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ENGL 302-01

07 December 2022

A Welcome Pain

Imagine, if you will, a time in your life in which you felt a palpable sense of sorrow and hurt. A pain that lingers, and sticks, and continues to hurt as time goes on. A pain that you would never wish upon a soul. Loss; Grief; Broken; Abused. Regardless of what situation you imagined, all of us can imagine a time in which we felt broken and beaten beyond repair. And yet, people continue to find solace in stories in which purposely invoke those emotions inside of them, and yet, they enjoy it. While not everyone is afforded the ability to re-experience that pain due to the extent of the lingering scars left by real life trauma, it cannot be denied that stories that hurt us are by far the most impactful forms of media that exist. Vladimir Nabokov illustrates in his stories a world in which pain exists as a punchline; The final kick to the gut that ends the story. Pain, in most stories, is used as a tool to endear us to a character, and allows us to sympathize with a character and revel in the victories they accomplish. Nabokov, however, uses pain as a finality. We often times feel little for the main characters of his story, often depicting them as sexually depraved or ill mannered. Characteristics that would otherwise cause us to root for the downfall of the character. This element of Nabokov's writing instead puts its audience in a unique position of pity. This choice seems unique to the Nabokovian twists that persist throughout his writing, where there is no time given for a main character to grow endearing, and

instead focuses on the unfortunate fates of people being nothing short of human - and yet we cannot help but to continue reading.

Within the short story *The Potato Elf*, follows the story of a man with dwarfism and his struggle to feel whole. When we are introduced to Fred, the main character, we are shown just how much his life has been nothing short of unfortunate. Treated as if nothing more than a prop designed for amusement and entertainment, eventually pushing him to join a circus. Even the narrator solemnly refers to Fred by his name, electing more often to refer to him as "The Potato Elf". Evenso, never thought the story does the Narrator even attempt to endear us to Fred, even going as far as to describe his run in with the sister acrobats as a disgusting display in which not everyone is made out to be a horrible person. Nabokov describes the scene:

> The two girls instantly deafened Fred with their chatter. They tickled and squeezed the dwarf, who, glowering and empurpled with lust, rolled like a ball in the embrace of the bare-armed teases. Finally, when frolicsome Arabella drew him to her and fell backward upon the couch, Fred lost his head and began to wriggle against her, snorting and clasping her neck. In attempting to push him away, she raised her arm and, slipping under it, he lunged and glued his lips to the hot pricklish hollow of her shaven axilla. The other girl, weak with laughter, tried in vain to drag him off by his legs. At that moment the door banged open, and the French partner of the two aerialists came into the room wearing marble-white tights. Silently, without any resentment, he grabbed the dwarf by the scruff of the neck (all you heard was the snap of Fred's wing collar as one side broke loose

> from the stud), lifted him in the air, and threw him out like a monkey. (Nabokov 229)

In the scene Fred, very shamelessly, acts and is treated as if he was a small dog in heat. It's difficult to read this and feel any sense of endearment to the characters. The disgusting display of objectification over Fred, and the similarly disgusting way Fred acts pushes its audience to a mixed state of emotions. On one hand one feels bad for Fred, and on the other hand the forced display of affection causes its audience to feel detached from its protagonist.

As the story continues, Fred falls for the magician's wife, Nora, and briefly shares a moment of intimacy with her. After this moment, Fred is shown in a much brighter light, being given a chance for himself to feel as though he meant something to someone, and having a much more positive outlook when walking through a park. This of course turns out to be a form of payback planned by the Wife as a means to gain back a level of power from her husband. Once again, Fred is forced to realize that he was once again seens as an object, pushing him further into his own daily sorrow. This sorrow is only exacerbated when Nora returns to Fred, and informs him of his child. And shortly after this intense discussion, and Fred pining for more information, Fred falls to the ground from a heart attack, the last words he hears is that the son they had was dead.

The Return of Chorb is a similarly sad story in which the actions of the protagonist that themselves refuse to be commended. *The Return of Chorb* follows a man named Chorb who is struggling with their new wife's death and the pain they're forced to endure. For instance, rather than informing his wife's parents of her death, lies to them by telling her family that their daughter had fallen ill. The reason for this, as described by Nabokov is given when he states, "

… he wished to possess his grief all by himself, without tainting it by any foreign substance and without sharing it with any other soul …" (Nabokov 147). The way Chorb goes about this journey is by returning to all of the places they had gone after their marriage in an attempt to, as Nabokov puts it, "He thought that if he managed to gather all the little things they had noticed together if he re-created thus the near past her image would grow immortal and replace her forever." (Nabokov 148). This journey, while in some ways wholesome, ends horribly when he is forced to sleep in the same bed that they had spent the first night after their wedding. This reluctance pushes him into hiring a prostitute to provide some level of physical comfort, while not actually engaging in her full prices. Eventually, Chorb is successful, but the cost is being found with by his wives father with the prostitute, now in a situation far worse due to the actions he made.

