

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MIHA MAZZINI
THERE SHE STOOD, IN
HER BEST RED DRESS

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ORIGINAL TITLE: STALA JE TAM, V SVOJI NAJBOLJŠI, RDEČI
OBLEKI

Miha Mazzini: There She Stood, in Her Best Red Dress

Short story, version 1.06

Mom put on her best dress while the neighbor was telling her husband to start the car and the boy was squeezing his legs together, howling with horror, without taking his eyes off the blood filling the toilet.

In hospital they pricked him with a needle, took his temperature and pressed a stethoscope to his chest and back, while he gripped his mother's fingers with his right hand. "You must be brave, you're a big boy!" she whispered to him from time to time, "You're five years old!"

He squeezed his eyes shut to halt the tears forming a dense lump in his throat that he was unable to swallow.

He was put in stripy pajamas, the legs of which still dragged along the floor even when rolled up. Mom and the doctor moved to the room next door. He tried to make out their whispers and then he became aware of the mixture of his sweat and his mom's on his hand, which was getting cold and making him tremble, and suddenly he was no longer able to hold back the tears.

Mom told him she would come during visiting hours, that he must be good, that he should not be afraid, everyone gets better in hospital, and she waved to him through the glass in the door that she shut as she left.

They put a needle into his arm below his left elbow, covered it with a plaster and attached a tube, and an older nurse with an angular body and a protruding backside, which she carried behind her like a cushion, gave him a strict look, telling him that he would be tied to the bed if he moved or tried to pull the needle out of his vein. Using both hands she swiftly pulled up the metal rail at the side of the bed so that it slipped noisily into position.

The boy stopped breathing. The lump in his throat spread to his windpipe. Only when the nurse was gone did he manage to inhale with a slight, high pitched noise.

He looked at the window and through the net curtains sensed rather than saw the trees on the slope and a slice of the sky.

Mom!

He was scared to move properly. He twisted his neck and sobbed into his right shoulder.

For his dinner, the boxy nurse brought him a banana and some tea with too much sugar. "Eat!" she said, jerking her head as if she wanted to prompt him to move.

The new order contradicted her earlier one, which is why he simply looked at her with big eyes.

"Not hungry? Fine. They're hungry in Africa."

In panic the boy tried to guess what she meant – Africa, banana, was he depriving someone of food? But the nurse was already offering him some kind of a plastic bottle, saying:

“Pee in here!”

She pursed her thin lips because he didn’t respond immediately and then noisily and slowly released the air from her lungs.

“Hold this in that hand, yes, the one with the infusion, then take your pee-pee in your right hand and pee in here.”

She interpreted his hesitation as shyness.

“This is my job, honey. You think you’re something special? Thousands have gone through this hospital before you. So, get on with it!”

The sensitive skin, warm and damp, on the slightly rough plastic surface. Long straining before the blood-stained urine began filling the container.

“You really are shy,” said the nurse, “your face is redder than your pee.”

The boy expected to have to wash his hands, like his mom always made him do. But the nurse took his temperature, wrote something on his chart and left. Staring at his open fingers he began to realize: no washing because there are no rules here because there’s no mom. He found himself in an unfamiliar world.

Slowly the room got darker and the tree tops outside the window merged into one. There was a light in the corridor and he saw the nurse go past a few times. She never looked at him.

The fence around his bed surrounded him like bars. He grabbed the metal and squeezed with all his might. For a long time, he stared at the glass bottle above him and followed the tube leading into his arm. Trying to hold onto the uncertain calm, he breathed slowly and carefully. He did not want to awaken the mass in his stomach, which he imagined as a bear in its cave like he had seen in a picture book.

He had always known that outside their small apartment there was a world without mom, a world which must include his father, whom he had never seen, as well as landscapes and rooms that were completely different from all he was familiar with. “But wherever you go, God is there,” said mom and the boy realized for the first time that in that room there was neither a cross nor Jesus with a bleeding heart. “In hospital everyone gets better so they don’t put things like that on the wall,” he thought, relieved to have found an answer to at least one question by himself.

