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THE NEW PANTYHOSE

“The most important thing is Mother. Mother alone and nothing but Mother. There can be plenty of women and wives. There can be many a child fathered around the world. But everybody has only one Mother on this earth. Nobody can replace your Mother. Who will take care of you once I am gone, my dear son?” his Mother was groaning.

“Mother, Mother, please calm down. You shouldn’t be getting upset, Mom, dear Mommy!”

“If at least you would have a decent wife... Who will take care of my only son when I am gone? !”

“Mommy, you are not going anywhere. There will be a surgery and everything will be just fine,” he flung himself down to embrace his dear Mother. His wife, standing upright next to him and holding on to the hospital bunk bed’s headboard, rolled her eyes. Her entire ten-year-old married life was spent under the slogan “Wives are aplenty; but there is only One Mother.” The highest possible manifestation of human love was a son’s feeling for his Mother. Everything else was just animal instinct. Mother was indeed sure that her son was above base lust. And now, such a disappointment at the close of her years! If at least he had married a decent and respectable woman, but what he did was... When a cute young girl, who had arrived in the crowded dormitory barely six months earlier, invited her girlfriends to a farewell party, every one of them envied her openly. Except one, the oldest among them, who said with genuine commiseration, “so he’s 29, never been married, lives with his mother, and has no father? I don’t envy you.”

“Don’t shake my bed,” yelled Mother at her daughter-in-law, who was leaning onto the bed’s headboard. “Oh God Almighty, am I not allowed to live in peace even in my last days?”

The following day the son showed up without the unloved daughter-in-law.

“She couldn’t even come to the hospital to see her incurably ill Mother, after all I have done for her?”

“She’s got to pick up our daughter from the music lesson.”

“And why does she take the little girl to the music school in the first place? The girl needs to pay more attention to the fine arts and learn to embroider. That little girl has inherited my talents! And *yours* has no notion of what that child needs. Oh, God Almighty! I wonder how is it that the Lord even blesses her type to procreate...”

Dear Mother needed surgery. According to information gathered both formally and informally, there was only one surgeon of the sort Mother needed. That was Dr. Zelenowitch. The Dr. Zelenowitch sort was another matter altogether. Mother gave him the task of finding out what was hidden behind that suspiciously-sounding last name. And when a long chain of acquaintances eventually secured him access to the hospital’s personnel office, it turned out that, according to official records, Dr. Zelenowitch’s ethnicity was Belorussian. Mother was disappointed, because it was another ethnicity category altogether in the official handbook, that in Paragraph 5, which would have given her greater confidence in the doctor’s skills.

There was yet another problem, more difficult to resolve. The thing was that Zelenowitch took bribes. He took bribes blatantly and brazenly. There was no point in discussing the operation without this into account. The popular wisdom was that the only free surgeries Dr. Zelenowitch performed were on orphaned children.

“Mommy, you’ve got enough money in your savings account for this. This is a matter of life and death.”

“The savings is for my funeral. Medical care ought to be free in this country, and I am entitled and well deserve to have it.”

“Yes, Mommy, but he won’t operate on you without the money.”

“Go and tell him that I am a Veteran of Labor, a Distinguished Scientific Worker, and have three honorary awards.”

“Mommy, he doesn’t give a damn about that.”

“You just go and tell him.”

Dr. Zelenowitch pointed to a leather chair.

“I am listening.”

“Yes, I am here about the surgery for Klymenko.”

“The operation should have been done a long time ago. We have talked about that, haven’t we?”

“Yes, and ... the conditions...”

“We have discussed those too.”

“But Doctor, we do not have that kind of money...”

“I am sure you do have that kind of money. In fact, I am sure you have much more than that. Still, I’m prepared to operate for a bottle of good brandy.”

“What exactly do you consider a good brandy?”

“Well... «Dvin», «Erevan»... As if you yourself didn’t know what kind is and what kind isn’t worth drinking”

“And... is that all?”

“Yes, that is all. And let your beautiful wife bring the bottle to my home.”

