SHORT STORY

Flyers

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"Mechanical Life No. Y" by Radoslav Rochallyi

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America doesn't exist. I've been there.
— Alain Resnais, *Mon oncle d'Amerique*

On a Friday afternoon, a phone rings. It's too soon to call her my new friend and she's quite a bit older, but this woman understands what I am going through. She is simply one of us, new immigrants with no income in sight. I met her just a few days ago in our subway station, immediately identifying her as "Russian," meaning coming somewhere from the Soviet part of the world. We recognize each other instantly, no need for verbal exchange. It's all about those tense, roused shoulders, slouched posture, bird-like hypervigilance. Our Immigrantland.

"Listen, my son... I never mentioned my son to you, have I? My son found something. It's not for me but maybe you want to try a shift or two."

If I am ready to start tonight, we'll have to meet at 4:30 p.m. sharp, at the entrance to *Telco*, a department store four blocks away from my house, and from there we shall proceed. The place is right here, in Brooklyn, so we can walk and save on a bus fare. The first shift starts at six, and we have to get there an hour earlier.

"What kind of a job is it?"

"What's the difference?" she replies. This is true, there's no difference at this point. It is the fall of 1991, and jobs are few and far between.

"Oh, I almost forgot, wear something plain."

As if I have a huge wardrobe with amplitude from plain to sophisticated.

Her son, a sulky guy in his early twenties almost twice my height, sighs with a sarcastic smirk, looking over me. "I am not sure you'd be fit for the job. They may not take you."

I begin feeling apprehensive. Several minutes later, another guy joins us. The three of us walk in silence for half an hour and then approach a shabby two-story building with wide-open garage gates, right across from an iron fence that separates piles of trash from the rest of the street – as if anyone would want to steal any of it. A sidewalk screeches under my feet; it is oversaturated with tiny, fine pieces of broken glass. I make my quick assessment of the neighborhood. Garbage here is rather pitiful: rusty cans, yellowish paper, pieces of old carpeting, shapeless, purposeless wooden sticks, mattress springs with pieces of stained

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fabric stuck to them, greasy McDonald's wrappers, foam cups with bite marks… It looks like people who live here have nothing to throw away. Things are much better where I live, and one can always find something useful in the garbage pile. One of my neighbors bragged about finding a china dinner set that was neatly wrapped — it would be a shame to let it be picked up by the garbage men. I don't know about her, but I'd rather reuse plastic plates. Although, I wouldn't mind finding a floor lamp or a working fan, for instance — the summer is upon us.

Some fifty people are waiting here to be hired for the night. All of them speak Russian. I look through the fence at the enormous brown rat (to me, all rodents look enormous!) that is sniffing around the garbage cans. Unlike me, the rat feels quite secure and relaxed. It is not paying any attention to the crowd slowly accumulating on the other side of the fence.

Finally, I learn about the nature of the job: we are going to pack flyers, the kind that people find on their porches on Saturday and Sunday mornings. If we are *hired* to pack them, of course. There are only three tables, twelve workers per table. It is obvious that not all those people who've gathered here will get to work tonight. *Amerikantsi* are gonna choose.

The job must be convenient for college students; one can study all week long and work here from Friday night until Sunday dawn. By then, all the work has to be finished, and flyers distributed in the neighborhood. A young man in a bulky coat chimes in, "Some weeks, I was lucky enough to work all six shifts, from 6 p.m. on Friday till 6 a.m. on Sunday. The problem is they don't like to hire me because I talk too much. They want workers to keep silent. By the way, they prefer women. Young and beautiful, I mean. Nothing to worry about; they just like to see women around."

Several men silently push their way through the crowd and disappear in the darkness inside the garage. They've worked for the place before, someone whispers. So, some work slots are taken already. Crossing the invisible line between "them *Amerikantsi*" and us, they suddenly look so goal oriented. Anxiety mounts and mounts.

The crowd consists mostly of those who are too weak, too young, or too old to do better paying jobs. Nothing like your usual day laborers. Former teachers, musicians and accountants whose more successful and stronger colleagues presently baby-sit children, clean apartments, or do construction work, all paid in cash, unlike this one, talk about chances to be hired tonight. A beautiful, fragile-looking blonde is worrying aloud: her husband may be late for this shift. He has to commute here from Uptown Manhattan, from The Julliard School of Music, but trains aren't reliable, and schedules are tight. This job is his only chance to make some money, because he has to practice all week long and also be mindful of his hands. He can't harden or cut his hands. Before coming to New York, he

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played flute in the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. His Julliard professors are all crazy about him and promise him an excellent future here, in America. But for now, they can't even get on welfare because they came to America with parole status.

Anxiety almost chokes me. I am neither too young nor too beautiful. True, I used to charm those around me in conversation about music, or poetry, or spirituality. I mean talking in my native tongue. And with people I liked. While here and now I feel aged and worn out. My oversized wool coat, a last-minute buy before the final departure from Odesa, makes me feel shapeless and lopsided. Besides, I feel that my English makes me a repugnant idiot and a failure in any job competition. I have enough self-awareness to realize that the way I see myself is how I probably look to the rest of the world, and this thought makes me even more self-conscious.

