



THEATER KIDS

"G REASEPAINT makes everything easy as pie. Smear it on, and you feel confident. Think not? Just try it."

Over the makeup table, the light from the bulbs, which are as round as tree ornaments, is trembling. It's as if the old theater were going blind and squinting. Or winking at Sam all of a sudden, agreeing with him.

The theater smells sharp, like expensive cheese, from the open makeup box, and sweet, like a vanilla cookie, from the beige powder more than half gone in the tin with worn gilding.

Buskins — fancy leather boots with platform soles — swallow up Sam’s feet.

“And buskins are for being taller onstage,” Sam says, as if I didn’t already know that. He’s talking so matter-of-factly, as if nothing’s happened — as if he hasn’t just said he’s leaving for good.

Sam’s feet and toes, and the buskins too, suddenly smear and blur, and the light of the lamps over the makeup table dims, and something hot boils up in the corners of my eyes.

“What’s wrong, Grish?”

Are you a man or what? my grandfather would say, and maybe he’d even be spitting mad. *Boys don’t cry*, Anton would say. *You’re being kind of weird.*

But you can do anything in the theater if you live there. Even cry, even if you’re a boy.

Only I’m not going to cry — in front of him. I don’t want Sam to know.

To know how upset I am.

Sam’s face drifts, and now I can’t see his wide eyebrows or his eyes, which he still hasn’t made up for the evening performance.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just a sec, Sam. . . .”

The theater opens all its doors wide and clears all its thresholds so I won’t trip and hurt myself. My eyes can’t see

anymore, but I know Sam is watching me go. And his jazz music races after me, tries to catch up, lift me over the earth, and help me run away. Sam always listens to jazz when he's putting on his makeup — softly, so he won't bother anybody.



There's just one place in the theater where you can cry without anyone seeing you. No one's going to pester you or start asking phony worried questions — “Who hurt you, Grish?” — and you won't have to snarl back — “I'll be the one hurting the first person who tries!”

Run past the old harpsichord with the fake candles, past the room where the big sets are kept — if the door is open, a chill will run down your legs — and slip past the women's dressing rooms and wardrobe.

And dart through a small door.

That's it. Now dive into the space between the slender-armed fairies and the puffy masks and sit down by the Jester. Now, even if your face is wet — it's okay.

I sit there hating everyone: Sam for leaving, that Holland place he's going to, my own mama and papa for not even trying to talk him out of it, the whole theater for not caring, and the people Sam can't bear any longer. And myself. I

hate myself most of all because I'm crying like a baby, and I don't know how I'm going to go on.

The room where the puppets hang always smells of wood, glue, the folds of their brocade dresses, candy wrappers, and . . . miracles. The only people who come in here are the wardrobe people and the theater kids.

The theater kids are me and Sashok. The kids. That's what Albert Ilich, the theater's janitor, calls us.

I sit there feeling sorry for myself — until I'm sick of it. After all, it only *seems* as though I'm here alone. With the puppets, you're never alone. How can you feel sorry for yourself in a room full of people?

Masks and full-size puppets hang on a stand right by the door to make sure no strangers come in. The gray Mouse King with the evil eyes and shiny, bulging nose, and the pumpkin-headed fat man, and raggedy Baba Yaga. The puppets hang there with their colorful painted faces, silk ruches, and neat boots. They're all different; you won't find two exactly alike.

Occasionally someone's amazed that there are not just puppets, but people and masks on the puppet stage as well. A big puppet theater has room for everyone — marionettes, Punch and Judy, masks, and actors made up so you can't recognize them.

Papa calls this "combined theater."

In the back, forgotten by all, hang my favorites — the puppets from shows now gone from the stage. Sad Losharik the horse, the Little Fairy with her slender arms and marvelous dress. The Tin Soldier looks sternly at you, standing at attention. The pot-bellied Mouse from *All Mice Love Cheese* looks on sympathetically. The Jester in his multicolored cap gives you an amused look.

