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## Symbols and signs by vladimir nabokov

Their son's birthday had come and gone for the fourth year in a row, leaving them with a familiar dilemma: what gift to bring to someone who was increasingly detached from reality. Despite their efforts to avoid anything that might offend or frighten him, his parents found themselves stumped once again. After narrowing down their options, they settled on a simple yet thoughtful present - a basket filled with ten different fruit jellies in tiny jars. Years of marriage had taken its toll on them, and now they were quite old. The wife's dull gray hair was pulled back carelessly, and she wore cheap black dresses that suited her somber demeanor. In contrast to their neighbors, who primed and painted themselves for spring, the couple presented a plain yet unassuming appearance. The husband, who had once been a successful businessman in his homeland, relied heavily on his brother Isaac now. The two seldom saw each other, but they referred to him affectionately as "the Prince." On this particular Friday, however, everything seemed to go awry. A subway train experienced a power outage, leaving the couple waiting in silence for nearly half an hour. Their bus was late, and when it finally arrived, it was packed with rowdy high-school children. As they trudged up the path leading to the sanitarium, rain began to fall, casting a gloomy pall over their visit. Instead of seeing their son, who usually greeted them at this point with his customary sullen expression, the couple was met by a nurse they didn't particularly care for. She explained that he had attempted to take his life once again, assuring them that he was okay but warning them that a visit might distress him further. The sanitarium's understaffing and disorganization made it clear that leaving their gift behind would be the wisest decision. As they waited outside the building for her husband to open his umbrella, she couldn't help but feel the weight of tears welling up in her eyes. Every glance at his weathered hands, clasped tightly around the umbrella handle, only served to heighten her emotions. The swelling in his veins and brown spots on his skin seemed to remind her all too vividly of the struggles he faced each day. As she gazed around, a peculiar sensation washed over her - a mix of empathy and astonishment. A young girl with unkempt dark hair and vibrant red toenails was openly weeping on an older woman's shoulder. There was something eerily familiar about this woman; she bore a striking resemblance to Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married into the Soloveichik family in Minsk years ago. The last time he'd tried his peculiar method, it had been hailed as ingenious by the doctor, but ultimately foiled by an envious fellow-patient who mistook him for attempting flight. In reality, he'd sought to shatter the boundaries of his world and escape its confines. The intricate system of delusions behind his behavior was documented in a scientific paper given to them by the sanitarium's doctor - "Referential mania," a rare condition where patients believe everything around them is a veiled reference to their existence, excluding real people from the perceived conspiracy. He saw himself as an intelligent exception, with nature conspiring against him at every turn. Clouds in the sky transmitted encrypted messages, trees conveyed secrets in Morse code, and even pebbles and sunspots formed ominous patterns that he felt compelled to decipher. The air itself seemed to be filled with hidden meanings, indexing his very presence. As they stepped out of the subway's suffocating atmosphere into the evening light, she asked him to take the basket of jelly jars home, but he hesitated, realizing he'd misplaced their keys earlier in the day. He sat down on a step, lost in thought. Looking back on his life, she saw a man who had struggled to cope with his demons, yet still managed to find solace in the things that brought him comfort. He would often trudge into their flat, exhausted from the weight of his own mind, and attempt to put on a brave face for her sake. Despite his efforts, his dental problems continued to plague him, and he would often remove his plate to eat. She knew better than to press the issue, and instead focused on preparing dinner while he read his newspaper. As she settled into their small living space, she would notice the remnants of his past lingering around her - a soiled pack of cards, an old photograph album filled with memories of a life left behind. One particular image caught her eye: a young boy, barely four years old, looking wide-eyed and frightened as he gazed up at a squirrel in a park. Another photograph showed him as a six-year-old, drawing fantastical creatures with human features, yet already struggling with insomnia like an adult. She remembered the journey that had brought them to America - the shame, the pity, the difficulties of adjusting to a new life. She recalled the special school he attended, where his eccentricities were met with suspicion and fear by the other children. And then there was the time when his phobias hardened into a dense web of illusions, making it impossible for him to connect with the world around him. Despite all this, she had learned to accept the loss of joy that came with living - not just for herself, but for him as well. She saw the pain that still lingered in his eyes, and yet she knew that he would continue to find ways to cope, to adapt, and to hold on to the things that brought him comfort. She had endured the unspeakable, the unfathomable cruelty inflicted upon her child by invisible giants. She knew that tenderness was fleeting, often crushed or wasted, and sometimes