



NIGHT shift

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Sveta Rychkova

1.

A cocktail of odours filled her senses; urine, cheap perfume and death mingled in the still air of the room making Sveta feel nauseous. An elderly patient had died that afternoon following a long battle against a remorseless disease, a disease whose name Sveta had already forgotten along with the old woman's name. She stripped the bed of the stained sheets and began to collect the belongings of another dead soul.

God knows how many times she had performed this task. It had become a routine task in her ward and she barely felt any pang of emotion while removing any evidence of this person's existence. Today there was something different about the room, though. She dropped the woman's nightdress on the bed and stood still, it felt as though the air was being sucked from the room.

Feeling dizzy, she forced herself to the window and looked for the latch, but there was nothing there. She glanced out of the ninth-floor window and all she could see was her own exhausted face staring back. Panic began to grip her nerves, her shaking hands searched her pockets for one tablet that would set the world straight again but she found nothing.

She closed her eyes and tried to control herself. She felt a presence in the room that seemed to ease some small part of her twisted stomach. Her eyes opened and she could see a man reflected in the glass of the window. The man was horribly short and was dressed in a bleached-white doctor's coat that was far too big for him. In his hand, between thumb and forefinger, he held a single pill as white as his coat.

A mixture of disgrace, desperation and shame filled Sveta, as she began to remove her uniform. The short man continued to stare at the subservient nurse, never blinking, his expression unchanging from one of an impassive observer. Sveta lay face down on the bed naked and waited for the short man to rape her.

"Morning Sveta!" called out the director making Sveta jump, "How is my little ray of light this morning?" She didn't know whether the daydream or reality was worse, she looked up and gave a thin smile. Her boss disturbed her, for some strange reason he was too thin to trust. She couldn't remember if there was a saying in Russian about skinny men, but her mother had certainly commented about them, although her mother distrusted everybody. Anyway, his weight aside, there was something sinister in his eyes; she felt he fed upon her soul and greedily consumed her body, but what could she

do?

“He was a patient of mine, you know. His father had similar problems in the end,” remarked the director. Sveta looked back at the director with a confused look, the director pointed at a man she had been watching absentmindedly. The man reminded her of a geisha dressed in a dark brown suit. He walked with his arms seemingly stuck to his sides and the steps he took were very tiny, which made him move like a camel, his body swaying from one side to the other.

“His father was a policeman and his mother was a nurse...” the director was always discussing his patients, especially with Sveta. The director seemed to have no other substance in his life worth talking about so he abused the patient’s confidentiality for mere small talk or material with which to flirt his intellect, “I have noticed that kids whose parents wear uniforms always have problems. Of course, I don’t want to generalise anything...”

Sveta wasn’t listening. She was watching the geisha man as he shuffled away from the grounds of the hospital. It looked as though it was about to rain, the heavy grey clouds hung overhead, but the man didn’t have a hat or an overcoat, and she already felt cold under her raincoat. As the man passed through the open iron gates, he stopped and appeared to be lost in deep thought, Sveta wondered what he was thinking.

“Sveta, are you coming or going?” Sveta blinked and looked at the director stood in front of her. He knew that she was leaving; she always worked the nightshift just to avoid him and the looks of her fellow nurses. Four years of five days a week, nine at night until seven-thirty in the morning, it was her time to hide from the world and live among the crazy and senile, which made her feel normal for a few hours each day.

“I’m leaving, Mr. Director.” Nobody ever called him doctor and none of the nurses had ever seen him examine a patient, all she knew was that he examined her with his eyes and never revealed the diagnosis. He was staring at her and she could start to feel her face beginning to burn and her spine becoming ice cold. Her arms hugged herself, as though she was instinctively protecting herself from harm. The director placed a reassuring hand upon her arm and she bit her tongue to stop from screaming.

The director glanced in the direction of his slow-moving patient, “Please follow him for a bit and make sure he takes the right bus to the centre.” Sveta mechanically replied, “Of course, Mr. Director,” but she knew what he really meant by his words. Her flesh crawled as she imagined him moving his hand under her grey raincoat and unbuttoning her blue cotton dress, “Very well, Sveta, have a nice day.”