He felt the cool sheet, then the cover and the flannel pajamas. All strange. They seemed soft, intangible. He pressed his hand against his body, scared that he too was melting into the darkness, disappearing, and would soon evaporate. In the morning all they would find would be the needle with a drop of blood at one end. He pictured his funeral, a white coffin with a small bunch of flowers, because they were poor, but with many priests and altar boys since his

grandmother frequently gave donations to God's deputies on earth, as she called them. "Who will come? Who loves me?" he wondered and dozed off.

He quickly opened his eyes and saw that he wasn't at home. A small fragment of the moon had got stuck in the top right corner of the window and was shining on him. He remembered stories of werewolves and the unfortunate people compelled by the moonlight to walk along the roof and plunge off it, their innards splattering on the paving stones. This is why his grandmother closed the curtains every night and blessed him, just in case the curtains didn't work.

"Mom?" he whispered.

There was still light coming in from the corridor, but the light bulb must have been somewhere far.

"Mom!" he said again even though it seemed pointless. Immediately he knew it was a mistake. The word awoke the mass in him, which began seeping through. A feeling of emptiness, of the isolation felt by a small, lost fragment carried by the current and for a short, false moment thrown up onto the surface, before being dragged down once more into the darkness. He was too scared to move his left arm, but his right hand searched his body for something firm to hold onto. A button. He grabbed it and held on for dear life. Crying without tears, trembling with horror and despair, his hand suddenly waving in the air, he bit the knuckles. Something was hurting his hand, the button, he put it in his mouth and bit and chewed, tasting the firmness, until he had swallowed it through his sobs, then he stopped fearfully before feeling for another button.

"What's this?" said the nurse, "what have they given you? These pajamas don't have a single button. How come I didn't notice yesterday? I'll get you some new ones. Come on, have a pee."

It was easier this time, now he knew how, even though he still missed washing his hands. He held the plastic container, wondering how he managed to color half of it red. The nurse returned with a fresh pair of pajamas, a banana and a metal mug of tea.

When he saw her coming, he began crying.

"Tears or no tears, everything passes," she said.

He was looking at the window, telling himself stories. The corner of his eye frequently darted to the door, perhaps mom was coming down the corridor in the red suit that she kept for special occasions. In the end a face did appear, but it was a strange one, both bleary and swollen. The cleaner, wearing a blue uniform, opened the door with a cloth she was pushing in front of her on a long handle, wiping the floor. She looked at the boy, but didn't see any reason to say hello. The boy smelt her sweat, left over from previous days, and then a scent that made him open his

eyes wide and he pulled it inside until his lungs could not expand any further and his whole chest hurt. Lysol, a cleaning fluid that kills everything, his mom had said, even unhappy women. She smelt of it when she came back from work and he didn't like it, it cut into his nostrils too sharply, but there and then it signified contact with his own world.

The cleaner left, the boy began crying again, but this time he left the buttons alone.

Doctors came, took the chart from the bottom of his bed, read it and shook their heads. They didn't notice him.

For lunch, he got a banana and sweet tea.

Mom didn't come. He stared at the ceiling, allowing the tears to run down his cheeks so that soon his head was lying on a damp pillow.

He heard mom's voice, whispering: "I'll come at visiting time!" He roused himself from his nap and looked around in confusion. Maybe they weren't letting her visit him? Maybe she was standing in the corridor, crying? The pain made him bend double, he felt so sorry for her. Poor mom, all alone out there!

Carefully he raised himself onto his knees. He felt dizzy. With his right hand he covered the needle in his arm so that it wouldn't move, and he slowly got up. If he went right to the corner of his bed, he could see through the window a part of the junction and the other side of the road. Cars, sometimes a bus.

He stood on tiptoe. Could he see something?

He jumped up.

Mom!

She stood there, in her red dress, looking at him.

