorous hands she raised his sickly dry body, turned it and adjusted it; he frowned, listening for his pain, relieved yet suspicious.

"I forgot to tell the doctor that my ear hurts again."

"Well, you'll tell him tomorrow," the nurse advised him grumblingly. "He's alone, and there are more and more of you." Then, unexpectedly, she added: "If there's too much mucus in there, I'll change it once more."

Maklovsky nodded enthusiastically; if it had depended on him, he would be changing that accursed tube constantly, striving to keep it unobstructed and completely clean. The operation took no more than two or three min-

utes, during which Maklovsky, with the help of grimaces, hissing, and sputtering, tried to explain how in his opinion the thing should be handled; then he fell back, exhausted, looking even paler and more shrunken than before. Seeing Peter approach, he said something that the other did not understand. "The diet, the diet," Mack repeated angrily and tried a facetious wink.

Peter was breathing heavily. Obviously, the patients, the doctor, and the ward had a depressing effect on him; his coat was crumpled, his shirt damp, and his whole appearance far less elegant and holiday-like than when he had first come in.

With a distasteful grimace, Maklovsky suddenly said: "Listen, it's getting late... Whatever you want to do, do it fast."

"Why, Mack," Peter protested, "I didn't intend to do anything. I just wanted to visit you."

Maklovsky looked at him pensively.

"What actually did the doctor tell you?" he asked, suddenly animated.

"Just talk. Incidentally, he seems intelligent. But I don't understand much about medicine. Besides, this suit—it's ninety-six degrees today..." and he pulled at his sticky shirt collar.

"Is that all you found...of your things? Old Saks kept them for you?" Then, unexpectedly: "Do you like the music?"

On the nurse's table, beside the telephone and some enormous books that looked like ledgers, the radio was playing softly. Sad musical phrases, perfect to the point of absurdity, were flowing from it.

"The music?" Peter asked, surprised. It was obvious that he had never before been asked such a question. "It's excellent music."

"It's a lie, all this is a lie," Maklovsky said softly, and then added: "If there's nothing else...go. It's getting late...and I am tired."

"Yes, yes," Peter said without stirring from his place. "I meant to find out... Why did you do it? You were a good fellow, my best friend. How could you? Would a woman..."

"Ah, that...really..." Maklovsky obviously was weighing every word. "I don't know. I simply...don't remember. I lie here all night...a little lamp burns over there...those people on the beds sigh and scratch themselves...and everything...vanishes. Important facts are forgotten. All kinds of nonsense creeps into your head. You remember things...you never even thought of before. At the age of five I had the measles. There was a kitten in our

house. I took him to bed with me and stroked him...he purred beside me on the pillow. If I could have him now..."

In the next row, almost directly across, a patient was yelling in a foreign tongue. He repeated a word that sounded like "coffee." But it could not be just coffee—he put so much anguish, such a burning desire for the truth, and such indignation into his heartrending cry. A nurse and an attendant were changing the sheets under him.

"Well, I'll be going," Peter decided. "It's hot. So long, Mack." And he went straight towards the door.

"Come again," the silver-eyed nurse told him.

"Yes, yes," Peter promised, and suddenly he stopped and stared at her, studying and memorizing with surprise her smile and her whole countenance. Already she had swept on—broadly and smoothly—along the line of beds. Shaking his head disapprovingly, he went out of the ward, for some reason walking on tiptoe.

A crowded bus brought him to Third Avenue. He walked a few blocks (while elevated trains rushed overhead, back and forth, with a thunderous noise), then entered the doorway of a gray house that looked exactly like its neighbors. On the top floor the wooden staircase abutted on an asymmetrically placed door: it seemed to have been cut into the outer wall—with nothing left beyond but the jump down.

From the room came the shouts of a radio voice—a commando raid in the Pacific. In the intervals Peter fancied he heard the panting of gigantic Saks as he leaned with all his weight against the door.