The director turned and walked inside the building leaving her standing there, her left hand nervously fingered a small pill inside her coat pocket hoping that some of its properties would be absorbed through her fingertips. She didn’t look back; she didn’t want him to understand that she knew. She was sure he was watching her. She walked through the iron gates guarding the hospital and spotted the brown coat moving slowly at the end of the street.

2.

There was a bottle of vodka behind the two volumes of Lenin on the bookshelf, beside the flowers was another and a third was beneath the toilet paper in the bathroom. Sveta was sure that there were more in the bedroom but she never dared look. Her mother had a problem with alcohol and her memories were filled with phone calls from her father saying he would not be home that night.

Sveta would come home from school, the same school her alcoholic mother taught at, and prepare dinner for Margarita, her younger sister. At some point, their mother would fall through the front door and sit in the small sitting room watching television. When her father would not come home, her mother would remove one of the bottles from its secret hiding place and begin to search for the bottom.

Their mother would walk on them in the kitchen some nights, while Sveta helped her sister with her homework, "Mother, Sveta is so good at mathematics," beamed Margarita, but her mother's palm would strike her face before she could finish her sentence. Her fingers would catch the side of the ear and the long nails scratched the young skin. "No, mother, she didn't do anything!" Sveta would cry running across the room.

She was fast; she had learnt to be fast when protecting her sister. Her mother had removed the thin brown leather belt from her trousers and was raising her arm in the air, but Sveta had managed to cover her sister and took the punishment from their incensed mother. The belt whipped her neck and bit her back; strangely, there was never any pain during the actual beating, although it certainly came later.

Sveta gingerly touched her neck clearly remembering the pain from her childhood and felt the tears in her eyes. She dug in her coat pocket for a tissue when she suddenly felt a small object within the depths of her pocket. She had finally found it, she pulled the pill out and dry swallowed it, something that she had learnt after a few years of practice and necessity. One moment nine-year-old Margarita was crying and then she was gone, replaced by rain and a man in a brown coat some thirty metres in front of her standing at the bus stop.

She slowed down; she didn't want to feel as though he was being followed when she noticed a dark blue taxi approach from the other side of the street. Something about the taxi was out of place, perhaps it was because it was blue and not yellow like in all the movies, but then she saw the taxi driver was dark skinned. At first, she thought the windows were tinted, but the driver was definitely black.

Back home in Leningrad, she could never think of it as Saint Petersburg, there were some students from Nigeria and Uganda but she rarely met them. They were usually around the library and the Nevsky Prospect, plus a few of the cafes where the students hung out. She was ashamed to admit it but she was scared, even terrified, of black men ever since she was convinced that a black man would kill her one day. She had seen her killer's face clearly in a dream one night, the details in his face, his lips, his facial hair and even the lines under his eyes.

The taxi was moving closer and closer to her, she could feel her heart thumping in her chest and a chill spread across her body. What was she doing? Why would this black taxi driver want to kill her? She was going insane; the exhaustion of a full night of patients acting like children, screaming, wetting the bed and another always trying to put his hand up her skirt was taking its toll. She didn't know why she had agreed to the director's request. The man in the brown coat was not even his patient any more and she didn't owe the doctor any favours, why didn't she just go home?

She stood a few metres away from Mr. Brown Coat at the bus stop at nervously played with the strap of her handbag. The driver was definitely looking at her, it could be him, but from this distance and in the rain she could not be sure. Her fingers were moving towards the blister pack of tablets in her bag, but she knew she had to ration them until she could restock on tonight's shift. How could the pill be wearing off already?

Through the car's front windshield, she could see his eyes calculating how he was going to kill her. Maybe the taxi would suddenly speed up in the last metres and hit her. He would then throw the car into reverse and go over her once more, until nobody would recognize her body or her Russian round face. She would have to think quickly to outsmart the man who was now smiling at her with his thick killer lips.