Oh, the Jester! With all that crying, I completely forgot. Soon, the Jester will be mine!

Today Lyolik said they're going to decommission *The Glass Slipper*.

All the shows get decommissioned sooner or later — and so do the puppets.

I always dreamed of getting the Jester. Because *I* am a jester. I tease the teachers in school. I talk to them in voices. I make jokes about the other kids. I'm Grishka the Pest.

To other people, I'm a jester.

Like him, just like him. Sam is the Jester.

That's what I always think when I take the Jester's hand. His palm is smooth and cozy, and it rests quietly in mine. Then the puppet tilts his head archly, so you can see his hooked nose with the bump, and he winks at me — "I do declare!" — and his eyes are clear, as if he hasn't been waiting here, backstage on the puppet stand, for a good hour to go to work.

“Sam, you’re on!” Vika, the assistant director, usually shouts in her terrible, loud whisper, downward and sideways, when they’re performing *Slipper*.

And now Sam runs, throwing the netting from his special black theater costume over his head, and grabs the Jester by its controller — and immediately the Jester’s sinew-strings pull tight. His arm jerks awkwardly, and his feet step out from the wings to a full house. At that moment, the Jester actually becomes a little less alive — he becomes an ordinary marionette on an ordinary stage. The scraps on the Jester’s cap flutter — apple red, cornflower blue, and gooseberry purple.

But the Jester laughs and sings — and Sam dissolves into him. The Jester hides Sam, as if he had never existed and there are only the black eyes and rascally smiles of the Jester, sculpted once upon a time by Lyolik, the theater’s puppet master.



Sam’s name is actually Semyon. But one day someone said “Sam,” and the name stuck. Because *Semyon*, though quite pretty, somehow isn’t very theatrical. Even when you see him offstage in the evening, after the show at the stage door, he’s obviously a Sam. Handsome and stylish. The scarf

wound nonchalantly around his neck, the turned-up collar on his flight jacket, the checked velvet trousers, and the round-toed boots. Sam's the whole package. Onstage he doesn't change in the slightest.

No, actually, he changes before he goes onstage. When I was little, I tried to be next to Sam when it happened. I tried not to miss the moment when he appeared from the dressing room to run to the stage entrance.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from him, trying to catch the moment Sam transformed into someone else.

But I always missed that split second when he crossed some invisible line on the floor of the passage leading from the makeup room to the curtain's black labyrinth.

All I saw was that someone else had taken up residence in Sam, that he was now moving completely differently. Even his palms, even the strong back of Sam's head and his flexible shoulders, seemed alien, like modeling clay. So changed I didn't recognize them.

It was always awful for me to see Sam step out of the backstage shadow into the light of the stage. I wanted to reach out and touch him to be convinced that it was really him.

Onstage, his face melts into hundreds of other faces — young and old, soft and sharp. Onstage, he knows how to walk softly, stealthily, like a large, unpredictable cat, or

angularly and clumsily, as if each step costs him inhuman effort. He knows how to fly onto the stage, barely touching the floor, swathed in black fabric, as if he himself weighs nothing. He knows how to make everything around him beautiful, and even in the ugliest makeup he takes your breath away.

Each time he plays a devil in one of the shows, I freeze on the spot. Because Sam spins on his heels, spins as deftly as a top, spreads his arms, and throws his head back. The hem of his scarlet frock-coat unfurls like a flower — and then suddenly he stops and laughs — a deep laugh, from his very core, that seems to make the air around him tremble; his laughter seeps into the wings, into everyone sitting in the audience, and into me. It seeps, it works its way right inside you, and everything inside you warms up, like after you drink tea with honey. His laughter runs hot through your veins, shoots straight through you, as if it were seeping all the way down to your toes. It presses my feet down, grounding me permanently.

That's what Sam can do.

After all, Sam is the Jester. That I know. The most genuine, most super, most perfect Jester. The Jester is his puppet. His role, which he plays better than anyone.

