# PATIO



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I write about trams and not buses or subway, because it was precisely by tram that you traveled from the terminus of the suburban bus to the hospital where my mother worked, on Astronauts Avenue. Then a huge gate with a porter's lodge, an enormous hall, long corridors, and elevators—unusual ones, large, wide as a table set for Christmas Eve, because they had to accommodate patient gurneys, after all. And then finally the eighth floor and windows from floor to ceiling, like in Cloud City on Bespin, except not in the clouds.

From these windows, you could see everything and the whole world besides. From one corridor you could see the skyscrapers in the center, from the other side trams running along Astronauts Avenue, from the third the wall of the neighboring wing of the Polyclinic. On the last side were offices with windows facing the interior of the building. And it was the view from these windows that fascinated me most. Because when you looked down, there below your feet, bounded on all sides by the hospital buildings, like a courtyard-well in a pre-war tenement block, a secret garden revealed itself to my fascinated, several-year-old eyes.

"It's a small patio," my mother said when I first saw this wonder of wonders and asked her about it.

"Patio" was a new word for me. I savored it quietly, in solitude, absorbed in myself in the corner of her office. I sat cross-legged, on my knees I had spread open a UNICEF photographic calendar thick as a brick, and I tried to decipher the inscriptions, although I had not yet fully mastered the art of reading. One should also account for the fact that the captions in the UNICEF book-calendar were much more complicated and concerned matters more difficult and far more exotic than the comics over which I spent my free time and on which I perfected the difficult art of independent reading.

"Patio"—I whispered to myself very quietly from time to time, leafing through black-and-white photos of ebony-skinned schoolgirls from Madagascar, laughing Moscow pioneers with fair hair and dark eyes, Eskimo tots hidden in their family igloo, or teenagers from suburbs of Monte Video no less exotic than the word "patio." Then I put down the calendar, toddled to the window, and as if enchanted, stared long at the view of green-ery imprisoned between the concrete wings of the hospital. The secret garden set my childish imagination ablaze and stayed with me for a long time. I visited my mother's workplace rarely, very rarely indeed, so there weren't too many opportunities to feast my eyes on the view of the patio, although memory and imagination returned to it regularly. When, during one of the rare visits, I asked whether one could go down there and heard that yes, one could, I was so moved and delighted that I didn't even ask that we do it. In the end, somehow there was never an occasion—we were always in a hurry, there were things to do, we had to take care of something else. I, for that matter, didn't ask or request; I felt that if one could go there, it would eventually happen.

Years passed, then decades. Two and a half. My mother's office wandered between floors, between wings of the Polyclinic, the patio disappeared from behind her window, it also disappeared from my imagination, though not from my memory. I myself had long been an adult and had my own office, though not on the eighth floor, but in the basement of a building in the old district, right next to a thoroughfare. We ended up at the Polyclinic with my wife and our daughter pushing her way into the world, as determinedly as ineffectively, because the ritual of arrival was prolonging itself. We appeared there at dawn, then noon struck, finally, the lunch hour came and passed. I went down to the ground floor in one of those enlarged elevators, though now I already knew they weren't so large at all—I had seen and used even bigger ones myself.

I sat in the cafeteria, hastily devouring mashed potatoes with meat and thick sauce. And just then, I raised my head and a dormant, abandoned memory suddenly jumped into its place. For I saw, for the first time in my life, at eye level and not from a height of several dozen meters, the patio. The secret, magical, mythical place that had so fascinated me when I was a little boy. I finished eating in haste, returned my dishes, and slipped out through the ajar glass doors, though they weren't necessarily intended for pedestrian traffic, much less for Polyclinic clients.

From above, the place had looked tiny, but from the fairy tale read by my grandmother about the brave hen that flew in an airplane, I knew that when seen from above, everything seems smaller. My childish mind, therefore, assumed that the patio must be quite sizeable, just right like the playground in Culture Park, or even bigger. In reality, even accounting for the fact that I myself was now several times larger than then, the area didn't make an impression. A small square, a clump of trees, some shrubs, literally two paths crossing, and one bench somewhere in the shade of those trees. Little trees, rather. Rachitic urban survivors, persisting amid concrete more by force of fury than will.

One might think that the patio, when encountered face to branches, was disappointing, but those weren't the feelings that accompanied me then. It was a bit like finding a childhood pirate treasure that turns out not to be treasure, or like meeting an old friend with whom there's not really much to talk about anymore. And yet we examine even such treasure with a certain fascination, handling worthless trinkets that nonetheless evoke some sentiment, and we listen to the words of a former friend with some curiosity, wondering and guessing who he has become over the years. I closed my eyes and returned to the maternity ward. I put the patio away in that drawer in memory, where settled and finished things lie.

Last summer, I was at the Polyclinic for a moment, on some business, for some papers or copies. Walking down the corridor past the cafeteria, I glanced through the glass walls and windows on the other side, from floor to ceiling. The trees had been cut down, the square plowed up, and asphalt poured over the entire area. In place of the patio was now an additional parking lot, judging by the identification cards stuck under the front windshields, designated for use by the facility's management.

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