At that moment, the bus to the city centre growled round the corner and stopped. Mr Brown Coat climbed on board and Sveta realised this was her chance to escape her killer. She rationed that it was better to take the wrong bus than be killed, so she followed the man on board and took a seat opposite him. After her near-death experience, she permitted herself another tablet. She closed her eyes and began to relax; it was only a twenty-minute ride to the centre.

3.

“Good evening, Mr. Sveta Rychkov!” It was her sister’s joke ever since the authorities had printed it incorrectly on her identification card. Sveta had tried in vain to explain that she was a woman and, therefore, her Russian surname should be ‘Rychkova’, but she gave up after months of bureaucracy. Margarita had called her during her nightshift asking her how she was because she had been worrying about the headaches for which Sveta was always taking tablets. Margarita had noticed during one of her weekend visits and had started asking questions, but Sveta changed the subject quickly and asked about their mother’s health.

Their mother was back in hospital, which was paid for by Sveta. Her mother didn’t scream anymore and she was so obese that she couldn’t move, so all she did was watch television. Sveta had often considered bringing the rest of her family to join her but something inside her stopped her from asking. She supported them all instead, even though her younger sister had a part-time job as a babysitter, but it was nowhere near enough.

She had forgotten the man in the brown suit. She hadn’t even noticed if he gotten off the bus before her. She hung up her coat in the café and waited for her order to be brought to her table. Many of the tables were empty, since everybody was coming in for take-out coffee, which was a phenomenon that she couldn’t understand. Morning coffee had to be strong and you should sit down to enjoy it. People here don’t appreciate good coffee. What does a Russian know about coffee when they all drink tea? She knew that it should not be enjoyed from a small plastic cup in a rush to work.

Her large mug of coffee had been placed on the table, but she was absorbed in the events out in the harbour. Many of the morning boats were returning from their early start and the fishermen were preparing to head home. What was home to her? A single bed and an old closet from the flea market, a small kitchen table with three chairs and a desk that she had positioned in front of her only window. She unsure about the flowery curtains with big yellow and red flowers, but she wanted to send the money to her sister rather than buy home furnishings.

The aroma of the coffee brought her mind back to the table in the café, she had to start saving and break Margarita out of the daily life prison of Leningrad, but despite her feelings towards her mother she could leave her alone in Russia. Life was so complicated. She felt her fingers shaking while trying to warm them against the mug of hot coffee.

She checked her watch, it read twenty to nine. The supermarkets would open in twenty minutes, but she only needed ten minutes to reach the little Russian shop near the tramline. She craved some fresh tomatoes and a jar of Monouri Feta, and maybe a packet of her favourite dark chocolates as a breakfast treat. Her attention was caught by a young Chinese or Indonesian girl that had sat at a table in the far corner. She wished she had the ability to distinguish between the nationalities but they all looked the same. However, this girl was quietly crying as she poured her tea.

Sveta felt uncomfortable when faced with other’s emotions, which was one of

the other reasons she worked the nightshift. She never had to deal with visitors crying or family grieving, when a patient died during the night the next shift had to phone the next of kin and inform them of the bad news. Her job was to package them down to the morgue and prepare the room for the next patient.

She never felt any emotion when she discovered another elderly patient had died during the night; it was part of the job. A death gave her slightly less to do during that night, with fewer bedpans, fewer tablets and one less person ringing the buzzer. She hated the doctors the most due to the amount of extra work they heaped on nurses through prescribing conflicting tablets, through either inability or disinterest.

On her ward, the doctors would prescribe all these pills without caring what would happen later at night. Sveta discovered that one PM in combination with a TN for their heart meant that the patient would not control their bladder. They needed to be in the toilet every two hours, so it was difficult for them to fall asleep and tiring for her.

