



NADEZHDA NELIDOVA

# The PIT

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**The Pit**

«Издательские решения»

**Nelidova N.**

The Pit / N. Nelidova — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-966890-5

SHOCK. That is the first thing you experience on reading Nadezhda Nelidova's book "The Pit". Two strikingly realistic stories are unveiled before our eyes. Two people related to the author preferred to leave this life voluntarily rather than suffer unbearable pain and loneliness. The author is grateful to the experienced British linguist and translator JACK DOUGHTY for his cooperation.

ISBN 978-5-44-966890-5

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# **The Pit**

**Nadezhda Nelidova**

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ISBN 978-5-4496-6890-5

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## THE PIT

“You’re in deep trouble, young lady. You’re in deep trouble.”

The phrase goes round and round in my head. Where is it from, from which book? It’s of no significance. Nothing has any significance now. It’s like running madly at full tilt into a brick wall.

It’s not that I totally refuse to admit that this misfortune can happen to me. I’m a sensible person, after all. But the possibility had seemed so negligible. How likely is it, for example, that a meteorite will fall on your head? That is the sort of likelihood with which this disease with the deadly little name might threaten me.

How did I find out about it?

There was an operation. We have the most complex post-operative ward, and also the noisiest and merriest. We chuckle at trifles, so that the nurses look at each other and say: “That must be Ward Six...” We lay on our beds, dying, doubled up with laughter and holding our stomachs in case the stitches break.

The whole ward is called for physiology exercises, but they forget me every time. Why? The surgeon who operated on me explained: “We are awaiting the results of the histology study. There are some doubts, let’s be extra careful...”

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Since getting back home, I had been going in for post-operative inspections, but the results were not in yet. Then the decisive day arrived. I took the bus to the hospital, it was dragging along like a tortoise. I wanted to jump out and give the driver a good kick in the ass. After getting off the bus, I walked quickly, almost running. Then I couldn’t stop myself, I ran at full pelt.

I had prepared a sentence to say to the doctor when it became clear that everything was all right. I would say: “Oh, what a relief! I was already gripping the table so that I wouldn’t fall down in a faint.” That was what I would say, and the doctor would shake his head and say: “Oh, these nervous patients!”

The nurse rummaged around like a zombie looking for the card. The doctor took an unbearably long time to read her own scrawled handwriting. Then, addressing me formally by forename and patronymic, she said: “It will have to be rechecked in the central laboratory, I can’t understand the histology.”

Seeing my face, the doctor hastened to add a whole lot of empty, slimy, misleading words. “It’s only a query, why have you gone so pale? Take the data to the Republican Center, they have different apparatus and specialists there. It’s a different level.”

Even if, God forbid, it were confirmed, it would be nothing to worry about. Seventy per cent of sufferers are cured. Anyone going out into the street might have a brick fall on their head, and my risk was no greater than that.

But why did I so passionately want to be in the place of those at risk from a brick?

\*\*\*

When I got home, I didn’t take my coat off, I went through into the room and sat down on the sofa. I couldn’t think of any more useful occupation than wringing my hands and sobbing. I lay down, curled up in a ball, like a frozen little animal. How long did I lie there? There was nothing to get up for. Or to lie down for. There was no longer any point in anything.

It was as if I’d had an anesthetic injection, but leaving me a clear head. I ought to think it all over. Who should I leave my schoolboy son with? Who should get Kerry, the sheepdog? And tomorrow, when I would go to the Center, and...?

I live a terribly scatterbrained, disorderly life. But suddenly it was as if an organizer had taken me over. I thought out in my head precisely all I would do in the coming hours, tomorrow, a week and a month ahead. I wouldn’t look further than that. I’d have to ring some people, give instructions to some, work out how much to leave in my will and for what purposes. And I was as calm as

a millpond. Not a single tear. Though when I was on my way home, I thought I would flood the street with tears.

