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My Influenza

by Edo

For three days I had been in bed, but the fever did not leave me. Was it a mere common cold or was it the flu? How could one tell?

My restaurant sent up food daily by one of the other regular diners. Yesterday, Herr Bader turned up—that good-natured fellow who always shook hands in such a friendly fashion and would certainly have liked to enter into conversation with me or invite me for a drink if I had given him the chance. But we were as different as chalk from cheese and I couldn't for the life of me find any mutual interests. He was a settled, unemotional type. I am nervous, abrupt, beset by thousand ideas and plans. I had no patience for following his long-drawn conversation and I could not pretend that what he said was in any way new, or even interesting.

Somehow, I envied him his calm but I realized too well that I wasn't built that way. I could find no way into the serene peace of his simple nature, nor could I march along with him, falling in with his slow unperturbed step. Much as I liked him, and even more, his 'sex-appeal', I left him again and again to his own devices. I always thought quickly of a way out and had left him before he had even understood what I'd said.

Hearing from friends in the restaurant that I was ill, he called specially to see me. When he arrived, he was tired out with work and there were dark circles around his eyes. He gave me his hand, that heavily formed, peaceful hand, and asked how I was. His voice was deep and melodious.

I bewailed my misery and the fact that I seemed unable to get the upper hand of the illness. He stood before my bed. He was of medium build, solid and compact. The brown, well-worn working suit could barely retain the contours of his strongly built body. Much too tight, it showed off his muscles.

«You must drink a cup of hot claret», he said.

«I have already drunk everything,» I returned, irritably. My God, the amount of pills I had swallowed; everything from Saridon to Elkosin and Antihezcamin. I had had wet packings, worn wet stockings and massaged my head with alcohol and banded it. The outcome of the last treatment had been such an increase of temperature, it soon made me think of offering myself as an oven, free of charge, in the cold streets below. Nothing had been of any avail. The cold air in that damned room of mine defeated all efforts. The central heating system between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. was sufficient to keep your behind warm but not enough to drive the flu away.

«I shall make you a nice hot cup of claret,» he went on. «First, I need to fetch the Meta boiler, wine, apples and cinnamon.» Before I was able to answer he had opened the door and was gone. I heard his heavy tread on the staircase, the front door made its creaking noise and was shut, and all was quiet again. He had spoken so matter-of-factly, I thought his own room must be just opposite and that he would be back in five minutes. A good half hour passed before I heard him again. He had been all over the place collecting what was necessary. I looked at him with gratitude as he entered the room.

He took off his coat. The Meta boiler was quickly unpacked and lit. Wine was poured into the saucepan, apples were finely sliced and the cinnamon was broken into small pieces and thrown in. It was all like a slow motion picture. Nothing was hurried.

We looked quietly at the flame. Words were not necessary. How rarely it is that people can be quiet together without getting on each other's nerves—without

suddenly and nervously searching for some new topic to talk about, anything to break a silence.

The way we were quiet together was quite natural. His undemonstrative masculine manner slowly enveloped me. My impatience at being forced by some virus to stay in bed evaporated, and a comfortable well-being took its place.

The light of my bedside-lamp shone indirectly upon his broad face with its prominent cheekbones. The forehead receded slightly. His mouth shimmered in a shade of blue and red from the fire, with a slight indication of sadness and chasteness around its corners, and I thought how this changed the face of the full-grown street-worker into the weather beaten face of a youngster. His skin looked tightly drawn, his eyes gleamed and the deep furrows of his fatigue had disappeared.

The claret-cup is boiling. He emptied it into a thermos flask. But first of all I must eat the apple-slices. Only then I am allowed to drink the cup, scaldingly hot and bitter. I am shuddering! I loathe claret-cups! But Bader is sitting next to me and looks steadily at me. There is no way out, I'll have to drink. My pores open, the poison is leaving my body. Heavy drops of sweat come down my forehead, and under the bed-covers I seem to be foaming and boiling. I have had enough of the drink and want to put it aside but he only laughs, takes a firm hold of my wrist, puts the cup back into my hand and here I am, swallowing the «Last of the Wine». Then he covers me up carefully with a contented smile on his lips.

His rough, large worker's hands get hold of the clean 'duvet' and carefully, so that no breath of air will come in, they put the soft covers around my shoulders and my neck. None of his movements is clumsy. How tender and valuable must be the inside of this rough diamond...



