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CHILDHOOD, MEMORY, AND THE COLD WAR

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Adult Hospital Ward¹

Irena Kašparová

She is in the hospital bed, waiting for tonsil extractions. There was no room in the children's ward, so they admitted her to the ladies' rooms. The only child among five grown up ladies. No toys, no children's books, no posters on the wall, no other children to play or talk to. Instead, there are plain white walls. Adult faces buried in novels sink in white hospital linen pillows. The buzzing of the neon lamps is only interrupted by soft conversations about knitting patterns and strawberry pesticides. She feels lonely. The ladies quickly run out of short informative polite questions to which she gives short polite informative answers. Nobody to talk to. She is terribly lonely. She wants to cry but nobody cries around here. Not here. Here are only adults. She was placed here, because she looks like an adult. She is a big girl, responsible, eldest, good girl. She is almost ten but everybody would guess she is older. She has a big tall body, too grown up for her age. She does not feel big inside her big body, but she wants to live up to the expectations. She must not cry, not here. She is a big girl in the adult's ward. A nurse comes in the evening, handing each person a thermometer and medicine, asking each everyone: 'Did you have your stool today?' The girl panics. What on earth is she talking about? What is a stool? Surely, she does not mean the chair to rest one's feet after a long and tiring day!? Or a king's stool, the hereditary seat the sovereign occupies. What else on earth could this word mean? She is helpless, shy, ashamed for not knowing, not being the big girl. Apparently, 'yes' is the correct answer to the nurse's question, every woman answers yes, so will she. But what if she misses something vital? What if the stool is some kind of a pill necessary for her operation? What if it is some food or treatment that she needs in order to get better? She decides not to admit she

1 This is a childhood memory produced as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project discussed in the introduction to this book.

does not know the word, because that would point to the fact that she should not be here, that she is out of place here, the fact that she does not belong here, because the rest of the people all know what a stool is. So, she will pretend she knows also. The nurse writes this information into the paper and goes away. The girl feels relieved, hoping it is resolved once and for all. However, the situation repeats itself the next day, when the stool question comes up again. Thinking hard about what went on differently today, what may be a stool out of all the food she has eaten (or the others) or the actions she had performed (or the others), she is still clueless. She pretends again, but this time she is terrified of missing something vital. She is tense and stressed, her body starts sweating. Her bad conscience is biting her hard. She dares not to ask, not to betray the trust of all those who have chosen for her to be among the adults. She wants to comply, to keep up the facade, the mask, to stay in control. The mind is determined but the body betrays her. She develops diarrhea and fever and receives a pill to cure both. In the morning, they move her downstairs to the children's ward. She feels she is allowed to be a child again; she allows herself to cry.