“Your home?” For the first time he took a sudden curious look at Dr. Zelenowitch. Not enough that he takes bribes; he is also an old goat. The white coat offset Dr. Zelenowitch’s black beard and bright green eyes.

“Yes, to my home. Here,” Dr. Zelenowitch gave him a business card. “Let’s say tomorrow night. I will be home alone. I will be expecting her then. On the other hand, if this price is too high for you – you know how much I’m asking. And hurry up. In a week I am off to a convention in Georgia. By the time I return it may already be too late and the operation might not even be needed.”

Mother summoned him to the hospital in the middle of the night. Mother was suffering from a bout of horrible thoughts about death.

“I will write a power of attorney for you right now. Go give him the damn money, I’ll have that operation. I want to live.”

“Turn off the lights, can’t we get some sleep?” the other patients in the ward were expressing their indignation. He had not managed to secure a private room for Mother.

“Shut up, you ain’t dying yet!” dear Mother hissed back at her roommates. “Worse than the cancer itself...”

The lights had to be turned off, but the Mother and the son went on whispering to each other in the darkness.

“Mother, a power of attorney has to be certified by a notary public, and they don’t work at night.”

“Go find one, maybe someone will be willing to strike a deal. And then take out the money right away and take it to that Zelenowitch. No, better yet, let that wife of yours bring it to him.”

At this point he told his Mother about the Zelenowitch's proposal. That was the first time the Mother had been gleeful since she had checked in the hospital.

"Certainly! There's nothing to shilly-shally about any longer. Why didn't you tell me all this yesterday? Why did you make me call you in the middle of the night instead? And you know how it is with the money – once you start withdrawing there will be no end to it!.. Quite soon we will be stripped naked and unable to afford even a decent burial."

"Hush you there!" once again somebody from the bunk bed nearby protested.

"But you do understand what he wants from her?"

Mother does understand.

"So how big a deal can it be for her anyway? If she was able to ensnare you..."

"She was a virgin when we first met... I have told you that a hundred times."

"She just faked it. I have also told you that a hundred times."

"Mother, this makes absolutely no difference right now. Tomorrow, well, actually tonight, she will be going to him. I only wish she would agree to do it."

"How would she dare not agree to do that for her Mother, who has done so much for her!"

"Mother has finally agreed to have an operation."

"And the money?"

"You see, the thing is..." he doesn't know how to begin. Even though in the past all their family predicaments have been resolved in a very simple way: he said what to do, she did it. And now the matter was.... Well, in the end he did explain to his wife what was required of her.

"Is that the one with the beard? The one who came up to us in the lobby?"

"Yes, the tall one. S-scoundrel."

"Do I have to go tonight?"

"Yes, here's the address. It's not far from Lvivska Square..."

The wife calmly walks into the bathroom. A while later she comes out in a black lingerie set. She sits down in front of the vanity. She pulls a cheap rubber band out of her hair. She does her hair in the latest style. She takes out a hair dryer and shapes the curls. She puts on her best designer suit, the one she might otherwise take out of the closet only on Mother's

birthday. The room fills up with the fragrance of her seductive perfume. Where did she manage to get that? She turns to her husband:

“I need a pair of new pantyhose.”

The husband is raging as a bull.

“Maybe you’d like some black fishnet stockings and garters too?”

“Would I?!”

“The patched-up pantyhose will do for him, that purebred sonofabitch.”

The wife puts on her patched-up pantyhose, her high boots, a blue overcoat, grabs a cute little bag and says on the way out:

“Will you pick up the little one after her music lessons?”

He is about to explode and smash everything in their home into smithereens. Every bit of it. Good Lord, he was so much in love with this woman ten years ago! Dear Mother had gone to Truskavets¹ for a month and a half. And he met this celestial babe in the meantime! Before that he had been dating only mature ladies, as they say, of twenty-five dash fifty. He always said that he had never given a thought to the possibility of a marriage, and he was absolutely sincere about it. Which made his Mother very happy. And suddenly that young thing popped up — beautiful, homeless, and madly in love. It was so easy for him to become her Lord Almighty. And now she is about to walk out to that green-eyed goat, with her fetching new hairstyle and her sexy lingerie. And he is even deprived of the right to fume in rage and frustration.