"Stop it, open!" he cried impatiently. "Don't be a fool!" And he knocked again.

The door half-opened, and there appeared a fat, paunchy, short-breathed man whose width was almost the same as his height. He let Peter in, then banged the door shut, ran to the radio, and turned it off. He was like a shabby actor from the old (silent) detective pictures.

"I asked you not to come here any more," he said threateningly, casting glances around him, as though someone might be eavesdropping on them. The room was stuffy and half-dark; a melancholy summer twilight was creeping in from the window; below, buses roared by, carefree, and children called to each other like wild birds; almost within hand's reach a train passed, shaking the foundations of existence. "It seems to me I made myself quite clear."

“Don’t be afraid,” Peter drawled. “I haven’t done anything.” He began to undress, roughly pulling off his clothes.

“Is that so?” Saks’s face displayed a mixture of reassurance and disappointment. “Is that so?” He expected further explanations.

“I could have torn him to shreds—no one would have stopped me. But the doctor told me...He has a disease in his throat: he’ll die in a week or a month.”

“So that’s what it is!” Saks grinned in understanding. “You decided not to go for him. You may be right. But in my time,” he added wistfully, “such vermin was not allowed to live an extra hour.”

“That’s not the point,” Peter said with disgust, as he unlaced his shoes. “He has a cancer in his throat: it’s growing by the hour, it’s strangling him. They put in a tube to help him breathe, but the cancer just moved further down.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him that?”

“Of course not.”

“Good boy,” Saks said solemnly. “Want a drink?”

“Yes, whiskey.”

Saks generously filled two large, grotesquely-shaped glasses. “The whiskey isn’t any good these days,” he complained. “They add all kinds of trash to it.”

“There are forty beds. A little lamp burns at night. He lies there and looks at the light.”

“Another glass? Bad whiskey doesn’t scare me.”

“Yes, thanks.”

“The craziest drink I ever had was ‘fetus milk’; me, Joe, and Tutoni. Did you know Tutoni?”

“He can no longer swallow. They’ll cut open his belly, put in a rubber hose, and pour milk through it.”

“Yes, Tutoni...The three of us got into a university museum, where they keep all kinds of monsters in jars: babies, heads, humps, breasts. Joe had the idea: ‘These things are in pure alcohol.’ We got the guardian drunk and took the alcohol.”

“Saks, here is a present for you,” Peter said. He took a gun out of his pocket and with cold curiosity began to turn it around. “I was sixteen when I first laid hands on this little machine. And I was happy. I felt like a man—I could act. Give orders, decide peoples’ fate. Put some to death and pardon others. A boss! Here is the toy.” He threw the gun on the bed. “I went to kill

Mack, but death was already in his throat, and I stood there like a child, like a fool, like a pup.”

“That’s what I always say: you are now like a sailor after a long voyage.” Saks reverently put the weapon in a drawer, poured a big drink from the half-emptied bottle, added ice and soda, and, without mixing it, held out the glass to Peter.

“I don’t understand how one can go on living if one knows that...”

“What you need now is to shake yourself up a little, drink and have a good time.”

“How can one eat, laugh, work, love... They have a nurse there. She goes from bed to bed, turning over those carcasses. She walks around and smiles, and she has big eyes, serious and cheerful.”

“You see, just what I say. You need a girl.”

“Shut up. She is gray. How can she smile like that?”

“Drink,” Saks insisted in a patronizing tone. “It’s September but the heat doesn’t let off...Didn’t you ask him why he did it?”

“Oh, that. He doesn’t remember.”

“He doesn’t remember?”

“No, he’s forgotten. And he’s forgotten other important things. He lies there and recalls all sorts of nonsense. He says he’d like to have a little kitten: if it lay beside him on the pillow he’d feel better.”

“A cat?”

“Not a cat, a kitten,” said Peter, and he cast a hateful glance at his companion.

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