More details seep in through the whispers. The pay is not bad: $4.25 per hour. That's because they pay by check. My previous odd job paid me $2.00 per hour, because when the employer pays cash, he or she has no lower limit, and there are always people who agree to work for even less money. I know a girl who works at the around-the-clock day care center for the bed in the storage room plus a hundred bucks per week. I learn that they pay per hour and not per piece, as the identical place in Boro Park does. It should work in my favor: I am sure that I won't be the fastest worker.

Gates open at 5:45 p.m., and a young Hispanic guy, our feared American boss, jumps on top of the empty wooden box to choose tonight's workers. The crowd breathes in and presses against each other. I've already lost my new friends in the crowd. Oh, here they are: Both got picked. First twelve people, predominantly tall men, go inside the garage and stand around a long table. The blonde is also hired: she *is* beautiful. Only then, I realize that another reason for not getting a job is my height, rather, the lack of it. The guy simply won't notice me. I'll have to struggle through the crowd to the front, to the garage gates, just to indicate my presence. Just to get this job. Just to prove to myself and to others that I can do anything; that I can survive in this country because I *am* so tough and assertive, because I don't feel pain or remorse, or get hurt, ever.

While I am trying to work my way through the crowd, another batch of twelve people get hired. I don't feel the pricks of elbows pushing me away or trying to slow me down. I just mechanically keep trying to get in front of the crowd. There are still a considerable number of people expecting the executive decision. The guy hesitates; he doesn't like the rest of us. Suddenly, he turns around and goes inside to talk to his boss. They may not need the third table today, someone says. People inside are already listening to another "boss", a guy who

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explains to them what exactly they need to do. It's already 6:10 p.m. I am an official failure. The six-shifts-in-a-row man looks at me apologetically from inside.

Then, the hiring guy comes back and quickly chooses another twelve people, me among others. I go inside. When I look back, I see a man with the slender black case under his arm, waving with another arm to attract the attention of the blonde who has started packing flyers. The flutist is desperately late. Well, better luck next week.

"Look, Russian. Today is six. One, two, three, four, five, *kharacho*?" The guy picks up five different flyers from five separate stacks in the center of a long, narrow table. "Six is "Marketeer"… put on top, *kharacho*?" Flyers are arranged in the middle of the table so that all six items can be reached easily by two adjacent workers. "Fold… put in bag… bag in basket… one, two, three, four, five… "Marketeer" on top… fold… put in bag… in the basket… understand, Russian? Translate." The guy turns to a teenage girl standing next to me. She obediently repeats the whole thing in Russian. It doesn't make much sense to translate, though: the guy demonstrates every step, making sure those illiterate Russians get the instructions.

Some people have already started working while the guy was explaining; others still hesitate to touch the towering flyers.

"Start!" the guy prompts them. "Fast! And no *govori po russky!*" Everybody is laughing. The guy is immensely pleased with his Russian. He walks up the stairs to the office. Okay, so we won't talk, what a big deal.

The work itself turns out to be much easier than I have imagined. I form packages pretty fast. One, two, three, four, five… the thickest of them, "The Marketeer," goes on top… fold the flyers in two… put in a plastic bag… throw the bag in a basket standing at my feet. When my basket is full, one of the guys empties it into a huge box that will be wheeled around the neighborhood on Saturday morning. One, two, three, four, five… "The Marketeer" on top… fold it… put in the plastic bag…throw in the basket.

I even enjoy the mindlessness of this work. I think about my future pay, and this simple thought sends warm waves through my body, cheering my soul on its way. With tonight's money, we have a chance to purchase a bookcase if there won't be any other, emergency purchase, or a payment overdue. I hate to see my cherished books piled up in a corner of the living room, on the smelly carpet that apparently survived several generations of new immigrants with limited means.

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It took me too much effort, money, and sleepless nights at Odesa's Main Post Office, on Sadovaya Ulitsa, to ship book parcels here. The lines were enormous, and the post office accepted only 22 parcels per day, four kilograms each. This meant four to six books per parcel. To make it somewhat fair, customers, all future emigres, had to set up their own rule allowing only two parcels per day from each sender. In order to become one of those lucky eleven customers in the morning of each day, people had to wait outside the post office from the early evening of the previous day. The good thing was that I was doing it through the summer, and the nights were pleasantly warm. By September, I managed to ship to America about thirty book parcels. I hope that someday I will have time to re-read these books. Not now. Not until we are fully settled and know what will become of us here.

My shift is going to end at midnight. It's just 6:45 p.m. now, but I begin to feel the tiredness. Everybody feels it. Two women at the far end of my table talk, quietly and almost lethargically, despite the warning not to. These guys don't understand that being able to talk keeps people from drowsiness and exhaustion that's only natural for such monotony.

