VADYA

Vadya sits in her wheelchair on the veranda, remembering. At 78, she remembers when she was eighteen and in love, and still living in Russia. She remembers, too, when she could walk, which wasn't long ago.

The stroke didn't stop her indomitable spirit and pride. It just stopped her physically in her tracks. One leg moves in front of the other if you hold on tightly to her arm, or if she holds on tightly to a walker.

"Just look at that useless leg!" she would exclaim, when I walked with her across the room for her exercise.

One arm does what she wants; the other is lazy and unpredictable. One side of her face cannot move to express her mercurial moods and feelings; the other side makes up for it. And nothing stops her love of people, of family and friends, of art, music and literature. She is a *grande dame*, a Russian emigré, the matriarch alone at the head of her family.

Vadya, even now, is a tall well-built woman. She was a beauty in her day; all the young beaus of her social milieu were in love with the vivacious Vadya.

"Oh, the eyes turned alright. And my hats were the envy of every woman," she would say, daring me to think otherwise.

Her clear intense eyes have only a hint of their original blue left in them, her skin has become very pale, and her soft blond curls have now turned silver gray. One day when I arrived at her house, I gasped. She sat there in her wheelchair, covered in snippets of hair, with a pair of household scissors in her lap.

"I wanted a punk haircut!" she told me, rebelliously. A punk haircut is exactly what she had.

I was Vadya's companion for two years, sharing her with two other young women chosen for the same task. I would stay with her for twenty-four hours at a time, sometimes longer. She lived in an old wooden, rather dilapidated country house, having removed herself from New York City after her stroke.

There was no escaping Vadya, except when she slept. She had a little brass bell that she rang, sometimes in the middle of the night, often very early in the morning. How I cursed when summoned by that tinkling sound, but I understood that her companions were her lifeline, her mobility, her limbs. Vadya demanded attention, but she would give attention. She wanted to know all about me, perhaps because she had nothing better to do. She understood the realm of passions and struggled continually to maintain her grace and dignity, indeed by example helping me through the turmoil I was then experiencing with my musician husband.

Her own concert pianist husband had left her for an adoring young student some twenty years before. When she was eighteen, in Russia, he had wooed and courted her, won her for his wife and brought her to America. He had won, too, some fame and glory in the concert halls but had, in his ignorance, laughed at his young wife's proud and deep-throated singing of Russian folksongs. She never forgot, and never sang again, but turned instead to passionately supporting artists and their arts. Like Robin Hood, she gave to the poor from the purses of the rich, though she never had to steal. Seated in her wheelchair at the old family dining table, surrounded by letters and cards and flowers from friends and admirers, she would plot her next fundraising events. I would type letters and make notes.

Everything stopped for lunch, however simple it was.

"We shall have some of that wonderful paté that Liliane brought us, don't you think?"

She could always be tempted with gourmet snacks but turned her Russian nose up at salads and health foods. She appreciated my efforts at cooking, and as with everything, her

praise was liberal, though a criticism from Vadya stung like a bee, and I would curse under my breath, out of sight, at having every one of my actions so closely observed.

"Come on, my girl, what are you dreaming of?" she would often say, when something didn't get done to her liking. Vadya was a hard taskmaster.

After lunch, she would lie down and try to sleep, but more often than not her bell would ring after a few minutes. She was impatient and bored and I would get her up again and into the wheelchair.

Afternoons were spent quietly on the veranda. She recognized all the varieties of birds that fed on the seeds she scattered around, and seemed to know the big red cardinal and tiny yellow finches personally. We played backgammon or scrabble and she loved to win. But mostly, she liked me to read aloud to her. Volumes of all kinds, some read a dozen times, some for the first time, lay in wait on the sideboard. From Tolstoy to Brontë, and Hesse to Colette, I read with my senses alert, for she listened with all hers. Sitting erect, she didn't miss a word.

"How about some tea?" she would ask at the same time every day. The same time, the same tea, the same tray. She had an eye for detail, and a sense of ritual.

Sometimes, when she was in a very good mood, near five o'clock, she would say:

"Shall we have a little cocktail?"

The cocktail, of course, was vodka: the best Smirnoff kept in the ice box and served in tiny shot glasses. To go with this, we would have caviar with sour cream and chopped onions. I would prepare the ingredients to her instructions and she would feel useful mixing them. Over our drinks we spoke of the artists she had known and sometimes she would confide to me memories of the well-guarded, well-remembered romances in her life.

"No, I didn't want to marry again," she said, in answer to my unspoken question. Mostly she would talk of her grandson whom she adored.

'Peter's on a shoot right now, you know. The Johnsons called me; they want to invite him for dinner. He's doing so well, the darling."

One day, Howard Koch came to visit. I sat fascinated to see a legend. Of course Vadya would know the man who immortalized Bogie and gave us *Casablanca's* romantic Rick. As the two old friends sat together, rather solemnly, they shared a silent understanding, for he too was suffering bouts of illness; an illness that would eventually become Alzheimer's and take his life. Now and again, they would reach out bony hands to each other, to give and receive reassurance of their continuing life force.

Vadya would never make a special fuss of her predicament, and didn't want people fussing over her. The show must go on, and it did. But she needed me, and sometimes she was completely at my mercy and had to trust me like a child. I remember a charity concert at Carnegie Hall given by Isaac Stern, when we waited outside in the bitter cold for what seemed an eternity until I could convince a taxi-driver to take both us and the wheelchair.

And only once, early, early, in the crisp mountain air in the old wooden house, as I washed her naked body in the steel and plastic wheelchair, do I remember her saying: "I've had enough, my girl."

She looked searchingly into my eyes. There was nothing I could say or do; we just carried on with the rituals of her daily life.

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