The most impactful forms of pain come through the lens of *The Vane Sisters*, another one of Nabokov's stories. We are introduced to a man walking down a road looking at the icicles on houses waiting for a drop of water to fall. This trek continues until he's far off the path he most often travels. After eating, he walks outside to the night sky and immediately notices a meter with shadows tinged a reddish hue. This eventually causes him to run into an old colleague, D, who informs the protagonist of the death of his ex, Cynthia Vane. Cynthia was a spiritualist with an unusual set of practices. This immediately prompts the Protagonist to lay out the history of Cynthia, as well as her sister, Sybil, that committed suicide after her brief affair with D had ended. Oddly, with this story, our focus for pain does not come from the Protagonists, but from the Vane sisters themselves. The Vane sisters, Sybil and Cynthia, who actually both share importance in reference to Greek Mythology - Sybil: being a term used for women believed to be

oracles. As well as Cynthia: which references the goddesses of Nature and the Moon. Even through names the sisters shared much in common with the spiritual. The reason why these women carry with them the embodiment of pain and loss.

As we follow Protagonists recounting his experiences with the sisters, we learn about how the sisters viewed the world. A world governed by spirits that could affect the world small and large. As well as one where meaning could be gleaned from anything, especially within the first letters of the last paragraph of a story. The protagonist doesn't undergo a painful change or a deep internal struggle, but what he does undergo is a situation that closely represents a breakdown of grief. As he struggles, after the death of Cynthia, with the idea that she would haunt him and that his world would crumble before him. He goes as far as state, "It was strange to think that if bombs began to fall I would feel little more than a gambler's excitement (and a great deal of earthy relief) whereas my heart would burst if a certain suspiciously tense-looking little bottle on yonder shelf moved a fraction of an inch to one side." (Nabokov 630). His wish only being to remain in this world, a world of what is known. A world of safety having remained in ignorance. Eventually though, the morning comes and nothing happens. He says:

> This was disappointing. Secure in the fortress of daylight, I said to myself that I had expected more. She, a painter of glass-bright minutiae and now so vague! I lay in bed, thinking my dream over and listening to the sparrows outside: Who knows, if recorded and then run backward, those bird sounds might not become human speech, voiced words, just as the latter become a twitter when reversed? I set myself to reread my dream backward, diagonally, up, down trying hard to

> unravel something Cynthia-like in it, something strange and suggestive that must be there. (Nabokov 631).

The protagonist wakes to nothing of his worries. The days come, the safety of the light is brought to him with ease. And even then he continues to ponder the idea of meaning between the lines, as if by some divine test there still was more to gleam. But alas there was nothing. The short story ends with a single vague paragraph:

> I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies; every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost. (Nabokov 631)

At first glance this ending exists as an odd rambling of an individual without meaning. But in-line, its true meaning exists, and by far one of Nabokov's greatest endings to a short story. By taking the first letter of each word, you can piece together the phrase: “Icicles by Cynthia Meter from me Sybil.” This reveal shows that the anguish and fear that the protagonist felt in his night of sleeplessness was, in some way, onset by the will of Cynthia and Sybil. The takeaway shows just how even though the pain and grief of loss can cause one to enter a spiral. One in which a person searches for loose meaning in the ends of stories, and worries about how their world will go on with all that could happen. All of which ends, when the sun rises, and you realize the pain, the sorrow, the anguish, is over, and another day comes.

While Nabokov can at times seem confusing, the persistence of pain and the effects that loss has on us is palpable. At no point are we given a hero that rises above, but instead we are given individuals who are so deep within their own pain to acknowledge it. Pain is a necessity

that must happen among all people. It's hard to say some days, just how different the world will be when you leave that sorrow. You can trap yourself in a world in which all that is bad engulfs you, or you can hold tight, and willingly enter the fortress of daylight.

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich and Dmitri Nabokov. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov.* New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.