
The Violin

A Short Story By Liudmila Petrushevskaja

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She was lying immoderately, getting entangled in her tales, forgetting what she'd said the day before, and so on, and so forth. This was a typical, easily discernible case of lying, of putting on airs and presenting all her actions as being significant and of great consequence, as a result of which something had to occur, but nothing ever occurred; and yet, with the same important demeanor, she would drag herself through the entire ward, holding in her outstretched hand a pale-blue envelope containing probably just some trifling message, but she would carry it, demonstrating with her whole demeanor the supreme necessity of mailing the letter. The content of her letter was roughly known to all the patients in that hospital ward, but obviously only the intention with which the letter was being dispatched was known, and not the words in which she couched her obvious intention, not the form in which she hid all her pathetic wishes, so obvious to all, or how she had lied this particular time to her heart's chosen one, a certain engineer Valerii who lived in another city.

However, it doesn't follow from all this that she, this very same Lena, was a chatterbox or willingly launched into explanations concerning her present condition. On the contrary, she was laconic and excessively ceremonious; the ceremoniousness became especially apparent during the rounds of the head physician, who liked to converse with Lena while seeing the patients on Mondays. The head physician, frowning in a paternal matter, used to say that everything was taking its normal course, and if henceforth things continued thus, then our little student would recover and would go out for a little stroll before the impending central event; and that she shouldn't be afraid to go outdoors, he would then interrupt Lena, it was absolutely imperative to breathe fresh air before her delivery, to take walks in the park, to store up strength. "And how are your hands?" he asked Lena. "As the hands of a violinist, won't they grow unused to strings and bow, and isn't it generally

true that musicians, and especially conservatory students, must practice every day for several hours?" "For four, sometimes five," replied Lena, not in the least embarrassed. "And before the specialized exam, as much as you can without straining your tendons, and that, to be sure, is a matter of stamina."

The professor would move on and finally disappear from the ward, and everybody would carry on with her own business; but Lena, diligent Lena, once again would sit down to write her letter, writing and writing until the moment came to seal up all this scribbling and solemnly carry it through the entire ward to the exit. Or she'd make telephone calls and, in a soft voice, negoti-

ate with somebody; those negotiations seemed to be of a strictly business nature, and you could see by the expression on her face that she wanted to clear up something extremely important and decisive for her. Those telephone conversations took place every day — each time there was the same preoccupied face, the same hushed voice, the same vague, unintelligible questions.

In spite of those exclusively businesslike telephone conversations, and in spite of the existence of somebody who was doing something for Lena, nobody ever came to see her, and, accordingly, there was nothing on her bedside table except an empty glass

covered with a paper napkin.

After long days of silent rest stretched out on her hospital bed — she had not been allowed to get up and walk around, as generally was the rule in that hospital whenever there were the slightest signs of complications — after those days of obligatory bedrest, she at last was allowed to get up, and she left the ward, heading somewhere with her usual letter in a pale-blue envelope. She began to pace up and down, and struck up some quiet, meaningful friendships with the nurses and nurses' aides, but it remained uncertain why Lena undertook all those secret negotiations with the nurses and aides, because they yielded no practical results: as before, nobody came to see Lena, and as before, perfect

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emptiness yawned out of her clean glass, which she sometimes used to get a drink of water. Lena also busied herself slaving over her letters or fixing her hair before the mirror in the corridor, or modestly consuming her hospital dinner. And, one should note, to all of that she attached a kind of supreme, inexplicable meaning.

The only channel filtering through at least some information about Lena was her conversations with the professor on Mondays, during his rounds, when she, all in a blush, lay on her elevated pillows and in a hushed voice answered the professor's questions, although he could have known everything from her health record.

However, the professor asked questions, and Lena answered him, and from those soft, brief answers the ward, frozen in silence, found out, for example, that Lena had fainted on the street and that her girlfriend had sent for an ambulance — and that was all. Further, in reply to the professor's inquiries, Lena complained about her present great weakness, about dizziness, and about occasional pain in the lower back. "Stay here, stay here and rest," said the professor after those conversations.

Each Monday they resumed their quiet conversations, during which Lena monotonously complained about dizziness and some sort of weakness, but her blood tests were excellent, as it turned out, and her heart condition couldn't have been better. And so, one fine day, one of those Mondays, the professor gave orders to have Lena discharged, advising her to move about as much as possible so as to overcome the weakness caused by lying in the hospital, and to start exercising vigorously so as to grow strong and robust and be able to cope well with everything in the best possible way. The professor jokingly invited Lena to come for delivery when he was on duty, asked her, for the hundredth time at least, whether she would send him tickets for her solo concerts, and disappeared into his quarters.

By that day, that Monday, Lena already felt quite at home in the ward and spoke a lot about her husband Valerii, the engineer living in another city who for the time being was unable to join her. Lena also told them that she had spent New Year's Eve at his place and that his par-

ents had treated her splendidly, and so on and so forth.

In just the same way she kept up her diligent letter writing, her solemn procession through the entire ward to the doors, her secret negotiations with the nurses, and as before, she talked on the telephone with her girlfriend in a hushed voice — and all that to no avail.

However, one should note that by that time her bedside table was no longer empty; it was filled with all kinds of fruit and vegetables and food in general. This filling had occurred fairly soon, immediately after the women had guessed the true state of affairs. At first timid and ashamed, but later more composed and at ease, they began to put on Lena's night table all their provisions; Lena, likewise, dealt with those gifts at first shyly and shamefacedly, but

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later with ever greater ease: she ate without stopping, constantly nibbling, dragging herself to the sink to wash some fruit on a plate and munching again. She ate apples, lettuce, cheese, and Polish sausage, candy, and once even half of a raw cabbage head, which had been brought into the ward for a woman with a stomach ailment.

Now the nurses gave Lena larger helpings, and sometimes, when there was nothing else available, they even offered her a second bowl of soup after dessert. Lena accepted, triumphantly nodding her head, and calmly ate the second bowl of soup, then left to comb her hair or sat down to write the next letter. Incidentally, the envelopes were no longer her own, because, as it turned out, her husband was

late in sending her allowance, and her girlfriend could not come visit her. That girlfriend, to be sure, didn't come and didn't come, and the whole month that Lena spent in the hospital, that girlfriend didn't show up until the very end, when Lena was leaving the hospital.

True, before Lena left, the women in her ward negotiated with the doctors to keep Lena for two more months until her baby was due, but evidently that was impossible, and finally that Monday arrived when the professor again conversed with Lena about the difficulties of studying at the conservatory, already knowing that there was no conservatory or violin. Nevertheless, that conversation on the most elevated level took place, and shortly after, Lena left the ward for good, together with her yellow comb, which had become so familiar in the course of that month.

Lena departed from the ward, one could say, fully exposed, yet without losing her solemnity and mysteriousness. And all that after the entire ward had seriously discussed in front of Lena what she could do with her future baby, and whether she could count on help from that engineer who, Lena claimed, was her husband — all these problems immediately came to the surface the moment Lena started to say goodbye. The patients in her ward in a chorus advised Lena to place the baby in a children's home, if only for a year, and during that period to somehow get on her own feet, find a job and living quarters, and only then take the baby back. Lena nodded in her usual dignified manner, sitting on

her bed, and then once more said goodbye to everybody and left with her swollen belly; afterwards, she could be seen again as half an hour later she was triumphantly walking away in a crumpled yellow raincoat, arm in arm with her supposed girlfriend. It was clear to everyone that her fainting spell on the street had been faked, and that after some time had elapsed, the two once again would stage something on the street, if only Lena wouldn't faint before they managed to agree on all the necessary arrangements.

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