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Just A Joke, by Chekhov

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Snow sledge ride in Sondermarken, Copenhagen, Paul Gustave Fischer.

Clear, wintery afternoon... The frost is hard and snapping, and Nadyenka, who is holding my hand, has silvery rime on her temples and on the fluff above her upper lip. We stand on a high hill. A sloping plane stretches from our feet all the way to the ground, and the sun gazes into it like a mirror. Beside us is a small sledge, upholstered in bright red cloth.

‘Shall we slide down?’ I beg. ‘Just once! I assure you, we will be safe and sound.’

But Nadyenka is afraid. The whole space from her little goloshes to the end of the icy hill seems to her a terrifying, immeasurably deep abyss. Her spirit freezes and her breath stops when she looks down, even when I only suggest boarding the sledge, and what would happen if she risks sliding down into the abyss! She would die, she would lose her mind.

‘I’m begging you!’ I say. ‘Don’t be afraid! It is faint-heartedness, cowardice, you know that!’

Nadyenka finally relents, and I can see from her face that she relents at

the risk of her life. I put her, pale and trembling, into the sledge, wrap my arm around her, and we plummet down into the abyss.

The sledge flies like a bullet cleaving the air. The wind whips in our faces, roars, whistles in our ears, rips, stings with anger, wanting to tear our heads off our shoulders. This onslaught makes breathing impossible. The devil himself seems to have wrapped his claws around us and, roaring, is dragging us into hell. Surrounding objects merge into one long, swiftly running streak... It seems any moment we can perish!

‘I love you, Nadya!’ I say in low voice.

The sledge starts to run slower and slower, the roar of the wind and the whirr of the skids are no longer so scary, my breathing stops no more, and we are finally at the ground. Nadyenka is neither dead nor alive. She’s pale, barely breathing... I help her raise.

‘No way I am taking this ride again,’ she says, looking at me with wide eyes full of horror. ‘Not for anything in the world! I nearly died!’

After a while, she comes to her senses and looks questioningly into my eyes: did I say those four words, or was she only hearing them in the whirlwind noise? I stand beside her, smoking and looking closely at my glove.

She takes me by the arm and we stroll near the hill for a while. The riddle, apparently, haunts her. Were those words spoken or not? Yes or no? Yes or no? It is a question of vanity, honour, life, happiness, a very

important question, the most important in the world. Impatiently, sadly, with a penetrating gaze, Nadyenka looks into my face, answering clumsily, waiting to see whether I am going to speak. Oh, what a play on that sweet face, what a play! I can see she's struggling with herself, she needs to say something, ask something, but she can't find the words, she's shy and afraid, and her joy is getting in the way...

'You know what?' she says not looking at me.

'What?' I ask.

'Let's take another... ride.'

We climb up the hill using the stairs. Again I put the pale, trembling Nadyenka in the sledge, and again we fly into the dreadful abyss. Again the wind roars and the skids whirr, and again I say in a low voice as the sledge reaches the loudest and noisiest point.

'I love you, Nadyenka!'

When the sledge stops, Nadyenka looks up at the hill we have just skidded down, then gives a long look at my face, listens to my voice, indifferent and impassive, and her whole, even her muff and cloak, her whole figure, expresses utter bewilderment. And words are written on her face, *What's this all about? Who said those words? Did he, or did I just mishear them?*

This obscurity worries her and makes her impatient. The poor girl doesn't answer my questions, frowns, ready to cry.

‘Shall we go home?’ I ask.

‘But I... I like this sledding,’ she says, blushing. ‘Shall we take another ride?’

She “likes” this sledding, but at the same time, when getting into the sledge, she is as pale as the last time, barely breathing in fear, trembling.

We slide down for the third time, and I see her looking into my face, watching my lips. But I put my handkerchief to my lips, cough, and when we reach the middle of the mountain, I manage to utter:

‘I love you, Nadya!’

And the mystery remains a mystery! Nadyenka is silent, thinking about something... I walk her home from the hill, she tries to walk slowly, slackening her steps and waiting for me to say those words to her. And I can see how her soul is suffering, how she makes an effort not to say:

‘It cannot be the wind that said them! And I don’t want the wind to say them!’

The next morning I get a note: ‘If you go sledding today, take me with you. N.’ And from that day on, I start going to the hill with Nadya every day, and every time we sledge down, I say the very same words in a low voice:

‘I love you, Nadya!’

Soon Nadyenka grows addicted to that phrase, like to wine or morphine. She cannot live without it. Though flying down the mountain is still frightening, now fear and danger add a special charm to words of love, words that still remain a mystery and torment the soul. The suspects are the same two: me and the wind... Which of the two confesses her love, she does not know, but it seems that she no longer cares; whichever vessel one drinks from, it is all the same, as long as one is drunk.

One afternoon I go to the sledging ground alone; mingling with the crowd, I see Nadyenka coming up to the hill, searching for me with her eyes... Then she timidly climbs up the stairs... It is frightful to sledge alone, oh, how frightful! She is pale as snow, she is trembling as if heading to the execution, but she goes, goes without a backward glance, resolutely. She has evidently decided at last to try: will she hear those marvellously sweet words when I am away? I see her, pale, with her mouth open in terror, she gets into the sledge, closes her eyes and, bidding farewell to the earth forever, sets off... ‘Zhzhzhzh...’ the skids buzz. Whether Nadyenka hears those words, I don’t know... I can only see her rising from the sledge, exhausted and weak. I can see it on her face that she does not know if she has heard anything. Fear has taken away her ability to hear, to distinguish sounds, to understand...

But here comes the spring month of March... The sun is caressing now. Our icy hill darkens, loses its shine and finally melts. We stop sledging. There is nowhere else for poor Nadyenka to hear those words and there is no one to utter them, for the wind is silent, and I am leaving for

Petersburg– for long, perhaps for ever.

A few days before my departure, at dusk, I sit in the garden; this garden is separated from Nadyenka's yard by a high fence with nails in it... It's still cold enough, there's still snow under the manure, the trees are dead, but it already smells of spring, and rooks cry noisily as they settle in for the night. I walk up to the fence and stare through the gap for a long time. I see Nadya coming out onto the porch and with her longing sorrowful eyes gaze up at the sky... The spring wind is blowing right into her pale, gloomy face... It reminds her of the wind that roared for us back then on the hill when she heard those four words, and her face grows sad, sad, a tear crawling down her cheek... And the poor girl holds out both hands as if to ask this wind to bring her those words again. And, when the wind roars, I speak in a low voice:

'I love you, Nadya!'

My God, what it does to Nadyenka! She shrieks, smiles all over her face and, looking joyful, happy, so beautiful, stretches her arms into the wind.

And I go to pack up...

That was a long time ago. Nadya is married now, to a Nobility Guardianship secretary – whether it was her choice or not, doesn't matter – now she has three children. The way we used to go to the sledging hill together and the way the wind carried the words 'I love you, Nadya,' to her ear is not forgotten; for her, it is now the happiest,

most touching and beautiful memory of her life...

And now that I am older, I do not know why I was saying those words,
why I was joking about it...

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