

To Read a Novel  
by S.L. Lee

The whole novel began with two men meeting together in a train carriage. It was “the Idiot” by Dostoevsky. Definitely not part of my literary diet. In fact, I didn’t waste money on it. He gave it to me, “it will do you some good to read it.”

A hospital ward. The beeping machines doing their usual beeping and staring in the dark. Him lying on the hospital bed with the ‘wheel and axle’ thing at the foot. He made it sound like medicine (or worst!) therapy. I flipped the pages – and I gave the book back to him. I mean, Rogozhin, Natasya, Aglaya...no way man. If there’s anything I hate in a story, aside from crappy ending, crappy dialogue, crappy everything – is unpronounceable names.

But he held the book firmly into my hands and told me to keep it. And read it. As if it was a Bible. As if I was the one on the hospital bed with ten-odd different wires and pipes strung into me like I was a French marionette in a Moulin Rouge side-show.

“Come over,” he said, or croaked, I guess, in a weak and feeble way.

“What will I do with you?” he said.

I sneaked the book back under his pillow. I doubt he even noticed. He looked like the sides of old boots – lined, creased with age, discoloured with illness, not lichens. And he was thin. Tufts of dirty-blond hair stuck out of his raw, liver-spotted scalp. He kissed me on my forehead. Then he turned over to cough.

*Well, he couldn’t be allergic to me, can he?*

He was more than a friend to me actually. In most social situations, I referred to him as my godfather. After all, he provided for everything. And he was old enough.

Then he closed his eyes. He wasn’t holding onto my hand. *Good.*

There were times when he slept, still clutching onto my hand. It felt as though he was dragging me, along with his rigor mortis grip, to his grave, ‘tales from the crypt’-style.

Ever the Literature professor, he wanted some books to read. I had to get some of his academic journals from our apartment. He gave me a list but I lost it. I gave him a stack of books, with my collection of superhero comics mixed into it. He barely noticed.

He was almost gone by then. You didn’t need beeping machines to tell you that.

I should say, using some easy to understand clichéd expressions that I was doing *the lonely vigil through the night*. I should say that I was *shocked and saddened* by his condition, I should say I was *crying my eyes out*, and *sighing onto his pillow* and feeling that *dark night in my soul* as the possibility of my *one and only* passing away forever into *the valley of death* looms ever larger to my *large, dewy, doe eyes* (checked and confirmed with the bedside mirror: sorry, I can’t resist).

In truth, actually I headed straight for one of the newer bars along the clubbing district. It was Friday night. There were lots of people, young men mostly. I joined the queue going into the club. I recognized one or two of them. We clubbed in the old days. In nocturnal terms, that meant, a year ago.

“Hi dears!” I said, waving and hugging and doing the pretentious French air-kisses and whathaveyous with them. There were three of them but only one was vaguely familiar.

“Hi dear! How are youuuu! Oh you look GO-O-ORgeous!” He replied, fluttering his pink feathery fashion disaster all over himself.

“Oh nonsense! You *look* gorgeous!” A socially prescribed rule never to accept compliments.

“No, you look gorgeous!” Apparently he adhered to the same rule.

“Oh, okay, if you insist,” I replied, “or else, we’ll be here all day.”

The three of them didn’t know what to say and so they laughed and pretended I was very funny.

We didn’t call each other by names because we probably didn’t know them at all. Come to think of it, the person I thought he was, had a birth-mark under his chin. Unless he had some radical skin surgery lately, he was probably the wrong person – but with the right ‘free’ invites to the party.

I waved the invites to the bouncers. We walked in the ‘exclusive queue’ on the red carpet and looked derisively at the ‘commoners’ standing at the queue marked ‘normal’. I waved to them and I nearly tripped on the hump in the carpeted path. I entered and promptly lost those ‘gorgeous friends’ at the entrance. I had something to do that night. And having pretend friends hanging around me with second-rates joke wouldn’t help.

A young man in his early thirties leaned against the bar. His face sharp and lean like an arctic wolf in the neon-blue bar-light; the cheap, trashy re-mix of some disco-track by some diva-dancing queen sounded the war-march of my heart. He was in a stuffy business suit, holding onto something James-Bondish like a martini.

It looked so right on him. It was only when he looked at me and smiled that I realized I wasn’t old either. In fact, I was only twenty two. Life was only unfurling her phosphorescent petals like a poisonous lotus blossom.

*Come poison me, here. I’m dying anyway, might as well die young.*

He couldn’t understand what I was saying. Neither could I. We left the bar just as an old queen screamed at his boyfriend for dancing with someone else (though if you listen carefully to the exchange, it clearly far more than just a dance) and a Malay teenager, who took too much ecstasy, passed out on the dance-floor. He was so skinny you could mistake him for Skeleton Jack the pumpkin king in the Nightmare before Christmas.

A radius of space around him as everyone continued dancing. The neon-blue light from the bar made everything seem so cold. And lonely. Poor boy, I thought. Life got him first.

“Go hot tell?” He asked. His English was abominable, and I didn’t need an electrical storm to hurricane through my neurons and synapses to conclude that he was Japanese.

“Supper, first. Then hotel,” I replied, adopting the linguistic structure of a three year old.

There were no cafes around at that hour. As we left the club early, the main population of the denizens from club-dimension was still locked within the four walls, throbbing to the music, which everyone agreed was getting worse with the years. The rest of those we saw walking around had insidious intentions that belonged more to the dark alleys.

