An Evening Guest

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Translated from Russian by Leo Pasvolsky

The lamp throws a bright circle of even light on the table at which I am sitting. Everything beyond this circle is dark, empty, lifeless; everything is strange to me, forgotten by me. The whole world is concentrated in this small space, every ink stain of which, every cut and roughness is perfectly familiar to me. I want nothing else. The sheet of paper before me is blindingly white and its edges are sharply outlined against the green cloth. The seconds of the evening run by with gentle, hasteless monotony, and in that circle of light everything is simple, bright, congenial, close, familiar, and dreamy. I want nothing, nothing else!

But somebody knocks at my door. One, two, three. … In rapid and insistent succession come three dull, disquieting knocks. The dreamy fascination of the lighted circle immediately disappears, as a picture moves away from the screen. I am again in my room, in my home in the city. … Life has rushed in upon me, just as the noises of the street rush in through an open window.

Who is there on the other side of the door? In a moment he will enter my room, I shall see his face, hear the sound of his voice, take his hand. I shall touch him with my vision and my hearing, with my body and thought. Oh, how simple is all this, yet how mysterious, incomprehensible, almost terrifying!

For there is not a single phenomenon, however trifling, that would not leave in me its indelible trace. The quiet stirring of a mouse under my floor, and an execution, the birth of a child, and the rustle of a leaf in autumn, a storm on the ocean, and the ticking of a watch, the embrace of a loved woman, and an ordinary advertisement—everything, large and small, consciously or unconsciously perceived by me, touches my brain and traces on it unintelligible lines and curves. Every instant of my life leaves an indelible, though unconscious, impress on my character—on my love or hatred of life, my mind, my health, my memory, my imagination, my future life, and, perhaps, even on the life of my children and my grandchildren. But I know neither the sequence of events, nor the time of their coming, nor their elemental force, nor their hidden meaning. …

I do not know what will happen to me tomorrow. … Only the shallow, self-satisfied, dull pharisees, or the chosen clairvoyants, with extraordinarily sensitized spirits, know it—or deceive themselves and others into a belief that they know it. I do not know what will happen to me in an hour or in a minute. I live like a player, and fate turns constantly my wheel of surprises.

Why is it that gambling excites people? Because if we stake a certain sum on the nine of spades, we cannot tell beforehand where it will fall: if to the right, we lose; if to the left, we win; because before our very eyes the future immediately becomes the past, while our hopes and plans change into disappointment or joy; because a game of cards is also life, only more contracted and intensified, like life in a jar of oxygen; because in a game of cards we feel with our souls that before us walks a dread divinity that holds sway over probabilities and possibilities.

But the phenomena of plain, ordinary life do not affect us deeply; we live in their midst blindly and indifferently. And yet, every day, every hour, whether we eat, or hasten to a tryst, or sign a business document, or sit in a theatre, or play cards, or bring a new friend to our home, or buy or sell, or sleep or stay awake—in reality we are constantly drawing lots out of the colossal urn that life presents to us at each step. After all, in a game of cards there are only two chances: you either win or lose; while life has millions of chances, multiplied by other millions, and no tickets are blank. In a game of cards, when it is over, you pay in money immediately, while life has countless methods and dates of payment. Sometimes it pays with the miserliness of a moneylender, and sometimes with the extravagance of a man who has just come into a large fortune; sometimes its payment is open, like that of a charitable benefactor, and sometimes it is secret, like that of the Biblical widow; sometimes it pays with the suddenness and rapidity of a revolver shot, and sometimes with the slowness of an incurable disease. …

All this is inexplicable, mysterious, and, thanks to its simplicity, really dreadful. Imagine some tyrant, a real human tyrant, a madman endowed with genius, who becomes weary of the ordinary forms of enjoying his unlimited power, and hits upon the idea of introducing in his kingdom an annual lottery of life. On a certain hour of the appointed day, the soldiers would drive all the people to a public square, in the centre of which would stand an enormous vase filled with cards, definitely stating in detail the life of each person for the coming year. Everything that human ingenuity can devise is stated on some of these cards: wealth, fame, power, disgrace, imprisonment, love, suicide, honors, exile, war, labor, titles, torture, capital punishment. … Now try to imagine yourself awaiting your turn in a crowd of the unfortunate subjects of this exquisite tyrant. Oh, how your face would suddenly turn pale, how your knees would begin to shake; when you would be led to the fatal urn, how painfully your heart would beat with two diametrically opposed, yet equally potent, desires—to hasten and to postpone the moment of your choice! …