One night a male patient was being overly abusive, he shouted and screamed at her, "I know, little tart. Your father fucks all the prostitutes in Afghanistan and you fucked all the boys at school. I know because I've been watching you! Go and bring my pills now, I have a headache. You fucking bitch, don't move from there, I haven't finished with you." Sveta decided not administer the second pill that night, which put the elderly man to sleep that night and in the morgue by the end of the month.

Sveta's workload dramatically reduced, so she continued to skip the second pill and began to hide the evidence. After nearly being caught out by the director, she began to take the tablets home and soon decided to try a couple to calm her down following an emotional phone call with her sister about their mother. Sveta could not believe how she had gone so far and refused to believe that she was in control of her actions.

Another 'sweet', as she had started to call them, was washed down with the last drop of her coffee and she got up to leave feeling the immediate effects rush through her body. As Sveta walked passed the window of the café she saw that the young Asian girl was watching her walk passed, whether it was the soothing effect of the recently taken pill but Sveta looked back and marvelled at the beauty of her sad Asian eyes.

The rain was beating down now, but the high from the tablet made the weather seem insignificant. She knew a shortcut through the mall to the little Russian shop and found she had instinctively taken shelter there. The electric feeling of connection with the Asian girl was beginning to fade and she could not allow that to happen so soon, so she took her fourth pill in as many hours.

4.

It was always so hard to sleep after every nightshift and taking a few of her tablets. She would lay awake listening to the thump of her heart and wonder whether each would be the last. Eventually she would drift off into a restless sleep that never left her refreshed, especially with some of the dreams and nightmares from which she would suffer. At six, her alarm rang and she could not recall the last time she had a worse sleep.

The day was slowly becoming dusk and some streetlamps had switched on, beneath one Sveta could make out the figure of a short man. She opened the curtains further and recognised the man's face, but she struggled to place him. She looked down at her desk where a framed photo of her sister sat and she remembered the connection. When Margarita had last come to visit, she had met him somewhere in the centre...no, she had met him in the Greek restaurant in which he worked as a waiter.

Sveta saw it clearly now. Margarita thought that he was funny because he was so short, with such a big belly and thick moustache. Sveta was getting angry at her sister's teasing flirtation. Margarita was so small, innocent and naïve. She knew this Greek's type. She had seen him watching her during the whole meal and now he was watching her apartment from the pavement below.

She looked again through the curtains. He was there looking up at her window. He must have something on his mind, he was probably waiting for Margarita to appear and then take advantage of her innocence. Or he wanted to get Sveta out of the way first, so she couldn't stop him. Sveta knew very well about these types of men. They pretend to be fun and friendly, and then when they are ready to kill their body unfolds into something gigantic and monstrous. Her mother had warned her about men with moustaches and she knew from experience that her mother had told her truth that time. She grew up in a country that suffered at the hands of a short man with a moustache, so nobody knew better than she did. What do all these people around here know about short men with a moustache?

From the corner of her eye, she spotted the small envelope that contained her sweets. She must have taken them from her handbag before going to bed and swallowed just one to help her sleep. She should be more careful with these sweets. She might fall asleep and be unable to react when this short guy would attack her demanding to know where her sister is, which she would not tell so his only choice would be violence.

Once more, she would have to go to school and say that it was her dog. Nobody at school knew that her mother hated dogs; anyway, they could never believe what her mother, a teacher in the same school, was capable of doing. Her father was a good soldier fighting for the interests of the mother country, but her mother had even tainted his brave memory, "He's there screwing all those Afghan women and eating their food. Playing the general with his good uniform and what is left for me? I tell you what is left for me, to punish him!"

Her mother's voice screamed in her brain whenever she tried to think of her poor father, she pushed his face further and further from her mind until there was only a box

of medals left. Sveta paced the small room of her apartment trying to decide what she should do. She took some chocolate from the desk and returned to the window. He had left. The kitchen clock read three-thirty. He was starting work soon. She knew his time schedule because she had been watching him over the last four months. He was always going to work at three-thirty and he was always waking up around the time she was arriving home. It made her uncomfortable that she had never seen a woman in his house, but she knew seep down why: she must be his target.