He expected his wife to return with tears in her eyes, as was the case whenever she would return alone from visiting Mother at hospitals. Mother would get hospitalized a few times a year. Mother loved it. She especially enjoyed being brought gifts and helped to a bed-pan. Which is why hardly anybody believed she was really ill this time around. He went to pick up his daughter, but they must have missed each other on the way. The little one got home alone. She immediately sat down to play her finger exercises.

“Oh, please, stop that racket! My ears can’t take that any more! Your Grandma has been saying for quite a while that you should to go in for visual arts instead.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“She went to see your Grandma.”

¹ Ukraine’s prettiest spa, situated in a picturesque valley of the Carpathian Mountains.

At this moment the Grandma calls from the hospital. She calls by herself, since none of the nurses would make the call for her, angry as they are with her.

“No, not back yet.”

“Heavens, when she is finally coming home? Say, did she at least put on a new pair of pantyhose? You know, once a country girl always a country girl.”

Dear Mother called twice more.

“O my God, God Almighty, she is taking her time to have fun there, while I am laid up here and suffering all alone. Didn’t I tell you who she really was?” He gets angry too and starts thinking: yes, she was really like that. Dear Mother tells him to call her back to the hospital once *she* comes home. He hears a car pulling up at the front. Two minutes later the wife enters. He sees the happy sparkles in her eyes. No trace of the tears he was so sure to expect.

“Mommy, where have you been? Grandma called and said you weren’t there.”

“I went to a birthday party. I told your Dad. Did he forget to tell you?”

“Well, I did, but you were going to be late. I’ve been expecting your call to pick you up on the way home. So how come you didn’t call?!” He fakes his righteous anger.

“I knew I would get a ride. Here, my Little Sweetie, they gave you something for your sweet little tooth,” She produces a tiny box of the exclusive “Bird’s Milk” chocolates from her cute handbag. In the bathroom she also takes out a small cardboard box with her old patched-up pantyhose stuffed inside, throws it on the floor and turns to face her husband:

“And you, why did you forget to give me the brandy? Well, it’s OK now anyways. Everything will be all right. There isn’t a better doctor in the world.”

The operation was a success. Dear Mother recovered quickly and forgot all about the dreadful diagnosis. Most importantly, though, Dr. Zelenowitch appeared to have ‘amputated’ a part of her unbearable persona. Yes, of course she still demanded plenty of special attention, but she would no longer send them to give a good talking-to to a store manager when she believed they had overpaid a penny or two for cheese or butter. She would no longer demand a bed-pan at the slightest ailment. She would no longer spread her propaganda to anyone and everyone about her daughter-in-law’s vices. Nonetheless she never ceased to be dissatisfied with her daughter-in-law’s abilities, or rather their failure, to be a real mother and a true housewife. Mother died two years later. The son insisted on a nobduction, since it was rumored that Dr. Zelenowitch would return a part of the money if

the patient expired within three years of the operation. The obduction showed that the organ on which Dr. Zelenowitch had operated had remained healthy .

Thereafter they lived without Mother. Each time he would start expressing his dissatisfaction with his wife, as programmed by the now-deceased, she would reply by recalling the minute details of Dr. Zelenowitch's apartment. She would describe his sitting room, the books in his study, the roses in the vase, kinds of brandy in his bar. This would shut him up, and she would stop her descriptions too, having never finished the story of what had actually happened there.

She remembered that cold and excruciating day in the fall more often than the first month after her husband and she had met. She had walked down the dark and wet street, mud splattering all over her beautiful legs in the patched-up pantyhose. She emptied the pockets of her blue overcoat and scraped around inside her cute little handbag. She gathered just enough change to buy a small import package with a pair of new pantyhose in a convenience store. She changed in a dark passageway, numbed by cold and fear, then got on a trolleybus. Somebody noticed the attractive woman and stood up to offer her a seat in a gentlemanly way. She thought, "God, where is it I am I going?" She got off at Lvivska Square and walked down a lane in search of the indicated tall building on the corner. She felt this evening would completely change her life.

