

Anna Halberstadt

Like in a Silent Film

Life no longer seems like a road
with an endless perspective
a country road in a Dutch landscape
curling around the hill
disappearing in the shadow from old trees
but appearing again in the back of the painting
with two travelers walking on it
toward a lake
or, perhaps, a castle hidden by the woods.
Now it seems more like a short ride on a train
that may stop abruptly
without a warning
in the midst of the journey,
or only at one of the couple of stops
ahead.
You will look out the window and see
a half-empty railroad station in the middle of nowhere,
nothing to see, hot and humid,
or maybe, the opposite—rainy and cold,
no trees or water fountains in sight.
Only shadows of other lost passengers
walking by in the fog
not recognizing or saying hello to each other
like in a silent film.
And you will sigh
and say, *And this is it?*

I am a Shrink

...and years ago, I was hired
to do psychological testing with patients in Moscow
in the old hospital with rounded staircases and thick walls
so that they don't get hurt walking down,
or rather, do not try to hurt themselves
after one unhappy fellow had done it.
The hospital was built by a wealthy merchant, Kanatchikov
for his sickly, depressed daughter.
The building where she was staying
was called the sanatorium ward in Soviet times.
It was surrounded by trees,
and inside there were old bookshelves
and vitrines with old china
from the times before the Soviet psychiatry,
when Freud was still not yet a persona non grata
in society that did not believe in the unconscious.
When I worked in the Kashchenko hospital,
patients in gray pajamas were walking in groups
down hospital alleys surrounded by a wall
shaded by tall maples.
They worked in the garden and hospital workshops
mostly fixing old parquet tiles and furniture
for the hospital ruling class.
The director Morkovkin's red-carpeted office was large and
fancy
enough
for the president of a small republic.
A few months later I was invited to the grand rounds.
Valery was one of the patients
whose case had to be discussed by a group of doctors
the head of the forensic department Lidia Belskaya
one of them.

His history was read before he was invited—it turned out he was arrested and hospitalized after multiple reports of him grabbing women’s breasts in the water at a public beach.

One day, on the way to the advanced training lecture, a young patient stopped me and read a love poem by Blok or maybe Tsvetayeva.

His name was Valery. He was thin and looking depressed. I was then twenty-seven, dressed in a white doctor’s robe unhappily married.

Valery made me smile.

From then on, whenever I met him, he recited more poems, standing in the middle of the road leading to the main building.

One day he yelled out: “Anna Semenovna, I am already thirty-three years old, and no one has loved me back!”