My face is now looking out from mountains of covering. He tells me how to effect the change—to put the fresh, dry, pair of pyjamas under the 'duvet' to let it warm to body-temperature—nothing as bad as putting cold things on a hot body. Then he proceeds to tell me to undress carefully under the cover, to dry myself, to put the new things on—no, he doesn't trust me, he'll do it himself. For the moment he has to leave me but he will be back presently as he has to meet someone. «A girl?» my curiosity prompts me to ask. «No.» he replies, slightly bad-humoured. As though he hadn't enough work to do without additional appointments with young females. But I understand. That well-formed, curvacious female he had been going with for a year has left him in the ditch. The disappointment had been so great, he had not dared to make new friends. Things like 'one night stands' weren't in his line, anyway.

This was he—a man in the prime of his life, alone, with no chance to protect and love a human being and fulfilling this strong sense of duty.

Suddenly an idea occurred to me as he was slipping the necessities of life over me. Hadn't he been chosen my guardian-angel? And, if that was so I went on speculating, would he—if I went about it the right way—be willing to meet me halfway, not only as a protector but also as a possessor? Those arms, not encircling a woman, might they not be put around someone who honoured him and gave him that warmth which would drive out the coldness of his loneliness? Might he not forget the woman who had brought his disillusionment? But it seemed too good an idea to be true.

He put his coat on. In three or four hours he'd be back. Just this—and off he went.

Three or four hours! A wild alarm took hold of me. The fellow must be crazy. By then I would have evaporated from the face of the earth. That fellow! I should like to run after him but, alas, I am fettered to the bed. Fettered! If you are in fetters you can still fight, push or scream, and that gives you at least the satisfaction of doing something. But here? Defenceless I sweat madly, fighting for air.

I look at the clock. Only an hour has passed. My heart seems to burst the bed-covers, wherever my hand wanders it's shining wet. After a while I look again at the clock. The fingers have barely moved. The clockwork, too, seems to suffer from lack of breath or from anaemia. What it needs is a vitamin pill. I am a specialist in pills. Hell, how a clock can get on one's nerves!

Finally I look once more at the clock. Only five minutes have passed. I submit to everything and fall into a semi-coma. Within seconds the most curious wish-dreams race through my mind in this sauna-like condition. What can be better than to dream of things one would like to have. He would take possession of me, would quieten my tense body — —

My enterprising spirit reasserts itself. Somehow I shall gain my end. And in my mind I am rubbing my hands contentedly. I shall have him, or better still—he shall have me.

But suddenly I come down to earth again. Am I mad or what? A working-man and an intellectual! Weakness overtakes me again. But that would be *just* the thing!

Why not unite mind and matter? He, a lonely man, strong and protecting. In his arms I would become a child again, the beloved one for his body, the friend of his heart—this makes me go to sleep happily.

... I only wake up when I feel his touch upon my cheek. «How is everything? Did you perspire nicely?»

«More than that. I have completely disappeared.»

«Slightly exaggerated,» he says, and with a smile pulls my ears lightly. Now, having become the field-marshal of my illness, he forgets the class-distinctions parting us and becomes simply a human being taking care of another.

The change of the pyjama top and the undershirt I was able to manage myself.

He kept the bed-covers lifted and waited patiently. His breath touched my own, standing as he was close to me, with his legs spread. Our eyes meet and I look softly and gratefully at him while my lips tremble slightly. There is the faint tension of a kiss in the air. Slightly embarrassed he stands erect again in order to push down the trousers of my pyjamas. Involuntarily and lovingly my eyes follow the contours of his body. He has bent down over the foot of the bed, pushed his strong arms forward and—like a cray-fish puts his claws slowly and quietly around something white and searches under the bedclothes for my body.

Now. His hands rest on my hips for a while. No movement of his fingers — Isn't he a fool?

«Go on,» I say with studied carelessness.

«Where to? I'll have to be careful because no air must get in. You must be patient.» While telling me this he has slowly pushed my trousers downward. Not a single movement which might have told me just a bit more. One thing though: a careful change of trousers!

Did my heart beat so wildly on account of the heat? He has taken the towel, warmed in advance, disappeared with it under the covers, and dried part after part of my body. All of a sudden his hands stayed for a moment and he remarked undisturbedly, «Yes, the warmth...»