\*\*\*

By an irony of fate, a year ago I had been in the same hospital where I would go tomorrow for the test. I had an interview with the chief oncologist of the Republic. My friend Katya had passed away – agonizingly, painfully. Questions arose.

**It was the diagnosis that killed my sweet sensitive Katya, I was sure. Couldn't they have told her relatives, who could have hidden the truth from her in some way? A lie to spare her distress, to give her a few more months of untroubled life. The chance to see the sun and the sky, to hear the birds, to be with those dear to her.**

“The patient must be given complete information about the disease, in an understandable form”, explained the doctor in charge. “We are allowed to notify relatives only with the written agreement of the patient. That’s the law.”

You propose giving the diagnosis in a softer, veiled manner, to avoid upsetting and scaring the patient. But – can you imagine? This does not concern him or put him out in any way.

You tell him: “Oh, nonsense, you have a blind spot there”, and he will just turn and go away. Also, it is not permitted to deprive a patient in the final stage of the opportunity to make appropriate dispositions and solve problems of inheritance, morals and finance. It’s the same worldwide. If you don’t like the law, write to Putin. Ask him to change the constitution.

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How had it been with Katya? They gave her the analysis, then ran off and forgot about her. At only 35, she was the deputy manager of a large factory. She got a call from the local nurse.

“We have your result. It’s not good. Can you come in today?”

“What is it?”

“The doctor will tell...”

“Cancer??”

A ringing in the ears. Katya fell down on the spot, the receiver lying on her breast like a cross. A funeral ahead of schedule. How long did she lie there?

Here’s a New Year photo with Katya sitting between us: the prettiest golden-haired blonde with eyes shining like stars. Everything ahead of her: new happiness, flourishing youth, all her youthful hopes.

Meanwhile the creeping disease is already spreading, taking her over. Poking around blindly, feeling her out. Seeing where it can plant its foul roots. Finding a place for the next vileness to emerge in her pure flourishing girl’s body.

Very soon the doomed Katya places her palm into someone’s firm experienced hand. She is led like a child through the road to Calvary, covered in dust, trampled by millions of pairs of feet before hers.

She has undergone chemotherapy, with no success. The fourth stage, inoperable. She was rated with a Class One disability and sent home with the optimistic instruction: “Get some rest. The main thing you have to do is put on weight”.

Here she is a few months later. She had given up the struggle by this time. She is scared. Like a bird keeping its wings folded. She has become skinny, perspiring from stress, her mouth half-open like a bird’s beak, little drops of perspiration above her lip.

She has difficulty getting up to us on the third floor, out of breath and stopping on the way. She apologizes for her straggly sagging dull hair which was once so golden. “I don’t want to do anything, girls, not even take a bath”.

When she first sat, then lay, on the sofa (while we made an excessive fuss about pushing cushions under her), she suddenly smelt like an old woman – an acidic smell. This from her – always so well groomed, always with silky hair, in a cloud of fine expensive perfume.

So Katya was sent home as a terminal patient. Then came the extrasensory sessions. The faith healer charged her 3700 roubles a session. There were ten sessions altogether. Then five thousand from another bioenergetic specialist. Patients had to sign a non-disclosure agreement about the secret of the treatment.

The secret was this. The specialist passed his spread hands over the patient, “collecting” piles of disease. He had the patient’s things in front of him: a scarf, gloves, maybe slippers, a spoon, the dish she ate from and the cup she drank from. Hair cuttings (not hair fallen out, they had to be cuttings!), small coins, cheap candies. The alleged “dirty energy” of the disease was “collected” and “shaken out”, to the accompaniment of appropriate words.

After these manipulations, the clothes had to be hung out, say on the sides of garbage bins. The cheap crockery had to be set out somewhere on a window sill in the porch, and the hair carefully laid in library books. In the book store, too, while apparently glancing through a book, you could slyly drop the “bewitched” hair between the pages.

Nail clippings were valuable for the wealth of information they contained about the disease. Little crescent clippings could be left under doors and under skirting-boards in apartments – those of acquaintances, naturally, we wouldn’t enter anyone else’s. They wouldn’t work in official institutions – it had been tried.