Thanks to a man who has warned me, I had kept my coat on. Only now, half an hour into my shift, do I realize that it's freezing cold in here, because the gates are constantly open, in order to allow in the last daylight. Light is also money, you know. My feet are getting cold, too. If I could just move them, walk around the table or something. Somebody whispers in my ear, "What do you think, can I go out for a cigarette? Will they let me?"

"They will," answers the teenage girl from across the table. "But they will deduct this time from your pay. They deduct time for every wrong move." Luckily, I don't smoke. At least, I won't have to fight the craving.

Three of us, the teenager, the smoker and I, start talking, almost reading lips. We keep working, maintaining a similar pace. The girl, a high school student, makes her pocket money here because her parents have no extras to give to her. Her mother attends a business school hoping to find a real job one day, and her father works for a car service, although he is still afraid to drive and gets panic attacks every now and then. He learned how to drive here, in America. Back home, in Belorussia, just two years ago, he was a chemical engineer. Who needs a chemical engineer here?

The woman next to me was lucky to find this job right away, after a month of living in New York. Of course, NYANA, an organization that sponsored them upon arrival, paid some part of their rent, and her husband just applied for food stamps. But who's going to pay the rest?! He has different appointments every day – we all learn the culture of appointments, not quite getting their meaning. He sits in waiting areas of social service agencies from early morning to afternoon. Then, he goes to his English as a Second Language school. She hopes that he's

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already home by now because she's left her boys home alone. The time has come to pay their first ConEdison bill. They didn't know it would be so much. Nobody gives them money for that damn light. Nobody cares how they're gonna pay those stupid bills. She'd be better off staying home in Ukraine and not coming here. In her attic, she had a whole shelf of homemade preserves. They could eat it every day throughout the winter and not worry about coming inflation. She wants to go back. She realizes that it's presently impossible because they have nobody to stay with, and their apartment has been taken back by the city.

We all want to be home and don't want to be home at the same time. And those who want to be home less win over those who want to be home too much for concentrating on building some kind of a life here.

I just tell them that I'm also from Ukraine, already four months in Brooklyn, and live with my parents, grandparents, a husband and a toddler son in a two-bedroom apartment. Back home, I was a teacher. I don't want to provide too many details. Too painful and too trivial. Everyone around me has identical problems, and there are so many of us. A mass exodus, that's what it is.

By now, my fingers have turned bluish-black from the cheap typographic ink that comes off the flyers. My neck hurts. I don't feel my feet. But it is easier when you are talking. We almost forgot about the guys. Oh, here they are. "Shut up, *po russky*! Hurry up!" We become quiet for a beat and then start whispering again.

The guy is fully back; probably, he has been watching us. He again tells us to shut up and then calls the girl aside. She returns back with the bad news: the guy threatened to deduct one hour from her time sheet. We feel guilty that she is the only one to be punished. We continue working in silence.

One, two, three, four, five… "The Marketeer" on top… fold it… put in a plastic bag… throw in a basket. One, two, three, four… By now, it's awfully, night-timishly cold, and my light wool coat, which is already covered with random stripes of gray typographic dust, doesn't keep me warm anymore. And I can't just give it all up and go home. I have to survive till midnight. Three more hours. The woman from Ukraine can't tolerate the torture and goes out for a smoke. I wish I smoked, too. Makes it easier. Good excuse for taking a break.

Then, suddenly, time starts to run, and I make it easily through the next two hours — until eleven. My last sixty minutes, though, turn into real agony. I look at my watch every thirty seconds, and I can't help it. I wish I'd died of a heart attack this very second. To make my family feel sorry for letting me come here and get this job. They'd realize that I had been tortured needlessly. All I need to do is to mask my suffering until my heart pumps out this

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last drop of blood. And then, I will be allowed to fall on the spit-covered floor, face down. I want to cry. Tears are slowly reaching up to my eyelids, ready to burst out. I feel like a helpless little child. But while it's ok to look pitiful in front of those Hispanic strangers, it’s totally not ok in front of my own kind. We all look powerful and wise, ironic and cool, and if not rich then possessing some special resource. It can be knowing right people or doing things like locals do. Whatever it is, we can’t lose it in the presence of others from the same background. So, on with the flyer-packing shift, even in my situation-inappropriate wool coat and the useless interview suit underneath.

We do not stop working at twelve because the next shift hasn’t been formed on time, and, as we learned tonight, time is money. We work until 12:20 a.m., and then it’s time to go home. I don’t even try to join them, my happy coworkers, who walk in the same direction, and choose to walk home alone. The streets are unlit; the whole neighborhood feels abandoned, but I no longer care. I am too tired to worry about safety. And, for the first time since the beginning of my American chapter, I register the sky, and stars, and the enormity of the night. Look, stars have made it here with me. I think I just earned my right not to be afraid of the Immigrantland anymore.

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