When I asked to have the puppet, I didn't know about Holland.

I didn't know Sam would be leaving soon for good.

But now I'm awfully glad I asked for the Jester. This way I'll have something to remember him by.



The Jester is Lyolik's very best puppet. Even Lyolik says so.

Lyolik's a jester too, of course.

He was here before I was born. Before all the puppets were born. He must be a hundred years old and he's seen it all, so there's a story behind every word he says.

The door to the theater workshop — to Lyolik's — is always open. It can be noisy and crazy outside, but cross his threshold and you're in another, magical world.

As soon as you step on the cracked but sturdy steps leading steeply down — and stoop a little because there's an old vaulted ceiling overhead — you catch the smell of fresh paper, glue, linden and birch shavings, the chocolate candies he always has here for tea, sharply sour paint — and hay, for whatever reason.

Lyolik is always sitting there, on a tall chair cleverly positioned so that he can see both the people rushing through the Moscow streets outside the window, hurrying about their business, and the wide-open workshop doors beyond which lies the actors' perpetual pandemonium.

Lyolik smiles broadly, from ear to ear; his mouth works independently; his brow is furrowed and ripples in waves; his glasses slip all the way down to the tip of his big, hooked nose; and, leaning over a puppet head, he looks like a fairy-tale hunchback, with hands hewn from an oak stump. All his fingers are different, as if some inept someone, in making a puppet, had stuck on fingers from hand puppets and china puppets, from rag-doll Punches and antique wooden nutcrackers. His hands look clumsy — but looks can be deceiving. No one can carve the fingers for Cinderella like Lyolik, or draw the squinting eyes of Puss in Boots, or glue the hairs to the Tin Soldier's brows like Lyolik anymore.



Earlier today we were sitting in his workshop blowing on our tea. That was when Lyolik said *The Glass Slipper* was going to be decommissioned. Before New Year's.

“But where will the puppets go?” I asked. “Where will Cinderella and the snooty Queen Mother go? Where will the Fairy and the Jester go?”

Lyolik just shrugged. “Where they usually do.”

The actors take the decommissioned puppets home. For instance, at home, in our hall closet, we have the bald King

Midas in his crimson chiton, and some large masks: a granny with glasses and a mousy-colored cap, and the little blue-eyed girl from *The Three Bears*.

Later, when I saw our artistic director, Kolokolchikov, Olezhek Kolokolchikov, in the passage, I nearly yelled, “Can I take the Jester when they decommission him?”

For some reason I knew that the Jester absolutely, just absolutely, had to stay with me.

“Sure,” Olezhek said distractedly, not even looking in my direction. “Sure, certainly, take it.”

That’s how I got permission to take the Jester.



“Are you there? Why are you hiding?”

I knew Sashok would find me, even in the puppet room.

She stands there staring at me with her big, round eyes.

“What were you doing? Crying? Are you a total idiot or something?” Sashok is my godsister.

Lyolik says there’s no such thing, but for me there is.

Sashok’s papa is my godfather and they christened us together. (We were eight years old, so I remember it well.)

I always wanted to have a sister, and I like thinking that Sashok is my sister, even though our parents aren’t related; they’re just friends.



If anyone at school calls me Grishka the Clown, Grishka the Pest, they clearly don't know what Sashok can be like. If you want to know who's the pest . . .

But right now I wish I could disappear, and I get a horrible feeling, as if my cheeks were filling with boiling water, and even the skin under my hair turns red.

"Grishka, the Maiden Red," Sashok says, and the right corner of her mouth twitches a little, like one of Lyolik's puppets. She immediately looks away, as if red-faced me is more than she can bear.

"Why were you crying?"

If you saw us on the street, from behind, for instance, you could easily have trouble telling which one's the boy and which one's the girl.

