

“Under a Bulgarian Umbrella with COVID-19”

Boris and I have been inseparable since I bought him at an estate sale twenty years ago. A humanities major in my twenties turned medical doctor in my forties, I fancied the idea of owning a replica of a piece of history: A Bulgarian Umbrella. Throughout college, I used him at the beach to shield me and my girlfriends from the sun and then when we snuck away to make out by the river near campus. In my thirties, when I finally settled on a career in medicine, I took him with me as an accoutrement to interviews thinking that I looked sophisticated with Boris by my side, a faithful lapdog shielding me from the elements no matter how many times I was rejected by an interviewer.

Those days of extracurricular use for Boris, the forays to the beach when my hormones were raging and using him when I went on interviews, were done, or so I thought. For the past ten years, I have employed Boris as ninety-nine percent of humanity employs umbrella—a shield from the rain. Every day we walk from the subway to my job at the local nursing home, he above me if it is rainy or by my side in my briefcase. But this routine is about to change.

Six months ago, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I accepted a per diem job as a floor doctor on the day shift at a local nursing home in Manhattan. During my short tenure, once the governor allowed positive patients for rehabilitation, I have seen about fifteen percent of my patients die. Then late last year when the vaccine was rolled out, it was first met by hesitation among patients and staff alike. Now, only a few from each group are holding out. Herd immunity really is a possibility.

A strong believer in patient autonomy, I have never embarked on a crusade to try to cajole my patients to accept vaccination, even as I fear a second wave. Every morning as I

shower, I listen to NPR on the radio about the latest statistics, and I think how people in their right mind can be resistant to the jab.

As I shower one fateful morning recently, I am hung over. I'd gone out drinking the previous night depressed at seeing so much death, and in my absentmindedness, I leave Boris at the entrance to the bathroom with the door open, not in the rack in the foyer to my one-bedroom apartment. As I bathe under the rivulets of water, black Boris bathes under a rising sun whose rays make their way through a small window located two feet above and three feet to the right of the showerhead I am under.

"Although there has been a decline in hospitalizations nationwide, the concern now is that the English and New York variants of the Covid-19 virus are now spreading across the Metropolitan area. If hospitals and homes of the aged do not achieve herd immunity in a timely fashion, a second wave could emerge" came a voice over the radio.

"Perhaps it's time you start making use of me again," Boris comments as I turn off the water and begin to dry myself.

"Why now?" I ask as I move toward the sink and begin to lather my face with shaving cream. "You always complained when I used you in the past. I remember after every date you gave me a million reasons why this person was not the right one for me, and after every failed interview you told me I had forgotten to do this or say that."

"Ah, yes," Boris replies. "But now the stakes are higher. We are not just talking about you, the individual, we are talking about utilitarianism and the greater good for your patients where you work."

"What do you mean?" I ask as I stop halfway down my chin.

“Your patients must receive the vaccine, either by hook or by crook, or by me.” Boris gives a nod to his top where the valve and barrel are located. “I know you can’t inject them by force, or you run the risk of losing your job and license, but if you do so clandestinely, it would be so much better.”

“Look who’s talking. I remember in college when I was studying Marx, you told me to always remember the individual, not to subscribe to collectivism, that such an idea was a farce. You harped about your ancestor who unwillingly participated in killing the free thought of a dissident on Waterloo Bridge when he was the tool of an assassin. Now you want me to be a proponent of socialist ideas? So, you propose I use you to inject my patients with the vaccine without their knowledge?”

“Yes, and yes,” Boris replies as he stretches his metal ribs to embellish his black canopy. “My people are tired of shielding your people at funerals. There is more to life than death. We’d much rather be at weddings, or at family reunions on the beach.

“I don’t mind holding up the sky for uncontrollable occasions, but this pandemic is one you can control, Doctor Bentham,” Boris says, emphasizing the last word. Hearing my last name is grating to my ears. I am not related to the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism, but still, the association, especially at a time like now, sticks.

“I guess we are both Atlas,” I respond. “You hold up the sky, no matter the occasion because you have no choice, and I respect the choices of my patients even if such choices lead to death.”

“I wish you’d reconsider,” Boris says, as I finish shaving and begin to get dressed. “I’m willing to be your whipping boy to block the sun, the rain, and the wind, but not from below. I don’t want to see so much sadness, so many graves filled up. We don’t have to live in the

present. There can be a better future. And just in case you don't already know, I am exhausted from attending so many funerals.”