How had it all become so complicated? Why was Margarita worrying so much? She now regularly asked her about the headaches and whether she continued to take those pills for it. Sveta had lied to her that they were a new type of headache pill, but Margarita was studying to be a nurse just like her older sister. She knew that they were not for headaches, but her younger sister didn't understand. It was not easy being Sveta Rychkov, Margarita was Margarita Rychkova and that's always easier. This damn 'a' made all the difference. Here she was nothing; she had even lost her name. There, she was her mother's daughter and now she didn't know which was worse.

Sveta had met a great guy a couple of years before, but she thought that he was too nice for her. She couldn't cope with nice. After his own nightshift, he would come in to visit his mother in hospital and always stopped and chatted with her. He was never threatening and she even looked forward to his smile. His mother died suddenly while she was off-shift and she never saw him again. She couldn't recall if she started stealing the pills that day or if she'd taken them since leaving Russia; her mind had begun to play tricks of time upon her.

Since leaving the hospital that morning, Sveta realised that she eaten only chocolate and her special sweets. She had even forgotten to stop by the little Russian shop because of the rain...had it rained, maybe that was yesterday. It explained why she was shaking and could barely hold the pencil as she wrote a brief shopping list. She managed to write 'milk' at the top but she failed to read her own handwriting due to the shakes becoming worse. Her head was spinning and her stomach shot pains up and down her legs, she was feeling nauseous again.

The mirror reflected back the skeletal image of Sveta. She had become lighter than the clothes she wore and the image in front of her shocked her. How had she let herself deteriorate so badly? Her breasts were shrunken and she could clearly see the outline of her ribs, she was still proud of her legs but even they seemed drained of colour. Her eyes were stuck to the stranger in the mirror, each of her senses heightened by the shock, maybe it was time to flush the tablets and start a new life.

A creak from inside her walk-in closet made her jump and she spun round to see a shadow move beneath the door. Had she imagined it or was there somebody hiding? She tried to ignore it, but the sound came again, slower and more controlled the second time. She held her breath as her eyes searched the room for a weapon, but there was nothing threatening enough; all the knives were in the kitchen on the other side of the closet. She spotted a brooch that her mother had given her on one of her early birthdays, its pin was sharp and could do damage if necessary. Her mind repeatedly flashed images of the short Greek, the director, the black taxi driver as she crept towards the door.

Her movements were slow for no other reason than she couldn't move faster. All her body was shaking now. She would open the door and try to scream or scream first. She couldn't scream if she couldn't breath; the air suddenly was so dry. She needed a pill. No, no she needed one of her precious sweets. She threw open the closet door preparing to attack the intruder with the brooch pin, but it was empty.

Empty, but her ears were still filled with the deep breathing. She began to laugh uncontrollably until she became hysterical. She was creeping around her tiny apartment naked holding a tiny brooch pin to attack herself. What's wrong with me? Perhaps Margarita is right. I take too many pills; she thought and continued to get dressed.

5.

One hand gripped the shopping list and the other pushed the shopping trolley. She didn't know why she had taken a trolley, there were only five items on her list, but she enjoyed the power of controlling the metal vehicle and she feared that her strength couldn't hold a basket for long. She tossed some milk, crackers and pasta into the trolley, then headed to the chilled section. She would love to have some ham, but she was never sure about its quality, probably another of her mother's issues subconsciously affecting her. She moved to the next aisle for toilet paper and froze. He was there again.

What often does that man work? He seemed to be there every time she was there. She knew he was Mexican; he had told her. He told her one day when she was looking at all these Mexican food tins. He had told her in her dreams too. He had begun to appear in her dreams regularly, especially one scenario that she remembered clearly. The Mexican was filling a freezer chest when the lights in the store would all go out. Sveta would suddenly find herself bent over the freezer chest with her panties around her ankles; she wanted to scream but no sound would leave her lips.