Another jump, the bed creaked, the wheels slipped, he began losing his balance, but somehow managed to focus so that he fell onto the bed. The needle moved and he squeezed his mouth shut to stop himself screaming.

But everything was well.

Mom was with him.

“We’ll have to tie you up if you do it again!” said the square nurse, looking at the dark stain growing around the needle.

The boy smiled shyly.

“You’ve got used to it now, haven’t you,” she said, “everyone does, sooner or later. Mom has her work. She’ll come on Sunday, at visiting time.”

“She’s off work.”

“How do you know?” The nurse furrowed her brow.

“Because she’s here.”

“Where?”

“Across the road.”

The nurse walked to the window and stepped behind the curtain.

“Where?”

“By the traffic lights, in a red dress.”

The nurse’s movements, thrown out of their daily routine and therefore impatient, halted. For a few seconds she even stopped breathing and then continued with a quiet: “Oh! I see!”

“Can I go and wave to her?” asked the boy.

“No. You’re sick and you must stay in bed. Don’t get up again.” She let the curtain fall back into place and slowly turned, avoiding the boy’s eyes.

“Can you wave to her?”

She stopped, still staring at the floor.

“Please, please,” the boy’s voice sounded as if it might burst into tears.

The nurse looked up and stared at him for a long time. Slowly she nodded, went back to the window and waved above her head, as if she was washing the glass.

“Thank you,” said the boy through a smile, “did she wave back?”

The nurse didn’t reply until her hand was on the door handle. She turned over her shoulder and nodded:

“Yes, she waved back. No more getting up now.”

Everything went easily and smoothly: from the constant bananas and tea, to the hospital rituals of blood taking, changing the infusion bottles and taking his temperature, to peeing into the

plastic container and pooping into a potty, where for a few days he had to use the paper to cover the clearly visible buttons. The boy knew it was worse for his mom, she had to stand alone in the sun; during a spring thunderstorm he silently begged her to find shelter, she didn't have to suffer for him and could go somewhere dry.

Every day, at least once, preferably twice, usually in the evening when the sun was already losing its strength and reddening and he was overcome by his fear of the night, the boy got up, stood on tiptoe and saw her. For a short moment, through the net curtain, but it was enough to stop the abyss of horror and despair opening up inside him again. Instead, it boiled and bubbled, but could not break through the shield created by his mom's presence. He felt he wasn't alone and the tamed days changed into a monotonous downward slide.

"I'm going to the seaside tomorrow," said the nurse, "a trainee will stand in for me." She stood in the doorway, her right hand playing with the door handle like a forgotten handkerchief while she looked for the right words. "Maybe you shouldn't tell her about your mom. Some nurses wouldn't understand, they may even call the police. So, you'd better not tell her," she said quickly and left.

The boy was expecting a dragon of a nurse and slept very little because of this. But in came a young girl with a wide smile and shiny eyes.

"Oh, you poor child!" she said, dropping the fence, sitting on his bed and stroking him. "Oh!" she kept saying, going about her business. Before lunch she even came and read him a story. She squeezed him so hard that he nearly ran out of breath and his bones hurt. His eyes couldn't get enough of her, he inhaled her perfume and the fabric softener wafting from her uniform.

She told him about how she went dancing on Friday nights and how boys fought over her. All that the little boy could do was smile broadly and feel grown up when she asked him who she should go to dinner with.

On the third day she said:

"I've never seen you cry. All the other children get sad sometimes, but not you. Don't you miss your mom?"

"She's out there."

"Where?"

He told her everything, the warning from the gruff older nurse only making him pause slightly.

The young trainee was already by the window, straining on tiptoe while the curtain rubbed along her back.

"Where? Where is she?"

“On the other side of the road, by the traffic light, in a red dress.”

The nurse shouted loudly: “Oh!”

She turned round and wanted to clap her hands, but they got tangled up in the curtain.

“Oh!” she said, laughing, so that her breaths rolled out like marbles, “you poor thing, what a silly story! That’s not your mom, it’s that thing firefighters use, what do you call it, a fire hydrant.”

THE END