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Sorrow and Company

Both Anton Chekhov's "Enemies" and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's "A Guest," explore the concept of human sorrow, particularly the way in which sorrow is a subjective experience, its severity often not understood by anyone else. In "Enemies," Abogin, a man who believes his wife to be at the brink of death, begs Kirilov, a doctor whose son has just died, to leave his grieving wife and attempt to save Abogin's wife. The more that Abogin disrupts Kirilov with his own unhappiness, the more that Kirilov is grounded in the conviction that Abogin's problems are merely trivial nuisances, putting both men in a mutually destructive rage. Similarly, despite inviting her friend Tolya into her home, the narrator in "A Guest" is extremely dismissive of Tolya's depressive and even suicidal thoughts, always redirecting conversations about his pain and focusing on surface-level, insignificant details from their evening together. However, where Kirilov and Abogin both suffer from inconsolable grief, which makes their displaced rage toward each other inevitable, the narrator of "A Guest" is not consumed by sorrow and therefore should still be able to listen to Tolya, making it all the more tragic when she does not.

Even at the beginning of "Enemies," there is already a contrast in the ways that Kirilov and Abogin handle their grief, foreshadowing the way in which their individual suffering will be unable to coexist. As conveyed by his physical presence, Kirilov is so struck by grief that he is initially unable to process what Abogin is asking of him, even though Abogin claims that his wife's life is at stake: "Judging by his unsteady, mechanical steps...at that instant he had no intentions, no desire, no thoughts of any kind,

and probably no longer remembered that there was a stranger standing in the entryway” (88). Kirilov’s first reaction to tragedy is complete numbness, both with regard to the loss itself and to his surroundings in general. The use of the word “mechanical” emphasizes this sense, showing how Kirilov allows himself to be controlled by thoughtless movements. He is later described not only as moving mechanically, but also as being “bewildered” by his body and its motion, and this sense of disembodiment is unnerving in a doctor, whose job is to be attuned to every inch of the body (88). Consequently, Kirilov’s distance from the physical world allows for his grief to be a peaceful and beautiful entity, since he is blocking out the gruesome reality of his son’s deathbed: “The repellent horror people tend to associate with death was entirely absent from the bedroom. There was something in the overall insensibility, in the mother’s pose, in the equanimity on the doctor’s face that appealed to and touched the heart – it was the subtle, nearly imperceptible beauty of human sorrow” (89). The overall tone of this passage is one of melancholy and delicacy, focusing on the figurative “insensibility” of the mourners, rather than the literal insensibility of the dead.

Kirilov seems to be utterly calm in this moment, presenting a front of “equanimity,” but his calmness contrasts eerily with Abogin’s panic and desperation. Upon seeing that Kirilov still hasn’t prepared to leave his son and grieving wife, Abogin says, “My God – and here I thought you had gone to get ready! Doctor, time is of the essence. Let us go, I entreat you” (90). In contrast to Kirilov, Abogin’s mind seems to be overworking in his state of panic, as Abogin speaks in dramatic, exclamatory terms. There is a sense of urgency in Abogin’s words, especially considering his focus on time,

snapping Kirilov out of his numbness and gentle melancholy before he is ready. Since these men are at antipodal mental states, their emotional collision seems imminent.

In “A Guest,” however, the narrator is in an emotional state in which she is fully capable of hearing Tolya’s plea for help, but she instead overlooks the severity of Tolya’s problem, as conveyed by her dismissive tone of narration. The narrator begins the story by admitting to her lack of attention to Tolya’s underlying mental health issue, yet she still sounds nonchalant while doing so: “The whole enterprise was mad from the start, of course – drinking beer with vodka. But for some reason I paid no great heed to it, I was past caring that evening. Or maybe, on the contrary, that was the thing I paid heed to most” (266). The fact that in her introduction of the situation with Tolya, the narrator chooses to focus on the specific idea of simply drinking beer with vodka, rather than delving more deeply into the reason why Tolya would attempt to become extremely intoxicated epitomizes the way in which she treats Tolya’s unhealthy thoughts as a whole. She admits being “past caring,” yet even in her recount of the events, she keeps her tone light, such as with the description “mad enterprise” for a very serious situation.