I glance at the clock. It is ten minutes to eight and time to go. Cutting Boris off from his soliloquy, I bundle him up with a dilapidated leather cord that came with him when I purchased the umbrella twenty years ago. Outside it is sunny and I am glad that I don't have to deploy my companion.

As I walk in my white lab coat (in my haste I forget my vest that I normally wear over it), not only do I not wish to hear any more of Boris' morality lectures neither do I want people laughing at me with a black umbrella over my head. White, the color of the void or absence of it, and black, the sum of all pigments, hues, and shades, would simply be too paradoxical. Granted, this is New York, a city of over eight million people from all cultures and walks of life, but still, I would feel awkward.

After a two-stop subway ride and a brisk walk of two more blocks, I arrive at work. The nurse practitioner greets me, and before I can sit down she shows me the census figure from the previous evening. I am relieved to see there have been no deaths and three admissions to our COVID recovery ward.

“The new patients,” she says, “are two who have been vaccinated, and I try to convince the third to get the second shot but she's afraid of the reaction and she won't take it. I try to convince—”

“We are not here to dictate,” I say firmly to my subordinate.

“But the health of others is at stake. Maybe they will listen to the man in the white coat under whose umbrella our health rests,” the practitioner says before exiting the office.

I spend a few minutes reading the chart of the new patient. The new admit is a woman in her early forties by the name of Dr. Kant. Upon seeing the name, I feel the hair on my spine stand up knowing I have heard the name before, but I can't place it. Where could I have heard the name outside of my philosophy 101 class in undergrad? Surely the connection with the philosopher to my namesake must be what triggers such a visceral reaction.

As I contemplate my new patient's surname, I lock my office door and go to the medial fridge where I take out a syringe of the vaccine and I load it into Boris. I watch his eyes bulge as I pull back the spring. As a replica of the original Bulgarian Umbrella, a notorious killing entity until the pandemic, I cannot imagine Boris having dreamed of ever being used in the fashion he alluded to this morning: as a life-saving device. I smile and enjoy a moment of Schadenfreude as my companion winces in pain. After priming the needle to make sure it works, I put on my mask and walk upstairs to meet the new patient, a woman in her early forties. My umbrella in tow, I now use it as my walking stick.

"Hello," I say, trying to sound as jovial as possible as I enter the room. "I am Doctor Bentham. I hear you were admitted to us because of COVID."

"Yes," a fair-skinned brunette who looked familiar replies. "Indeed I was."

"I am sorry to hear the virus is affecting you, but before I examine you," I clear my throat and say, "I want to make you aware that we are offering the vaccine."

"I know," the woman replies. "The NP told me and I do not want it. She asked me three times. Please don't be the person who asks me the fourth time. All this badgering will not make your crusade a means to an end."

As the woman says these words, I feel Boris, whose handle I am holding, bites my finger. I know he wants to pontificate and coerce the woman to take the vaccine he is holding in his

modified ferrule. As he nibbles on my finger, I think of how I can hide behind him, of how I would not have to break my Hippocratic oath to live up to the greater good of the hospital's staff and its patients. If I do what Boris asks me to do, I'd think about the future and abandon thinking about the present, a frame of mind that many sages and New Age gurus urge humanity to embrace, ostensibly for the sake of their health.

“Very, well, I will not ask you,” I say as I wash my hands.

“Thank you, Jack,” the slender brunette says as she briefly removes the oxygen. As I hear my name, I take a step back and collect my thoughts. The patient continues. “Remember me? I was your classmate back in undergrad and we dated for ten years. Why, once I was your fiancée! I see you have the same umbrella, the one you used to shield my fair skin from the sun when we would sit out on the beach on summer afternoons. I see you have changed in the past decade and can now live in the present. You respect my feelings. ”

“Emmanuelle,” I whisper, not fully believing that in front of me is the woman I wooed in college.

“Yes, Jack, it is me, Emmanuelle Kant, your little philosopher, the woman you dated while you were a TA in philosophy 101.”

“The woman who I wanted to marry, but who I put off. I had to find out what I wanted to do and delayed our wedding again for med school—”

“After which point I got fed up and moved on. You only saw your future, not my present,” my former fiancée says. “One thing hasn't changed though.” Emmanuelle gestures to my umbrella. “You're still carrying him wherever you go, that prophylactic of yours. Guess you still are striving to be in control.”