Before the Mexican could touch her, Sveta would wake up sweating and automatically grab one of the pills beside her bed. She would swear that the dreams were caused by something she had eaten, but Sveta knew deep down that her diet was not the cause of her nightmares. In another dream, the Mexican would force feed her cheese until Sveta suffocated and then abuse her unconscious body; Sveta was no dream analyst but she knew that there was something wrong with these.

The toilet paper aisle was empty, where had he gone? She looked around and she couldn't see him. He knew that she knew he wanted to kill her and then rape her, because that was in her dreams as well. The cashier packed her shopping and left the shop before the Mexican could return from wherever he was.

She made a cup of coffee and watched the birds circling in the sky. It was so funny that she came all this way for a better future and now she found herself living in a small apartment in a strange city, while back home she had a room bigger than her whole apartment in a beautiful house with a big garden – also nobody was trying to kill or sexually attack her. They hate her. That's it; they hate the successful. They feel jealous, they are all jealous and that's why they try to kill her.

The time was just after six and she still had another three hours before she started work. She made another cup of coffee and turned on the television immediately muting the sound. She always kept the volume turned off, so she could imagine what the conversation was discussing. It was probably about their kids because that's what all the people talk about on television lately. Their kids! She thought of the strange family in the neighbouring apartment: Four people living in 50-square-metres screaming all the time with the television blaring twenty-four hours a day.

She was feeling calm now. The sound of their television filtered into her apartment. It was strange how she had become used to it. When they first moved in everything about them bothered her, nowadays she could barely hear them. He seemed to be at

work all the time and, for a strange reason, the kids never seemed to be away at school or something. That was insane, but none of her business.

The wife was there all the time. She watched everybody from the security of her veil. Sveta was sure that she had green eyes but sometimes these Arabs have green and blue eyes. Her eyes were not good eyes; they were the eyes of evil. Perhaps these Arabs perform some kind of black magic. Sveta wondered if she was under some strange spell that made her rely upon these little sweets everyday, she looked on the desk and she only had a few left to last until the start of her shift.

She should be extra careful tonight, the weekend was coming and she had to take some extra sweets. She would give only one pill to the old Arab women on her ward; she doesn't need a second. She could also take a couple of extra packets from the store. She always thought that the pills had a weird bitter taste similar to the smell that Arabs leave behind them. Why do Arabs all have this funny aroma?

If that woman didn't hate her so much, she could ask the old Arab lady. Perhaps she wanted to kill her, there was a look in her eyes sometimes, but Sveta knew that she didn't have the strength or speed to beat a young nurse. Maret hadn't called today. Maret worked for a company that cleaned offices during the night. Her husband had left her two years ago and since then they had become closer. It was weird, in the beginning they were on the same bus every single morning, but had never met. Something happened, Sveta wished she could remember what, and they became friends. In fact, Maret was her only friend.

Why had Maret asked her about the headaches? It seemed that Maret was asking the same thing as Margarita. Maret was always reading these women's magazines packed full of health facts and statistics, she was always telling Sveta about nurse statistics, such as five percent of nurses in the USA have, one way or another, been for a period of their professional life a victim of drugs. Why had she picked that particular snippet of information? Was she trying to say something? Why couldn't her friend mind her own business?

Maret was dating a man with ginger hair and a strange name. Maybe Maret wouldn't want to see her so much anymore or her new male friend wouldn't want Maret to be friends with Sveta. She now understood why her mother had warned her about ginger-haired men, but this guy was good. The strange-named guy was Dutch or something like that; she liked him when they all went out on that double date with the ginger's Irish friend. Sveta had drunk lemon juice all night, despite protests from all three of her companions; she never drank alcohol, but how could she explain about her mother?

During that evening, the ginger guy had told them that his name meant 'warrior' and his surname meant 'dark foreigner'. A chill ran down Sveta's spine. Dark foreigner. She was the foreigner. Just as she was beginning to convince herself that Dark Foreigner had other things on his mind, the Irish guy joked that he didn't believe a ginger-haired bloke could be a dark foreigner warrior and everybody laughed. Sveta put the pill back in her pocket and took a sip of her lemon juice.

