

The Last Vice of Viktor Mikolnikov

Harrison Potts

Amidst the ruckus and fluttering lights of the casino, Viktor Mikolnikov found himself adrift in a sea of anticipation and despair. The roulette table, with its spinning wheel and tempting allure, held a bewitching grip on his senses. It whispered to him the prospect of re-attaining the wealth he'd lost in a several-month slide into poverty.

Once a reasonably well-off merchant of gentlemen's hats, the day that his wife, Anya Olsufevna, finally succumbed to consumption set in motion an aftermath that pushed him into a deviled state of mind. It was one that sought the fulfillment of love in the cheap thrills of vodka, brothels, and chance. With capital running thin, all efforts were eventually placed on the aforementioned. There was a strange logic to it: after all, it was the only vice that held with its temptation the *possibility* of financial and social redemption.

The feverish nights when Anya was spasming and coughing up blood were painful, true, but the moment that Viktor felt the greatest pain was when she was finally *gone*. He would choose to endure a million years of witnessing his wife's illness if it meant that he could be with her. Alas, death must always be that final separation which even love cannot penetrate, leaving those who feel it, like our hero, to feel it as a kind of permanent hollowness, the behaviors of which only hollow itself further.

In sentimental moments, scattered throughout the ebbing and churning of the casino floor, Viktor

would recognize something in the pearl ball that he once witnessed in the whites of Anya's eyes. Alas, this *witnessing* can only be described as ineffable: both the word itself and the witnessing of this abstraction point to their own futility.

Viktor arrived at the casino that day with the scraping-bottom of his savings, praying for a miracle to reverse his fate, repeating to himself that *yes* it was possible. Beneath this veneer, however, the game was always more than just *chance*. It was a game of *playing*. It was that kind of playfulness, or even high-stakes silliness that was a poor imitation of young love. The silliness of that first smile exchanged between strangers, the absurd for-itselfness of blossoming laughter, and the unwavering gaze of a bride uttering vows beneath the three-barred cross. The words that once filled Viktor with light grew to haunt him like sonic phantoms bouncing around the inside of his skull.

...in sickness and in health, in happiness and in grief...

The cacophony of shouts, gasps, and obscenities inflated the air as he made his way through the maze of card tables and rolling dice. There were a number of men that Viktor Mikolnikov recognized, but didn't know. And there were those that tipped their hats to him that he "knew", but didn't recognize. Finally coming to his destination, Viktor sat down on a vacant seat at the roulette table. He placed his remaining gold on the color red. The wheel spun, the ball skittered along the numbered pockets, and

the tension was knotted at full crescendo. The dealer was dead-eyed as he watched the events occur. To him, the wheel was but a black hole for men to lose their wealth and sanity into the vortex of.

The ball landed on black, bludgeoned to death any semblance of Viktor's hope. Its dying gasps bled out into the corners of his mind, flooding every corridor of his conscience. He slumped down over his bent elbows at the edge of the roulette table, wanting to collapse into a pile of clothes. Feeling suffocated by himself, he began to shuffle away from the table to God knows where.

In the midst of this devastation, a peculiar figure caught the edge of Viktor's attention. A man, tall and thin with skin frayed by many decades, stood nearby. The figure watched Viktor's heavy steps turning away from the table as his gold went into the possession of the casino. The stranger's eyes held the glint of a dancing snake. He wore a threadbare coat, the fabric of which seemed to blend indistinguishably into the air around him. Consumed by curiosity and needing to do *something*, *anything* to uphold himself, Viktor adjusted his heavy steps and approached the enigmatic figure.

Voice trembling with anxiety, Viktor asked, "Who are you?"

The stranger's lips curled into a reptilian smile.

"What is in a name? You may call me Ivan."

Viktor's heart changed pace as he examined Ivan, unable to hide his inquisitiveness.

"And what brings you to this casino, Ivan? Are you a man of roulette? Or cards perhaps?"

Ivan's eyes glittered further.

No... actually I have an offer for you, dear Viktor Mikolnikov. I will grant you one intervention. One wish. But be warned, for every gift and pleasure there is a price to be paid."

Wanting to believe the stranger's words, a feeling of desperate hope lept forth in Viktor, though he went about trying to mask it with a handful of skeptical exclamations. He removed a handkerchief

and dabbed at the sweat that was beginning to collect on his brow.

"Hah! A peculiar man! Something of a mystic! I suppose you can't raise the dead, can you!"

Ivan simply stood there and blinked slowly. Viktor waited for a moment to see what Ivan's response would be. When Ivan remained silent, blinking again, Viktor couldn't help but mutter nervously before the desperate hope shot up to the surface in a declaration of his *wish*.

"Only the *material* is your concern, I imagine, heh, heh. In which case I wish for riches beyond my loftiest dreams! To never again face the misery of poverty!"

Ivan's eyes and smile widened synchronously, knowingly.

"Very well."

In an instant, Ivan vanished, leaving Viktor to ponder the possible hallucinatory nature of what he'd experienced. Doubt was nibbling on the perimeter of his conscience. With the strange cognitive dissonance of both dread and optimism, Viktor exited the casino. He hobbled into the evening, made his way across the city, puffed his way up the stairs of his building, and crashed onto his sleeping place. It was so undignified that calling it a "bed" would be to elevate it beyond what it was worth referring to.

The following morning, Viktor blinked his eyes with dullness as he observed the water-stained ceiling and the peeling walls of his dilapidated apartment. Stumbling to the bathroom to relieve his bladder, his decaying trousers fell from his waist onto the floor. They were heavy with the gold of Ivan's blessing. He danced half-naked to absent music, overjoyed and screaming hallelujah.

That evening, after a day of flowing vodka in the dimly lit tavern across Petersburg Bridge, Viktor went straight to the same roulette table he'd lost at less than twenty-four hours prior. Upon entering *this* time, it seemed to his ears that the cacophony was

a choir, praising him as he went to the wheel. He placed his bet on red again, the fresh memory of his last failure still on his mind. It spun and the pearl ball danced. He held his breath. At the edge of it, the white sphere landed on a red pocket.

The attention of onlookers had been drawn, and they burst out in jubilation at Viktor's success. He smiled as they bustled joyously around him, but felt as though he was forcing it, almost for the sake of appearances. *I must go again*, he thought. *To double my fortune once more should certainly make my smile genuine!*

He placed the summation of double what he'd brought, again on the color red. The gamekeeper didn't hesitate. The ball spun as one might expect, being followed by the enthusiastic gaze of the onlookers, as well as the dead eyes of the dealer. Somewhere along the way, however, the pearl took a turn against gravity. It whipped through the air,

whistling with the speed of an English arrow before piercing bone and lodging itself in the center of Viktor's brain cavity.

He stood there for a moment, eyes staring a thousand yards towards nowhere before his legs crumpled and he fell onto the carpet.

His own words echoed back to him inside of his psyche. They distorted themselves until the voice that whispered them in the folds of his mind was no longer his own, but Ivan's.

Only the material is your concern, I imagine...

As the blood swelled and flooded, Viktor thought that the ceiling he was gazing through had the same hue as his wife's face when he would wake up beside her in the morning. Amidst the screaming and fluttering lights of the casino, Viktor uttered "I love you" as his final words.