“Look,” I say as I turn Boris upside down while being careful not to engage the spring mechanism. “I know this is awkward. Let’s complete the intake later.”

“Sounds good,” she says and draws the curtain, leaving me under a cloud of shame that even Boris cannot protect me from. I make my way down to my office. Once there I close the door and open my accoutrement.

“You just going to let her insult us like that, and not take a stand?” my umbrella says. I am just about to chastise my umbrella when I am interrupted by a knock at the door. The nurse is breathing frantically. “I’m afraid we have a death. It’s the patient you just saw,” she says.

I dash upstairs and look at Ms. Kant’s chart and see that she is in full code. I begin CPR counting one, two, three in my head, and I press down on her chest breaking her ribs as I do so. My attempts to revive my former fiancée are futile. After debriefing the nurse practitioner of what has just transpired so she can tell the next shift, I take off work early, tired and saddened from what I just witnessed.

“Thank you for at least sparing me the sight of the failed CPR attempt,” Boris says as we walk toward the subway. “You fail to use me when I ask and you once again expose me to trauma.” The umbrella protests as he folds himself up and leaves me exposed to the elements.

“Had I vaccinated Emmanuelle, it wouldn’t have made a difference, she still would have died!” I say to him.

The rain starts to come down heavier. I spend the next five minutes struggling to open Boris up but he does not budge. I curse and call him odious names and make an ass of myself, oblivious of the people who walk past me. Eventually I give up, cut my losses, and take the subway.

I arrive home drenched to the bone. I shake my umbrella and finally force him open. When he spreads out he is hyperventilating.

“I suppose the next funeral I will be at is yours,” Boris says.

“What do you mean?” I ask bewildered, momentarily forgetting my anger.

“You’re living in the present and your eagerness to save your patient may seal your future. I wouldn’t be surprised if you have contracted COVID,” Boris says as he excretes the vaccine I loaded up in his chamber a few hours before, and I watch the precious proteins slide down the cracks of my tiled floor.

“Watch yourself before I break your ribs,” I snap, as I throw my umbrella in the rack along with some of his cheap compatriots I bought from street vendors over the years.

I go to sleep, trying to forget about the day’s events. The next morning it is raining and I feel feverish. I call in sick. I spend most of the morning repairing Boris, and then I go out for coffee. I return to my place to rest the remainder of the day. The next morning I still don’t feel well and arrange to have a COVID test, which comes back positive.

“Boris,” I remark that evening as my fever reaches 104 degrees, “if I die, do you think I’ll end up with Emmanuelle? She’s what I always wanted, but I was too shortsighted with my own career and too wrapped up in myself to see that.”

“I will not allow this to be an option,” Boris says as he props himself up between the head of my bed and the wall and then deploys himself to form a canopy above my head. “Even if you do leave this earth, I will not allow your soul to ascend to heaven.”

“And why is that?” I ask, too weak to raise my arms to remove him.

“Because people need your skill on this earth,” Boris says.

“There you go with your utilitarianism again,” I moan as I drift off to sleep.

As the week progresses, I grow weaker. By the end of the next week, I am dead. My soul leaves my body and tries in vain to ascend to heaven, but Boris keeps it at bay under his canopy. Eventually, after crawling around, my soul manages to make its way into the very hermetic chamber where the COVID vaccine had once resided in my umbrella. There it remains, trapped. Having no family or final arrangements, I have a simple pauper's funeral, and my few possessions are put up for sale by a neighbor. The sale includes Boris who is purchased for five dollars by the curator at the *KGB Espionage Museum* in New York. The curator obviously knows he has bought a Bulgarian umbrella, but he doesn't know he has also brought its contents.

So, I ask you the next time you're there, to either try to buy Boris from the owner or try to steal him. Then inject my soul to the heavens or in someone else. Am I worthy of being reincarnated? Who knows. Still, freeing Boris is a means to an end, and whether such an action is utilitarian is for you to decide. Until then, Boris can have the last laugh. As you can see, I cannot live in the present now, but he can. And for the first time in his existence, he is not at someone else's funeral, he is at his own. There he lies with my soul bottled up inside him day after day, and the people come to look at him. He tried to convince me to save others, but he's never had it so good now that I am dead.