Sashok's hair is cut like a boy's. She's angular and has big ears, and when she walks she swings her arms briskly. Whereas I don't like to run; I feel like almost dancing when I walk. "You ball of fluff," Sashok sometimes says affectionately, reaching for my hair as if it really were dandelion fluff just about to fly away, and not the shaggy, curly head of hair I got from who knows where.

It's as if Sashok is proud not to have braids or silly princess dolls.

"Mama and Papa, thank you very much for bringing me

home from the hospital in a green blanket!” Sashok likes to say, stressing that all that pink and blue stuff has nothing to do with her.

I love her very much because she doesn’t dress up like a princess and doesn’t ask her parents to buy her a dress the pink of the sticky cotton candy at the amusement park. And because she’s easy to talk to about anything — it’s like talking to someone like you, not a girl. And I probably even like that she’s a pest. She doesn’t mean any harm; that’s just the way she is.

“Come on, spill!”

Sashok won’t back down, I know. So it’s best just to come clean.

“Sam said he’s going to Holland. Forever. To work there, and live there, for good.”

“I see,” Sashok says, and she sits down beside me on a wooden step.

She doesn’t say anything for a while.

Then she takes a deep breath — the smell of candy wrappers, shavings, and brocade puppet costumes — and she comes out with this: “And I’m going to have an operation. After my birthday.”

Sashok has something wrong with her heart, some syndrome whose name I can never remember. “Nothing

terrible, just palpitations,” she’s said. But they told her once that an operation might be necessary if the palpitations started to bother her.

Sashok’s had the syndrome since she was a kid; that’s why her lips are often totally blue, as if she’s smeared them with watercolors as a joke.

I always wondered what the palpitations were like.

That they could bother her.

“Well, it’s like you’ve got a crazed bird locked up inside you and it’s beating its wings in there but can’t get out,” Sashok said one day, without even the whisper of a smile.

I’ve always thought operations were very scary. I’ve never been in a hospital — as if, like the Jester, I’m not made of the same stuff as everyone else.

But Sashok’s another matter. She’s not me. She’s fearless. Or maybe she just pretends she is.

“They tell me the operation’s safe, nothing serious. But for some reason I keep thinking that’s not true.”

She glances at me, briefly, as if she doesn’t want me to see her eyes.

“I’m afraid of the anesthetic. At night I lie in my bed and wonder, what if I don’t wake up tomorrow? Then I don’t want to fall asleep, so I try not to close my eyes, as long as I can stand it. And then — there it is — I don’t want to, but

I fall asleep. And the next night it's the same thing all over again."

I don't know what to say. If Sashok admits she's scared, that means she's very scared. Which is why, just to cheer her up, I blurt out, "Guess what? They're going to decommission *The Glass Slipper* soon, and you can take any puppet you want."

I think she'll take Cinderella, or maybe the Queen. They're so beautiful, sometimes you feel like squinting because your eyes can't take that much beauty.

But this is Sashok, after all.

Her eyes glitter. Because, of course, I really am a complete fool.

"That means I can ask for the Jester!" Sashok exclaims. "It's no stupid, girly puppet," she says after thinking about it, as if she's continuing to argue with someone, "like the kind you'd ask for on your birthday."

Sashok's birthday is December 31, and she never invites me to celebrate it because she never has a party. It's rare she gets presents, since it's New Year's, after all. Up to the day itself, her parents work the holiday shows — just like mine. The holiday season, and all that.

"So they really might give me the Jester," Sashok says, and she cocks her head like a magpie.

Theater kids — it's not just me and Sashok, after all. It's the grown-ups too, I suddenly realize. Absolutely everyone who lives in the theater: Lyolik, Sam, Mama Carlo, Maika on lights, and even Nina Ivanovna, the fat lady at the snack counter with pink lips and blond hair whipped up like a fancy cake. And we may be all one another has. The theater too — we have that. The theater's always here. Everyone can count on a piece of the theater — that's a certainty. That's honest.

Sam would surely have done the same, I decide.

The theater's creaking stairs sigh: It's the right thing to do.

I'll give Sashok the Jester. How can I not?