

PERESTROIKA

by

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Seryozha is surprised he didn't hang himself in Sachsenhausen. He clears his throat and takes in a bit of air. His lips remain stuck together, having turned eggshell-like from the heating. He walks to the window, avoiding the radiator and the cloud of vapor that hovers over the bleed valve, and pinches the window-rail from the bottom to slide it upwards. The cold brushes past him. He leans outside, trying to feel the dry morning rays. He leans again, farther this time, and thinks of the ease with which he might continue leaning. Snow feathers to the ground.

Something about a cold morning, even now, brings out Sachsenhausen and the trials he endured as a prisoner there. If one of them ran away, the officers sent the dogs out, and the rest of them, the law-abiders, would stand at attention, sometimes as long as eighteen hours, and wait for the hanging. Many dropped right then, from the weather. After a prisoner was found and hanged, they—the stripes—returned to the barracks. Often it was so cold that no one remembered why they were out there at all.

"What, the window is broken?" Anna asks. Here is the wife who is no longer asleep. Her voice is startling. He might admit, if pressed, to a reluctance to step away from the window. She has carried him back to a room from which he had briefly, unsuccessfully fled.

"No, we need to get up," he says.

"Is the window broken?"

"Come on."

Anna's mind is still set on repeat. She has a nurse now, an American named Jennifer, who comes in at nine and not a minute later. Jennifer said today would be the coldest day of the year.

Seryozha takes the blanket off Anna. As he airs it at the window, Anna's smell rises up and fills the room. The wall of odor is so potent that he must step back and assume a new stance. Anna lies still, fully-clothed, and stares at the plaster on the ceiling. She has not gathered that she needs to rise out of bed.

He clears the sheets so she can get into the wheelchair. As he bends over and lifts her legs, his heel brushes against the radiator's ridges, leaving a red, kopek-sized mark. He pulls the foot back and rubs it against the bed frame.

"Where is my son?" she asks.

"Stop," he says.

"Everyone is making an idiot out of me."

"Anna, get up," he says. "Why am I standing here?" He pulls her legs across with both arms, leaves them to dangle off the side of the bed, and drags one of her arms toward himself. Her torso is unrelenting in its downward pull, like a parachute strapped to a soldier's vest.

"Help me," he says.

She begins to understand what is asked of her. She sits up, punching the mattress as she slides her backside across its edge. She smiles in a lopsided way and clenches the far side of the chair. She remembers that this is what she needs to do: he will thread his arm through the angle of hers, and she will stand, briefly, before falling into the chair.

"After this, we need to talk about our son," she says. "I hate the woman he's seeing. She thinks I am stupid."

"No one is seeing Jennifer."

"Not her."

Anna was arrogant before the stroke. Seryozha thinks her brain must have been so infused with ego that when part of her died, her entire mind shut down. She was the one who managed the money and spoke with guests and hosted parties. She was everywhere and in everyone's life.

Seryozha pushes the wheelchair toward the bathroom. On his way, he maneuvers past strips of crusted-over wallpaper and door jambs white and freckled with nails. The wheels roll over a stain the color of chicken skin.

The chair is just narrow enough to fit through the door. The bathroom is cramped, like a motel restroom, and there are wet rags drying along a string from the tub's corner to the shower head. Anchored to the toilet seat is a mound—plastic, with a locking mechanism—that is half a foot higher than the seat itself. Clay plugs small cracks in the sink and shower. A radiator cover prevents the door from opening all the way.

As he pushes the chair to meet the toilet lip, he passes infected-looking patches on the sheetrock. He locks the wheels by pulling the lever down on both sides. He pulls her extra-large sweatpants off, as a sign for her to go. She soon reaches for the farther handle of the toilet seat and, with his hands guiding her, manages to take a step and swing herself to land over the hole. He unlocks the wheels and pulls back the chair.

"What?" she asks.

"We need to change your diaper," he says.

He rubs his finger against the polyethylene flanking her waist. He squints as he unravels the diaper, as though he were manipulating onion skins. He inserts his hand between her legs, past the pimples around her vagina, and reaches for the back waistband.

"Is anyone visiting today?" she asks.

"The nurse," he says.

"Why don't we call the neighbors over?"

"They don't come up anymore."

"We can talk over some tea. Do we still have that slice of cake?"

She watches him stuff his hand with toilet paper, as intently as she might watch a circus performer with a poodle and ring—for her, these ordinary maneuvers are acts of magic. Again she watches his hand disappear from view, this time with a clump of paper. He wraps the soiled diaper into a bag, which he knots.

"Do you need to go?" he asks.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for fleas."

"Stop it."

"They're in my hair."

"You don't have hair anymore."

"Yes, I do."

“Stop touching it. Are you going?” As he finishes saying this, he hears a urine stream echoing in the bowl. He sees the contortion on her face, the parallel squares of forehead wrinkling, and the brown-blue spots smearing her cheeks. Once she settles, he straps a diaper from underneath and sits her back in the chair.

“The neighbors don’t come up because of their daughter,” he says.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asks.

“She’s fine. She’s in school.”

“Let’s heat up a kettle of water then. We can talk to the neighbors over cake and tea.”

“You asked them how their daughter ever planned to find a man, dressing the way she did. You said she was going to end up living alone in an attic somewhere. I think you fell asleep right after.”