And yet, we draw lots every day; only through blindness, superstition, cowardice, or plain habit, we never notice this, do not want to notice, do not think about it or believe in it. A man says: “I will order my life in such a way.” Another says: “I know that a year or two, or ten years from now, I shall still be sitting in this chair, signing papers.” Still another man is more certain of the fact that until his very death he will not leave the walls of his asylum than he is of the fact of his very existence. … And if their confidence will not deceive them, these self-satisfied men will say to themselves or to their children, or to their friends: “Now,

you see, I wanted to get those honors, and I got them. Persistence and labor will bring you anything you desire. Every man forges his own happiness." But their words are just as foolish and naive as the words of the man who says, in order to prove his independence of fate, "Now I will strike the table with my finger," and does strike. And the former think even more foolishly than the latter, because their foolishness is more complicated and intricate.

For, in the first place, once a man becomes petrified in any one definite and final form, he enters upon the first symptomatic phase of death, for life consists in constant motion. In the second place, if we could show him, *as he is today*, his soul of *that time*, he would be astonished and would not believe that the soul is really his, and if he would believe it, he would be at a loss to explain those influences and concatenations through which it could have undergone such amazing changes. And in the third place, this man, who recognizes not the soul, but merely the filament that envelops it, will never understand that the most important phenomena of life—birth, love, and death—evidently for the purpose of striking us with terror, are subjected to the uncertitude of chance.

Who of us knows the meaning and the cause of our appearance in the world? Surely, our parents know least about it. In the conception and the birth of a child, in the formation of its soul and its body, and therefore in the determination of its whole future life, thousands of causes play an equally important part. The dinner eaten during the day, the odor of flowers in the garden, the fragmentary tune implanted in the conscious memory—all these are possible factors, and there are thousands upon thousands of others. And the simplest and, apparently, least important of them, which remains unnoticed and totally forgotten, may prove to be the most important and potent cause.

It is the same in love. Who can tell when, where, and how we shall become enthralled by its power, beautiful, destructive, or disgusting? One can never know beforehand either one's wife or one's lover. A friend introduces me to some of his friends; while there, I meet others; through these, I meet a woman hitherto totally unknown to me. And when I am introduced to her, I do not know that at that moment I drew a ticket out of the urn of fate, upon which is written the following: "You are destined to eat at the same table with this woman for many years to come, to sleep next to her, to have children with her, to be called her husband." And how many times does it happen that two men, who are longing for years for an opportunity to meet, pass each other in the street, even touch elbows, and separate once more, perhaps never to meet again!

And the children! Have I ever thought of them before? Can I tell even approximately what part of my body, my mind, and my soul I shall transmit to them? And not mine alone; but those of my father and grandfather and great-grandfather. Can I foresee all the occurrences, scarcely noticeable to me, but capable of proving fatal to my child, of leaving indelible traces on its soul?

And the end of all this is brought by death, by the true, yet most accidental guest of all, for whose coming we prepare ourselves involuntarily by our dress, our drink, our food, our home, our dispositions, our love, and hatred.

No, I know nothing of this life, understand nothing. With obedient, dull fear I draw my lot, and cannot even read the unintelligible inscription upon it.

And never before has this been so clear to me as on this night when the disquieting knock was heard at my door. “Here is fate,” rushed through my mind, “come with her magic wheel.” I must go and draw my lot. Who can tell whether the person standing behind my door has brought me joy or grief, love or hatred? Will his coming mark a turning-point of my life, or will it glide past, leaving a scarcely perceptible trace, which I shall immediately forget, and not recall until death or even beyond it? And a superstitious thought comes to me that if I were to ask loudly, “Who is there?” an indifferent, scarcely audible voice would answer: “Fate.”

I say: “Enter!” Not a second intervenes between the sound of his knocking and my reply, but the thoughts which rushed through my head during that short interval of time have lifted up a corner of the curtain beyond which is hidden a black abyss; they have already aged me. And I feel that the nervous knock has already drawn invisible threads between the man on the other side of the door and myself.

Now he opens the door. Another instant, and the simplest, yet the most incomprehensible of things will take place. We shall begin to talk. With the aid of sounds of different pitch and intensity, he will express his thoughts in the customary form, while I shall receive those sound vibrations and decipher their meaning, and the other man’s thoughts will become mine.

Oh, how unintelligible to us, how mysterious, how strange are the commonest phenomena of life! And without understanding them, without conceiving of their true significance, we pile them one on the other, intertwine them, connect them, broaden them; we meet people and marry, write books, preach sermons, establish ministries, fight wars, conduct trade, make new inventions, and write history! And every time that I think of the vastness, complexity, darkness, and elemental accidentally of this general intertwining of lives, my own life appears to me like a tiny speck of dust, lost in the fury of a tempest. …