What an intelligence! And to stay half-way!

I console myself. I am weak from perspiring and it's much better this way. Finally the dry pyjama-trousers are back in place.

Does he want to go now?

«No.»

«Why not?»

He says he'll stay the night and look after me. It wouldn't take much for me to start perspiring all over again and he doesn't trust me an inch to look after myself. His sense of responsibility and duty was admirable but all of a sudden it made my nerves jingle. Am I a baby, a helpless child, unable to count up to three? Haven't I lived on my own for four years now—alone—and do I need a guardian angel for sweating? That would be about the limit. I was on the point of contradicting him and sending him about his business but his shirt was already being pushed over his head. In the pale light of the bedside-lamp all the muscles of his bare back were brought into play, and I lost myself in admiring observation. And I was perspiring once more. As though to effect a better perspiration on my part he stood there letting his proud torso gleam in front of me. He unpacked his sleeping-bag, put it on the blue Persian rug and looked questioningly at me. Without words I pointed to the cupboard. I always keep a pair of freshly laundered pyjamas there for emergencies. He took them out.

What followed was only to be expected. The muscle-build of a working man—the light, thin pyjama-top of a 'never-do-well'—a tearing noise—and all was over. That could have easily been guessed.

I say airily, «Oh, it doesn't matter at all—just worn too much.»

Herr Bader seems to believe me. For a moment he stands there, slightly self-conscious, then he pushes down his trousers and stands naked—and I go on perspiring—on account of that hot claret—and he gets into the pyjama trousers. As can only be expected—they don't tear. Despite his build!

They fit him tightly. Even the slightest tension would lead to disaster. That means I must behave myself in consideration for the trousers.

Now the whole beauty of his proud torso is quite close to me. The skin is clean, deeply tanned, and without the slightest blemish. His eyes scan me for a long time.

What thoughts lie behind their look?

«You're a nice fellow and different from the others.» The voice sounds warm and intimate. «Always kind to everybody, and no difference whether they are rich or poor, intelligent or simple.»

Somehow the voice conveys a feeling of gratitude and just on account of the fact that never a word or gesture from me has hurt him. How many others have looked down upon him on account of his strong callous hands? Nearly always people judge superficially by what they see. For his hands may have been marked by hard manual labour but his whole body—as I had seen it uncovered just now—was perfect.

He grinned at me. Suddenly I knew for certain—one day I would be his.

«Good night.»

«Don't I get a good night kiss?» I ask jokingly.

«You have a cold, my dear boy. Good night.»

His hand moves forward and he puts a finger on the switch. It's dark now. Well, he has called me his 'dear boy' — —.

Three days later I am well again. For a fortnight I surround my male nurse with all the attention I can think of. I am asking him in several times for the evening. We usually have a drink together in my room and though we do not talk much I suppose he gathers what he wants to hear from all I am saying. Soon I have his full confidence.

Then, one evening, he puts his hand heavily on my shoulder and looks at me. His look is clear and near. I think I can risk it now.

Outside, the rain is pouring. That downpour will last a good long time. I propose to him to stay the night with me. It wouldn't be the first time. We start to undress. All my own clothing lies already neatly folded on a chair. I open the cupboard to look for pyjamas. Only the thin trousers he had worn are there. All else has gone to the laundry. I play-act surprise, hand the trousers over to him and slip under the bed-covers as naked as the day I was born. He does not seem to attach any importance to it, puts the trousers for the moment aside, and starts unrolling his sleeping-bag which is still there.

«No, leave that alone. There is plenty of room for both of us. I shall sleep near the wall.»

Now he is under my bed-covers. No longer is there a way out. And I am giving him slowly to understand how the land lies. He follows suit, simply, naively, without any shadow of prejudice, and without imagining more than what actually happens. He follows his urge and his inner feeling—and learns the pleasure which comes from realising that to give is more blessed than to receive, especially when it happens with someone who had found his way into his heart during the last weeks. What his former lover had been unwilling to give him he takes from me, and soon his warmth is floating through my body. When later I rest relaxed in his strong arms, I am suddenly thinking of Walt Whitman whom up to this hour I had never understood. Well, life is a good teacher!

In the time that followed I lost my nervousness and abruptness, and his arms were regularly around me, year in, year out. We lived for one another and so we always will.

(Translation by R.A. and B.W.)