“Can we invite someone else?”

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The rest of the apartment (a main room and a kitchen) looks dry, as though the air from the outside leaked in and stripped the moisture off the surfaces. The couch looks ordinary, its fabric taut in the right places. A rug hangs on one of the walls.

Seryozha pushes the wheelchair toward the kitchen, into a space between two table legs. With the bag in hand, he leaves Anna to guard the table (she is asleep again) and starts down the stairs, stepping out onto a porch three floors above the snowbanks. From here, he sees nothing but the backs of houses and the balding pines. Everything is half-saturated with snow. Metal joints stammer. When he reaches the bottom stair, he turns toward the trash can, whose plastic is chipped, and throws away the bag. He continues to hear mechanical sounds somewhere along the street. He walks down the driveway, carefully, as though each step must touch only so much snow.

Colton Avenue is alive but not well. At one end of the street, construction workers shout to each other among engine moans and pneumatic tools and wave their arms, creating what Seryozha might call the sound of industry. Multi-family houses line the blacktop edge, torn up as it is. Snow patches remain over the dormers. Footsteps and tire marks dirty the street’s surface.

Here, on this avenue in Massachusetts, U.S.S.R. immigrants are the overwhelming denizens. The Cold War, that vacuum, is over—he thinks of how shocking it must be for them. He is the guest now, invited out of charity, and yet, he is so unlike his hosts. He tries speaking English, as often as he can, deluding himself that, at his age, he could still learn. If pressed, he might admit to envying the Americans. Not the way they smile at everyone, but how happy some of them seem. He knows everyone suffers the same tragedies, but still, he imagines the Americans are fine. They seem so.

Back inside, he sits in a kitchen as raw as the main room. The cabinets, some open, face the window overlooking the street; the bowls are greasy from last night's meal, stacked to one side of the sink.

Anna slouches in the chair, still asleep, a thread of drool twisting from her lip. Seeing her like this reminds him of a night in Sachsenhausen. He shared a bunk with another inmate, Volodya. Seryozha lay flat across the top, away somehow from the other stripes. The snow dropped like foam outside. In the middle of the night, he awoke to a stirring, although he kept his eyes closed. He felt the bed ease at the supports. He heard a belt clink, but thought it was nothing, another sleepless man thinking about his family or a girlfriend. Still, he heard it again, purposeful this time. It was the sound of someone tying a knot. The window glowed under his toes, and his ears flushed. He knew what was happening. As he kept feigning sleep, he heard breathing. He kept his eyes closed, with effort, as though he were afraid of someone prying them open. He heard the breathing for an hour, maybe longer, before the clinking again and a final drop. The worst of it was the shaking, once Volodya was hanged. Seryozha kept his eyes closed. He stayed awake for the rest of the night. All the other stripes must have heard, too.

What he could never understand, though, even after the war, was how easy it was to let Volodya hang himself. The reasons seemed right: Volodya had tuberculosis and would be sent to the crematorium if even one guard noticed the cough. Seryozha covered it up as best as he could; he helped Volodya with the work. But, if Volodya did not kill himself, Seryozha would have died of exhaustion.

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Seryozha continues to stare at his wife. He thinks also of Jennifer, who will arrive in thirty minutes, on time as always. Jennifer will take Anna's vital signs. She will tell Seryozha about the full-time nursing services across town. She might tell him, in her exasperated way, that Anna needs twenty-four-hour care or remind him of how exhausted he looks. It will be like every other day.

Seryozha starts to move toward the fridge, past his wife's slouching form. He thinks of the construction workers in yellow and the way in which they might carry out their stroikas today. He pulls on the refrigerator door (he hears a gasp as the magnet unsticks), and reaches toward the vodka he uses to rub Anna's legs. He curls his lips around the opening, almost kissing it, and sips for some moments. He returns the bottle to the shelf and shuts the door.

"Anna," he says. "Anna, listen."

She lifts her eyes; they are cloudy, faceted pearls.

"I need to go to the food bank," he says. "You need to sit still until Jennifer comes. Did you hear me?"

"Where is Jennifer going?" she asks.

"Jennifer will be here in thirty minutes," he says. "I need to go right now. Otherwise, the other grandmothers will raid the boxes, and we won't have anything to eat."

"What boxes?" She wants to understand, but she knows of so little outside the apartment and almost nothing of the other residents or the women at the food bank. And, certainly, she knows nothing of the facility to which Seryozha will send her eventually. It might be the home across town or a more extravagant place farther away, but in any case, it will be located neither in this building nor on this street.

"Sit still," Seryozha says. "I'll be back soon."

Although he's never left her like this, he slips out, thinking, here is his own mutiny, if only for a few minutes. Jennifer will be angry, but he can tell her anything, afterward. He knows, of course, that Anna cannot be left alone. But still, here he is, leaving her, going out into a cold that reminds him so thoroughly of Sachsenhausen. He knows Jennifer will expect an answer when he gets back. She is confident Anna needs to be in a facility.

As he steps outside again, the vodka circulates through his middle, and he decides he wants to see what the men in yellow are doing on a day so cold. He finds it hard now to live in a place, any place, where others might be happy and to see the world satisfied, as if he himself were transformed, cured. Seeing the workers in the street might help. It will take only a minute.

THE END