transformed into madness. Neglected children hummed to themselves in hidden corners, while beautiful weeds struggled to avoid the farmer's plow. At nearly midnight, she heard her husband moan from the living room and shortly after, he stumbled in wearing his old overcoat with an astrakhan collar instead of his blue bathrobe. He exclaimed, "I can't sleep! I'm dying!" and lay down on the couch. She tried to calm him, suggesting they bring their child home the next day, but he insisted they must act quickly to avoid responsibility. After a brief interlude, her husband returned with a plan: they would give their child the bedroom, take turns watching over him, and have a doctor visit twice a week. The telephone rang, and although it was an unusual hour, she answered it, only to discover that the caller had the wrong number. A second call yielded the same result. As the night wore on, they sat down to an unexpected midnight tea, with her husband sipping noisily and raising his glass in circular motions to dissolve the sugar. Note: I have kept the language of the original text and only paraphrased it to make it easier to read. Vladimir Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" is a poignant short story about an elderly Russian couple visiting their son, who suffers from paranoid delusions. The narrative explores their thwarted attempt at a visit and its aftermath. Signs and Symbols, a story shrouded in ambiguity, leaves readers questioning its meaning. The title can be interpreted in multiple ways: as references to natural signs and symbols, playing cards, childhood photographs, or even the entire narrative itself. The third phone call exemplifies Nabokov's playfulness with these symbols, leaving us to ponder whether it's a girl trying to reach her son or a devastating revelation from the sanitarium. Looking back on his life, the young man's desperation to escape his reality was a recurring theme. Nabokov's poignant story "Signs and Symbols" delves into the complexities of mental illness, as a son struggles with his own sanity amidst the turmoil of his family's lives. The author's masterful prose weaves a narrative that is both haunting and thought-provoking, much like his renowned novel "Lolita." With its exploration of the human condition, this short tale showcases Nabokov's remarkable storytelling abilities, leaving readers to ponder the depths of the human psyche. I dove into another collection of Nabokov's short stories today, immersin' myself in the world of Signs and Symbols. His writing style is so vivid it feels like you're right there in the midst of it all, livin' through the characters' experiences (and it'll stick with you forever, just waitin' to be revisited whenever you need a mental escape). But what's really beautiful about Nabokov's work is how he weaves complex undertones and symbols into his prose - you gotta read carefully, even multiple times, to catch all the subtleties. It's worth the effort, though, when you do finally grasp the depth of his writing, it's like nothin' else matters. Human existence can be pretty bleak, but what really gets me is how our own minds can turn against us. We're our own worst enemies, and even the things we use to cope with all this existential angst don't always work out in the end. It's like we're all just tryin' to find some comfort in a world that's constantly challengin' us, but it's hard to know what's real when everything feels so uncertain. Some scientists say our whole reality might be just a simulation, and we're all just livin' in this delusional world together. That's somethin' to think about, but at least we've got each other... or do we? Maybe that's the problem - what if you're the only one who's lost in this never-endin' loop of confusion? Nabokov's story Signs and Symbols is like a mirror held up to all our worries. It follows an elderly immigrant couple strugglin' to figure out what to get their son for his birthday, but it's not just about findin' the perfect gift - it's about tryin' to make sense of this crazy world we live in. The son in the story is sufferin' from some kinda mental breakdown where he thinks everythin' around him has a hidden message meant just for him. It's like Nabokov is sayin', "Hey, maybe that's what it feels like when you're lost in your own thoughts - like everything is speakin' to you in a language only you can understand." The way he writes these characters is so rich and detailed, it's like you're right there with 'em. Nabokov's got this gift for paintin' people with just a few words, makin' 'em feel so real. And then there are the little details - the way he describes things makes you feel like you're watchin' a movie playin' out in your mind. He's got this magic touch that lets him take you on these wild adventures without ever leavin' his chair. The story transports you through a surreal landscape where diamonds on sunken leaves glimmer under dewdrops, and butterflies dance with reflections that change their colors. Alternatively, it's a poignant tale about the deranged son who longs to understand the mysteries of existence. This son is stuck between his own inner struggles and the indifference of the world outside. His parents, desperate to help him escape the abyss of his own life, are torn between assisting doctors who seem oblivious to their son's plight. The story jumps back and forth in time, as the couple plans to shift their son home, only to be interrupted by a wrong number call that hints at multiple interpretations. Throughout the narrative, Nabokov masterfully weaves together symbols and signs that challenge readers to unravel their meaning. Even love cannot be enough; one needs something more profound and detached from worldly concerns to truly grasp the meaning of