The small change and candies were thrown on paths. Whoever picked up this trash would pick up the disease with it. All the more so for children, their protective shell is as flimsy as the film on an egg. But on the other hand, you will **live, live, live!**

Katya fled in disgust from all this extrasensory nonsense.

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The months of chemotherapy were behind her.

Now, from morn till night, her days were devoted to dieting. She squeezed vegetable juices – she cleaned out the cellars of all those she knew in the village.

She would lie down to gather her strength and take deep breaths, then back to the cooker again, quietly cooking vegetable jelly and rubbing burdock root into it (Ugh! It tastes horrible, girls!).

Buckwheat was left on the window sill to swell up. She kept spring nettles in a jar – they improve immunity tremendously. There were bunches of grass hanging everywhere in the kitchen and the hall. Round her neck she wore some miraculous root sent from the other end of the country kept in a finger stall cut from a glove and hung on a cord.

“They say a dessert spoonful of paraffin with vegetable oil can help...”

Katya sighed.

“I’ve drunk paraffin too.”

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I forced myself to get up. I went over to the mirror. Instead of a face, just a hazy spot, as flat and pale as the mirror itself – distorted, as if floating out from the facial bones and muscles. My son will be home from school shortly, he mustn’t see me like this. Nor should anyone else. I’d better take a hot shower. No, not a hot one, a mildly warm one... And I’ll ring Raisa, my dear busy unfailing helper. When I’m not here, she’ll look after the house, wipe and vacuum the floors, and she won’t leave my son or the dog hungry either...

Last night I honestly, earnestly tried to seek out the logic, the train of events, the guiding thread. If I could find the end of the thread, get hold of it and wind it up, I could try to get back to my former life, before the fatal parting of the ways. When and where did I first draw back and stumble, without noticing the secret sign, the hints of fate?

Not long ago, something strange, almost mystical, happened. The oldest person in our editorial office had passed away. They gave me the job of writing the obituary. I picked out the text, swinging my leg and munching an apple. A dropped apple seed stuck between the shift key and the next key, the backslash. The key got stuck.

“I was typing without looking at the screen and when I did I was stupefied. After the heading “Obituary” the whole page consisted of the letter Ya [*which in Russian means “I, myself”*]. I automatically typed again, to finish off, and the same letter jumped up again: “Ya”.

Oh, really, I’m not supposed to believe in all this mysticism, how did this nonsense get into my head?

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By morning I realized it was not worth uselessly striving to get back to some turning point, it’s fruitless to beat your brains out looking for answers, so why do it? There may not be much time anyway. I ought to have time to think about other questions, more necessary, important, urgent.

Questions, questions.

Why did it have to be me?

Is my disease a punishment for my sins?

Is other people’s good health a reward for the good they do?

What will I feel at the moment I depart this life? Will everything instantly become amazingly clear? Will there be a blazing carousel in my head? A blinding white flash in my eyes? A cosmic black hole inside, rushing to draw me into itself?

And finally, the most important: *What comes after that?*

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From my interview with the doctor in charge:

**So, the patient has realized she is incurable. When a prisoner is sentenced, they watch him carefully, they almost go as far as having a first aid team on hand. Does your department have a duty psychotherapist for such cases? Are there efficient tranquilizers for patients and relatives?**

Oh, God! We don’t even have provision for a duty therapist! Although in oncological practice there was a time when they were frantically trying to introduce the specialty of psychotherapist. “But a good doctor, particularly a good oncologist, is himself the best psychotherapist”, the doctor assured me. “Without special knowledge, it is not possible to discuss the course of the disease, and the problems, and to instill hope. It is enough for the patient simply to have psychological help from the doctor on the case. He knows what words to choose, he can observe the problem professionally from every angle. Why, if a psychotherapist were to see these catheters sticking out of the body and this awful swelling, he would need urgent psychiatric help himself.