The narrator’s attitude of nonchalance is especially present in the way that the narrator neglects to describe Tolya’s thoughts themselves: “‘But Tolya’ I say, after this long, boring account of how a man’s fate gets determined even before he’s born, ‘why do you go on ringing me up? You keep ringing and ringing. Sometimes when I pick up the phone you must sense, don’t you, the way I’m talking to you, how uneasy the whole thing makes me?’” (268). The narrator dismisses Tolya’s thoughts as being “long, boring,” showing how she rejects the opportunity to help him. Moreover, not only is the narrator overlooking Tolya’s pain, but she redirects that pain to herself, changing the

conversation from Tolya's feelings of predetermination to the way that Tolya's calls make her "uneasy." This redirection shows the way that the narrator's self-absorption is in fact dangerous, as in changing the subject she is missing the suicidal cues in Tolya's defeatist language.

When Kirilov and Abogin learn that Abogin's wife is not ill, but rather has feigned sickness in order to leave him, their discovery of the truth catalyzes their joint emotional eruption. The discovery at first exacerbates Abogin's frantic sorrow: "'She has deceived me!' he cried, drawing out the *eee* in deceived. 'She deceived me! Just to leave me!'" (94). Abogin's dialogue becomes more dramatic, full of repetition and drawn-out syllables. However, this time, Abogin's frenzied misery snaps Kirilov out of his numbness, fueling him with a new emotion: anger. As Abogin continues to express his utter despair with regard to his wife, Kirilov finally snaps: "The indifference and surprise on his face gave way little by little to an expression of bitter resentment, indignation, and anger. His features became even sharper, coarser, and more unpleasant" (96). Kirilov has now lost his equanimity, and the sorrow that had initially left his features peaceful and beautiful has now evolved into something harsh and ugly, making his features "sharp," "unpleasant," and "bitter." The resulting insults thrown between the two men are described as being the most "unjust, cruel, and absurd" words they had ever spoken, and their respective unhappiness "wrenches them apart" in a manner that the previously invisible narrator of "Enemies" describes as being inevitable with unhappy people (97).

However, while the sorrow itself has become uglier, Kirilov's loss of equanimity finally allows for the men to find a way to channel their feelings of helplessness and

general frustration toward forces out of their control. Since Abogin's pain stems from the actions of a person, Abogin has been riled up to the point where he channels his anger in a fatal matter, preparing "to do a lot of foolish things," which implies that he is going to kill his wife (98). The fact that he kills the woman who brings about his sorrow conveys the way he tries to destroy the source of his unpleasant emotions once and for all, rather than allowing them to fester internally. Kirilov, on the other hand, whose pain stems from forces of nature, displaces all of his rage onto Abogin, which allows Kirilov to divert his attention away from his son: "All the way home the doctor thought not about his wife, nor about Andrey, but about Abogin and the people who lived in the house he had just left behind. His thoughts were unjust and inhumanly cruel. He condemned them all...and all the way home he hated and despised them to the point of pain in his heart" (98). Kirilov has become all-consumed by his hatred of Abogin, satisfying his need to express his anger through "inhumanly cruel" thoughts, which sets up an interesting juxtaposition with the seemingly ethereal beauty of his initial melancholy.

In contrast, rather than helping Tolya redirect or channel his negative thoughts, the narrator drives Tolya further into his cycle of despair, asking him a series of questions that remind him of his failures. She repeatedly mentions how he "used to be so charming, if it weren't for those jowls of [his]" (271). Her fixation on certain aspects of their encounter, such as Tolya's deteriorating appearance, the consumption of vodka and beer together, and the impression that their interaction will give to the neighbors reflects the cyclical way Tolya thinks, as, earlier on, the narrator describes how Tolya "always goes on and on so long, so tediously, agonizing over the same old thing" (267). The fact that the narrator acts similarly to her unfavorable description of Tolya's repetitive

tendencies reveals not only her insensitivity, but also her lack of self-awareness. As a result, the narrator evolves from Tolya's last source of hope to one of the final pushes toward total despair: "Once during the night Tolya jumped up and muttered, quick as a flash, 'There used to be an exit in this room, and now there's no exit'" (271). Tolya had thought that the narrator could be an "exit," or a way to break his cycle, but she misses her opportunity to be his escape. Tragically, Tolya finds no other "exit" after his visit with the narrator, leaving him believing that he has no choice but to end his life.

While both "Enemies" and "A Guest" depict the way in which unhappiness leaves little room for company, often driving suffering people apart, the wedge created by the disparate sorrows of Kirilov and Abogin propels the two into new emotional states in "Enemies," whereas the wedge brought about by the narrator's ignorance in "A Guest" only exacerbates Tolya's unhappiness. The contrast between these two encounters is especially apparent in the lasting effects of the confrontations, as the only character who remains in the grasp of his initial sorrow is Tolya. Where Kirilov and Abogin move past their grief, whether by holding onto hatred rather than sorrow or by channeling sorrow into action, Tolya remains fixed in the state he is in that night: a state that has fatal consequences.

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