life. Nature itself seems to follow him wherever he goes, with clouds conveying subtle signs about his innermost thoughts. At nightfall, these thoughts are revealed through the slow gestures of trees. A poignant tale by Nabokov is presented in a starkly honest manner, leaving readers emotionally drained. The story delves into the life of a young man suffering from mental illness and explores the complexities of human emotions. The unnamed couple embarks on a journey to visit their mentally ill young friend, only to return home as the day comes to an end. Every detail in this narrative is shrouded in sadness, hopelessness, and despair. Nabokov masterfully crafts an ambiguous tale that leaves readers questioning its purpose. As the story concludes with a delicate balance of hope and fear, it imparts a profound message: a mother who has accepted her son's suffering, we see a world where life is a constant struggle to find meaning. The son's "Referential Mania" leaves him isolated and alone, with his only solace being in reading between the lines. Despite this, the mother remains torn, acknowledging that some people live in denial. The story unfolds through the mother's observations, revealing her inner turmoil as she grapples with the reality of her son's situation. Her words convey a sense of hopelessness and despair, as if the world is crushing those who seek beauty and meaning. Original text's meaning has been preserved while subtle alterations have been made using the "INCREASE BURSTINESS (IB)" rewriting method. Nabokov's short story 'Signs and symbols' tells the tale of an elderly couple traveling to visit their son in a sanatorium, where he suffers from a rare mental illness known as referential mania. This condition causes him to believe everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. Upon initial reading, it didn't leave a strong impression but multiple readings with analysis have allowed for a deeper appreciation of the story's complexities. To fully grasp the narrative, one must pay close attention to the signs and symbols scattered throughout, which reveal character traits and struggles. The tale masterfully conveys the suffering and hopelessness experienced by both the boy and his parents, highlighting their defenselessness against affliction and misery while also capturing the glimmer of hope that things might improve someday. The ending remains open to interpretation, inviting readers to draw their own conclusions. One aspect that stands out is the theme of alienation and disconnectedness. Nabokov's handling of this topic sparks curiosity about his intentions - was it a genuine exploration, an apology for the consequences of such disease, or simply a narrative device? Kenzaburo Oe similarly delved into this subject in 'A Personal Matter', drawing from real-life experiences. In contrast, Nabokov's portrayal of an unnamed son trapped within their own fears and obsessions serves as a poignant embodiment of isolation. The story expertly weaves together moments of tragic beauty where characters teeter on the brink of connection only to be met with disappointment or disapproval. This may have been Nabokov's goal or simply a means to manipulate the reader, as he often did. The realistic portrayal of illness evokes empathy in readers, making them more invested in the narrative. Another notable aspect is the use of color imagery, particularly yellow, which dominates the scene and contributes to an atmosphere of anxiety and instability. Yellow has never been associated with soothing qualities, adding to the sense of unease that permeates the story. The conclusion, much like Nabokov's works often are, remains open to interpretation, leaving readers to ponder their own thoughts on the narrative's themes and symbolism. Everything left open-ended, like a Nabokovian tale. Why does every ending have to be the final one? Can't it just lead to another beginning? The blue sky yesterday, all I see is just another lemon tree. January 17, 2023. Regarding the title of this short story, I'd quote the author himself: "Everyone knows I'm allergic to symbols and allegories." This has led me to wonder why you chose a name that draws attention to symbols. Did you intend to subvert Freudian psychoanalysis once more? Or perhaps you sought to derive pleasure from linking the absurdity of the title to the analyses of literary critics? As one might expect, I can't help but be puzzled by your choices. After all, you said that for me, a story is only good if it takes me to a beautiful, recognizable truth - in other words, makes me feel like I'm experiencing something new and beautiful. But this story doesn't seem to fit that bill. And yet, I find myself drawn into the tale of a father and mother who repeatedly attempt suicide due to their son's obsessive behavior. The son believes everything around him is a symbol pointing to himself, and he seeks to create a hole in his own world to escape. (Oh, how I wish I could sell my soul to the devil and get out of this hellhole!) This story, like Nabokov's works, can be seen as an exploration of family migration and the search for identity. It is a tale that defies interpretation, leaving the reader with more questions than answers. As one might expect from a Nabokovian author, the story leaves the reader to ponder its meaning. The narrative itself becomes a puzzle to be solved, and the ending remains intentionally ambiguous. In the end, I must thank Shell for prompting me to read this tale. At first glance, Nabokov's narrative seems to be a tale of symbolism, but beneath its surface lies a deeper exploration of human separation. The story's central conflict transcends the relationship between parents and child, instead highlighting the isolation people experience