“It’s another matter”, he continued, gesturing, “if the doctor is physically unable to hold long explanatory, comforting, hope-inspiring conversations with the patient. When an oncologist is dealing with 40 patients a day, no psychotherapy will help. It can happen in our offices here that two doctors receive two patients at the same time. The Oncology Center has been under construction for ten years! That’s how they treat us, those are the conditions we work under. And you are talking about a particular reverential attitude to patients.”

The doctor tapped the table thoughtfully.

“Another problem stems from boredom and overcrowding, Not all those sitting in the crowd in reception are cancer sufferers. We find four thousand of them a year, whereas about 70,000 people pass through the surgery in that time. They come as ‘possible’ sufferers, or for cancer to be ruled out. And there they are, sitting next to each other, chatting, exchanging negative information. And the nervous ones discover similar symptoms in themselves and begin to panic. They infect those around them with fear, causing a chain reaction which is quite harmful in a hospital atmosphere.”

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Before Katya’s illness, I had been naïvely confident. “Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.” They have a duty psychologist in hospitals like this. Why, to hear a diagnosis like that could blow your mind.

But Katya had told me, with a wry smile: “Oh yes, everything is ‘there’. A team of psychologists and psychotherapists, who hastened to comfort me and treat me with valerian. And a special bath too. Dream on!”

Coming out of the doctor’s, Katya hid herself in the bathroom. There was a yellow pool of urine from the broken toilet bowl on the tiled floor under a rag. She slumped down exhausted on the filthy trampled toilet seat with footprints from the soles of someone’s shoes on it. Seeking consolation, she pressed her hot forehead to the cold tank. She had a toilet instead of a psychologist.

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To be honest, that summer I had raced about the hospital at a gallop, tapping my high heels. Noting down interviews, pulling my frivolous skirt down over my knees, looking at my watch.

That was then, in the former life. But now circumstances forced me to get to know the hospital thoroughly from the inside. I had thought everything would be different in such a hospital. Speaking in lowered voices. Doctors and nurses, discretion itself, Kind encouraging looks, Sympathetic supportive contacts. Empty of people, calm, silence, pictures on the walls, flowers. Feet sinking in soft carpets as if walking on a cloud.

But what was it really? A dark gloomy vestibule with cracked tiles underfoot. Dismayingly long queues, lots of country people. In the buffets, greasy pies as hard as rock, awful even to look at. Enough to send a healthy patient to the next world.

A cleaner in cut-down galoshes brushing pools over the gray floor, hitting your feet with a mop. The cloakroom attendant dipping a boiled egg in salt, drinking tea from a thermos flask. A bespectacled nurse short of sleep saying “No admittance today”.

Even someone dying has a last wish. Heads should involuntarily bow before him, people should look away and voices become muffled of their own accord. All around should be a suite of security

guards, doctors, priests, lawyers – abashed, recognizing the terrible grandeur of the moment. In the deadened air itself there should be hushed whispers. respect, superstitious fear of the mystery about to happen...

Nothing of the sort! Life mockingly shows its ugly contorted mug and kicks you with a varicose foot in a filthy galosh. The universe will not collapse, finding your departure unbearable, that's not hard to imagine, is it? Your disease is strictly your own business, so just behave accordingly.

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So Katya was sent home as a terminal patient. Then came the extrasensory sessions.

From my interview with the doctor in charge:

**When she was told the chemotherapy was not effective, she went in for extrasensory treatment. On the quiet, we condemned her for it. How could such a clever woman believe in all that macabre nonsense? Mind you, we can all be clever about it till we ourselves are affected... You can wash your hands of someone else's problem. And anyway, after she'd been with the face healers, her eyes brightened up a bit, if only for a few hours.**

“When you came here yourself, did you read the advertisements on the pillars about the sale of ‘miracle’ herbs?” asked the doctor, answering one question with another. “Did you see the herb sellers with their sacks of hay? Those charlatans ought to be cleared out regularly, by the police if necessary. To sell their trash, they passionately assure you that they cure everything in the world.”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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