I sat on a set of stone benches beneath a row of Chinese shop-houses with 1921 in pink cement lettering at the pillars. I hope that was not the expiry date of the building.

He looked at me. “Here?” And then he smiled nervously at me, “Do here?”

Truth dawned on me. “No, not here. We rest here awhile. Then we go.”

“To hot tell,” he frowned and insisted.

“Later,” I said. *Gosh, what an idiot.*

“From Japan?” I asked – making some conversation in exchange for the cigarette. *No, duh, from the Land of Cuckoos.*

“Yeah, Tokyo. Here on business.” Although what he actually said was, Yei, Took-kyo. Here on BIZ-ZI-NESS.”

“How’s Singapore?”

“Singapore, very hot,” He had a disgusted, roguish expression.

He had good bone-structures sticking out of his face, rare for a Chinese. But then again, he wasn’t Chinese. He was Japanese.

I realized there wasn’t anything to talk about really. I was not particularly interested in his life-story and neither was he interested in mine. And without a translator, we were lost. Why we sitting in that sordid place was mind-boggling to me. He looked at me.

“To where?” He asked as I got up.

“To HOT-TELL” I mimicked him.

And he grinned like a simpleton and nodded, “Yessh, Hot Tell.”

He had his heart seizure, his last one, at three in the morning. My *godfather*, not the one night stand, mind you.

We were stark naked by then, the Japanese guy and I, not my godfather. Oh wait, actually that was when we were stark naked *only* to discover that condoms didn't come with the free matches, towels and soap in the hotel hamper. He didn't seem to understand what I wanted as I pushed him down and dressed up doubly-quick.

“What? I no good?” He asked, frowning.

I kissed him, tasting the cigarette in his breath and said, the only Japanese word I knew (aside from ‘good morning’ and ‘your mummy is ugly as the rear of a cow’).

“Chotto”

My godfather had a weak heart and that ruled out certain activities for a long time. And he expected me to keep to his doctor's orders too. Hell! No more of that.

I tore down the steps and ran to the nearest 24-hour convenience stall, so conveniently located just across the road. Condoms were located at the counter beside the strawberry lollipops like a cosmic taunt. The cashier, a fifty-over year old man with his belly sticking out of his tight-red uniform, looked at me – like a gargoyle.

When I ran back to the room, he was all ready with his knob pointing up to the sky, as if readying for the lightning's strike. “You like?” He asked, no longer quite so innocent.

“You bet,” I replied gamely.

We wrapped round each other and banged away hard.

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He died at three.

At three, with admirable self-control, he eased himself out, knelt in front of me and, his English, improving by leaps and bounds in that miraculous hour, asked, “I *spray*, no?”

At three, before I could even say a word to answer, I was filled with a deluge of hot semen ‘spraying’ onto me as he shook his thing all over mine.

The nurses who discovered him dead weren't the only ones that night to say ‘oh God, oh God, oh fuck!’

My mobile phone rang. It was the hospital.

When I told him that I had to go to the hospital, the Japanese guy looked at me oddly.

“Aids?”

I believe that even the gargoyle across the road shuddered at my hell-raising shriek at him.

When he died, no one was with him. He never spoke about his family in Scotland. If he didn't have the sense to make arrangements in the form of a coffin-sized parcel back to tartan-land, there was no way I was doing it for him.

I thought I should go up to his ward. I thought I should listen to the nurse as she rattered on about why he died – instead of telling her to 'fuck off'. I thought I should not be looking at the young doctor and entertaining unworthy thoughts. It turned out that he was just an intern and it was the first time he had a patient die on him. He was inconsolable and stood at the foot of the bed, sniffing onto a piece of tissue I offered him.

The room hung with his smell. My godfather's, not the intern's. It was that morning-after smell at the, you guessed it, next morning. Usually after sex. Except it was four am. Except I was the only one to get lucky in the room – unless the doctors and the middle-aged nurse were 'doing it'.

I wondered if he was already rotting. It got disgusting and I wanted to leave. I took the book from under the pillow (he really didn't noticed) and left.

I got down to the hospital lobby where there was a campfire of couches around a coffee table with newspapers and magazines from another time. Since vagabondism never quite caught on in Singapore, I didn't have to kill any tramps to get a seat.

I tried the vending machine for coffee and for once the coffee came. But not the cup.

I stood helplessly watching my brain fuel seep into whatever is at the bottom of the vending machines and I wanted to cry.

The room was cold with air-conditioning. Or maybe it was just the ghosts in the hospitals trying to tell me that the beeping machines besides their beds emit killer-gamma rays.

The young doctor came down to the lobby as well. He smiled, inserted some coins and he got a cup of coffee without any mishap. In any normal circumstances I was ready to cry. But this time, I wasn't. The doctor did not say anything but sat beside me. Good, I was in a touchy state. I could bite anyone's head off.

I got the novel out from the bag, propped them on my knees and flipped it open. In the Wordsworth Classic in front of me, it was two men facing each other in a train-carriage, on a cold, September evening...

After sometime the doctor slept beside me. In the course of the journey to the morning, he slept heavily. He turned over and leaned against me. I could feel his body heat beneath the white doctor's coat. I wondered if it was unprofessional to sleep with the patients' boyfriends.

I sighed and turned to my book. I wondered when they are going to have sex.