due to mental, physical, cultural, economic, or religious divides. This theme is eerily reminiscent of the Jewish people's suffering during World War II, which makes the narrative even more poignant. The character's delusions serve as a stark contrast to his parents' struggle with reality, underscoring how our perceptions can be vastly different from one another. Moreover, this sense of disconnection is not limited to mental illness but is a fundamental aspect of human experience, often leading to misunderstandings and conflicts that escalate into wars. The narrative concludes with the image of a girl attempting to reach Charlie, symbolizing the elusive nature of connection in a world where we're all separated by our differences. This theme is hauntingly captured in the words "our separation is the real disease." The author's use of symbolism and imagery creates a portrait of despair, madness, and aging that resonates deeply with readers. In a brief but impactful 6-page story, Nabokov masterfully crafts an immersive atmosphere by focusing on seemingly trivial details. These carefully chosen words paint a picture of a world where pain is omnipresent, joys are fleeting, and tenderness is often crushed or wasted. The narrative raises questions about the nature of our existence, whether we're just navigating chaos, creating maps from white noise to find meaning in an uncertain world. Readers are left pondering these mysteries, wondering if Nabokov's signs and symbols hold secrets to understanding our shared fate, or if we're simply drifting through life without a clear direction. In the seemingly random nature of flames lies a profound novella by Vladimir Nabokov. Published on February 8, 2018, this short story delves into the theme of accepting loss and the human condition. The narrative revolves around a couple whose son has attempted suicide due to his condition, "Referential mania," where he interprets everything as veiled references to himself. The story follows their visit to their son in a sanatorium, only to receive two wrong phone calls before it abruptly ends, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps. The tale is replete with symbolism and emotional depth, particularly in the mother's poignant descriptions of her son's mental state. Nabokov's prose is masterful, making this story a captivating experience. As I reflect on this piece, I realize that we must often confront our own inner demons to truly understand ourselves and the world around us. This realization has resonated with me, sparking a desire to delve deeper into Nabokov's works, such as Pale Fire and Lolita. Perhaps I'll continue reading his short stories or tackle those more complex novels. Looking forward to seeing everyone at the meeting tomorrow and discussing our strategies. The elderly couple's anxious heartbeats and rustling newspapers were the only sounds filling the train car. Even in silence, they were acutely aware of their own mortality, knowing that one day they'll pass on and leave their child to face the world alone. The passage evokes a wistful familiarity in me, as if I've personally experienced such vulnerability. It's like recalling the time an aging parent visits their frail son at a mental institution, hoping for the best but uncertain of how to help. This sense of vulnerability is palpable: "During the ride to the subway station, she and her husband didn't exchange a word, and every time she glanced at his old hands, clasped and twitching upon the handle of his umbrella, she felt the mounting pressure of tears" The couple's aging process is subtly hinted at - seeing signs of age on their own skin as they head to visit their son. Mental illness is portrayed as complex, beautiful, and sad, a delicate balance between creativity and paranoia. The story ends ominously, with the phone ringing incessantly, leaving the reader in suspense, wondering if this time their son will follow through on his suicidal plans. The parents' situation is heartbreaking, and I feel sympathy for them, trapped in a state of constant anxiety. Looking back at the information about him, they're always keeping tabs on him. On his birthday, they still can't decide what to get him - in the end, they settle for a dozen jars of fruit jelly. Along the way to the hospital, their journey is marred by small annoyances: the metro breaks down, the bus takes forever, it starts raining, and crowds of people block their path. The son can't even catch a glimpse of them because a unpleasant nurse tells him that he's attempted to take his own life... again - but this time, a neighbor who thought the boy was just pretending to fly jumps in to save him from getting caught by hospital staff. An elderly couple returns home feeling down, and on their way back they see dead birds floating in the river and a crying girl, forgetting the keys along the way. At home, things aren't much better, and with the clock striking midnight, the father decides that his son needs to be taken out of the hospital and cared for at home - which would be better for everyone involved. With cups of tea and jars of jam in hand, the old couple looks forward to celebrating this important decision. The phone rings again, and an unfamiliar voice asks to speak with Charlie... the wrong number, says a distressed woman who can only assume it's someone calling from the hospital at night. Both continue to feel joyful despite the interruption. That certain parts of the story were unnecessary, including questions without answers. I'm okay with using symbolism and cliff-hangers, but in this case, I felt it was a bit irrelevant. Maybe I'm missing something, but overall, the story had some disjointed elements and too much forced information that didn't quite feel natural.