Dr. Zelenowitch opened the door and said:

"A-ha, the charming daughter-in-law of the Klymenko Witch, isn't it? Please, come in."

There was someone else at home. She could not see who it was, but noticed the bright light and quiet voices coming from a kitchen or another room. Dr. Zelenowitch asked her to come to his study, adjacent to his sitting room. He closed the door and offered her to sit down. A delightful and mischievous smile settled on his face.

"O my God!" She cried out all of a sudden. "He forgot to give me the brandy!"

"Don't worry about the brandy. It doesn't really matter now. Look over here, I've got plenty of that stuff." He put a bottle, two glasses and a box of chocolates onto a coffee table. The chocolates were the "Bird's Milk", considered a true luxury at the time. "What does really matter is that you have come here. I haven't had such a charming lady here in a long time."

"I haven't been called a charming lady in a long time." She sighed. "Perhaps in my previous life."

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“No. But I’d love to.”

“So would I. In your previous life you were as lovely then as you are now. In my previous life I was some sort of a surgeon as well... Well, you know how much my surgery costs in this life and in this country. Let’s not get into the morals and ethicals of all this right now. I can assure you that I do help, for free, any decent person who needs my help and happens to be without money. Your mother-in-law is not one of them. Yet somehow I feel I just might help you personally, perhaps indirectly. And I’d like to do that. A toast to you.”

They had a drink. Then they had another. He was staring at her, at once audaciously and tenderly. Her uneasiness was fading.

“Rest assured. Everything will be all right. You will earn the adoration of your family. You do have a child, don’t you —a daughter or a son?”

“A daughter.”

“I have a daughter too. Please take this for your little girl.” He took the box of chocolates and handed it to her. The “Bird’s Milk”, a true luxury at the time. She opened up her cute little bag and a new box with her old pantyhose stuffed inside fell out and dropped to the floor. He bowed down, picked it up and handed back to her. Dr. Zelenowitch was an expert not only in the field of surgery. He appreciated how seriously this young lady took the task of performing what her family required.

“Let me give you a ride.” He helped her with her blue overcoat. They went downstairs and got into his car. Street lamp posts and window lights set out in motion outside.

“When I get too tired after the long day’s work, I like to drive around the town without any particular destination in mind.”

They drove along Artema Street, turned onto Soliana Street, then Hlybochytska Street. Ancient Khoryv Hill was a dark shape on their right, and the glitter of Schekavytsia twinkled on their left. She gazed at the city, eyes wide open, and it all looked somehow very different. She thought that for the first time in many years she did not have to worry about making it home on time. In Podil they pulled over to an old building with a wrought-iron gate.

“They make good coffee here. I wonder if it is still open”

Young men and women were laughing loudly inside the café. It was a strange life in the unknown world outside of her realm she knew nothing about.

“What is your name?” He asked her tenderly.

“Hanna.”

“A very good name. Donna Anna. The name of the woman Don Giovanni never seduced.”

“He was afraid of the Commendatore...”

“Well, first of all, Don Giovanni did not fear anything in the world at all. And second of all. Second of all, your husband is not the Commendatore.”

After the café they walked along the bank of the river. The Dnipro was murky. Old houses along the Khreschatyk Embankment floated past them. Dr. Zelenowitch told her about his adventures in those dark alleys ages ago, when, as a medical student, he moonlighted as paramedic.

The black city was flowing down the river of life, carried toward distant horizons. At last they arrived to her sleepy Kurenivka and pulled up on front of her dark house.

“Here you go, Donna Anna. Your perfume will linger behind in this car for a long time. Take good care of yourself! Everything will be just great. Still, may I give you one piece of my humble advice? Never ever in your life, and even on your deathbed, if, God forbid, you were to die earlier than your husband, never ever confess to him that, as they say, nothing happened between us. He is not worth it.”