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‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’ Review: Wishing and Waiting

Eleven stories by a Russian cardiologist that show how doctors and patients alike soothe themselves with lies, shortcuts and elisions.



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By *Laura Kolbe*

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Doctor stories, unlike lawyer stories or housekeeping stories or commercial-fishing stories, tend to be regarded by the profession depicted with immense, even pious seriousness, and with an eye toward the edification of the fledgling or wayward practitioner. Most of the country’s prestigious hospitals now have book clubs, discussion groups, occasionally even a writing workshop.

But edification can also be orthodoxy. During my residency, I spent a day training under an eminent rheumatologist who took the occasion—we were waiting for a nurse to draw up the ingredients for an injection—to ask me, furtively, what I thought of William Carlos Williams’s story “The Use of Force,” in which the doctor-narrator confesses his spiteful brutality toward a little girl who refuses to have her throat examined. Without waiting for my response, the rheumatologist leaned forward and said: “The others in my book club act so *appalled!* And here I’m thinking, this guy’s a *hero!*”

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

By Maxim Osipov
NYRB, 295 pages, \$17.95

Anyone looking for digestible morals for the clinician, or balms for the patient, need not read Maxim Osipov’s short-story collection “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” In these 11 stories (translated by Boris Dralyuk, Alex Fleming and Anne Marie Jackson), Dr. Osipov, a Russian cardiologist, fiction writer and playwright, regards the field of medicine as though it were a hapless production of a surrealist play. There is the director of a provincial intensive-care unit who keeps a brain-dead woman nominally alive on a ventilator for six weeks in order to pad the hospital’s statistics. There are the “grannies,” an entire demographic of presumably distinctive older women who resign themselves to being reduced by the hospital staff to mere numbers: “Granny One,” “Granny Two,” “Granny Three” and so on. Another doctor escorts well-connected patients to more advanced hospitals in the United States, his work a ghostly trot between baffling American airports (he mixes up his Portlands, to start) in cursory service of patients he’ll never see again. A priest sick in the cardiology ward tells doctors that he is not a priest but a geologist in order to avoid confronting his own ebbing faith; another patient, a writer, brags about his romantic conquests and his literary success in heartbreaking denial of how little time he has left to live. Little lies, shortcuts, elisions—put more generously, a little theater—color nearly every interaction.

These refusals to see the self or others clearly arise from varied motives—at times malice or greed but more often affection and even love. In “Polish Friend,” an aging violin teacher maintains the fiction of a long-distance relationship with a wholly imaginary boyfriend because real love, when she finally encounters it, is so staggering that it overpowers and stupefies her, causing her to fall back into the old lie as onto a fainting couch. And though it is coldness and egoism that drive the intensive-care doctor to keep a futile case on endlessly protracted “life support,” we sense that it is love that prevents the patient’s husband and father from asking too often or too probingly about her prognosis—as long as they haven’t been told the worst, they can pretend the worst has not happened. Instead they stick to safer generalities: “Doesn’t she need any medicine?”

In these stories, the borders between hope, delusion and dishonesty are hazy and heavily trafficked. In the title story, Ksenia, the owner of a dumpling restaurant in a “small town, Central Russia, away from railways and the highway,” convinces herself for a few hours that she will adopt a young Muslim immigrant and convert to Islam, thereby cleansing her life of its petty indignities and giving meaning to her daughter’s untimely death. The story makes no comment on whether these resolutions are laudable or practicable; it simply makes apparent that the griping, mercurial Ksenia is incapable of overhauling her life. As soon as she starts speaking in the future tense —“We’ll live by the law, by Truth. We’ll work; we’ll do it all together”—the reader knows that her project is doomed. A moment later, Ksenia decides that, planned conversion aside, she’ll keep drinking, “but only on holidays. The big, real, important holidays.” Though the story ends shortly thereafter, we sense how Ksenia will keep bargaining her resolutions down to nothing. And yet, for all that, something of her lovely, childlike desire for goodness and purity still lingers. Even an “oligarch”—that byword for corruption—in another story makes a doomed and clumsy attempt at self-improvement, if at the cost of destroying several lives in his orbit. The famously self-deluding narrator in Chekhov’s “A Boring Story” announces, “Tell me what you want and I’ll tell you who you are”; these characters, too, hope desperately that intentions hold the same currency as deeds.

Dr. Osipov is a master of dramatic irony, wringing bittersweet humor from what the reader sees but the protagonist cannot. In “Renaissance Man,” the self-improving oligarch fails to grasp that most of what his expensive fleet of tutors are imparting to him—piano lessons that peter out shortly after “Chopsticks,” condensed synopses of world history and Bible stories—are worthless in their superficiality. When, late in the story collection, we encounter an elderly character with dementia, her pitiable disorientation stops short of cloying melodrama in part because the book has shown us dozens of perfectly lucid characters, many of them doctors, who also struggle to see what’s in front of them.

Written between 2009 and 2017, the stories in “Rock, Paper, Scissors” wander between the last days of the U.S.S.R., the chaos and economic crisis immediately after the country’s collapse, and the era of Russian nationalism. For most of Dr. Osipov’s characters, the changes in regime barely register, or they are treated as so many painted backdrops lugged across the same stage floor. “Once there had been Socialism,” Ksenia thinks, recalling Soviet days, and she “had done her duty, believing and not believing, like everyone else.” In the more contemporary stories, too, a mist of suspended and partial belief envelops whole families, whole hospitals, whole villages. As in the children’s game that gives the collection its title, Dr. Osipov shows how people dwarfed by institutions can make purposeful moves with nonetheless arbitrary outcomes. His characters sense the game and know the score. Their antics and soliloquies, however, do something to ease the long hours on the hospital wards and the sickness of lives that fail to change.

—*Dr. Kolbe is an attending physician at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital and an instructor at Weill Cornell Medical College.*

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