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# The Strays of Moscow: and Other Stories

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Faculty Advisor: Stephanie Grant

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## Preface

Literary critic and writer Anatole Broyard once said: “Travel is like adultery: one is always tempted to be unfaithful to one’s own country. To have imagination is inevitably to be dissatisfied with where you live....In our wanderlust, we are lovers looking for consummation.”<sup>1</sup> Broyard captures the feeling that I had – and surely one shared by many other first-time travelers abroad – before I left for Russia: some inarticulate yearning to discover something beyond daily experience. People travel not only to seek other places, but also to discover a part of themselves, as yet unknown, but which comes alive in a foreign environment. For travelers who live abroad for an extensive amount of time, new questions formulate about their own identity. Settled in this limbo between tourist and native, these travelers acquire enough intellectual, emotional, and spiritual distance from their everyday lives to question themselves and their desires. Suddenly, the simple experience of traveling abroad becomes more than a journey outside of one’s country; traveling elevates a person’s level of self-awareness and results in intense questioning and self-exploration. The travel experience, therefore, becomes a journey in more than its physical sense. While living abroad, people undergo an emotional journey as well, as their feelings travel to extremes – from frustration to despair to elation – as they publicly confront their unfamiliar surroundings while they also privately struggle with discomfiting questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Anatole Broyard, “Being There,” in *Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Essays*, eds. Robert Pack and Jay Parini, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 53.

In fall of 2005, I lived and studied in Vladimir and Moscow. I had decided to study abroad in Russia because of my personal interest in the culture, and I had arrived with the intention of crafting some type of creative project from my observations and experiences in the vein of journalist Hedrick Smith's *The Russians* (1985) or Andrea Lee's travelogue *Russian Journal* (1981). I was curious about how Russians handled the experience of a capitalist democracy, as well as the increasing impact of Western culture fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, I kept a journal of my thoughts and experiences as my fellow students and I explored this culture. The world of post-Soviet Moscow that I encountered, however, was very different from the totalitarian society these authors had written about: today's Russia includes luxury shopping complexes, beer-drinking kids in the streets, and American restaurant chains like T.G.I. Friday's. As I led the life of an outsider looking in, I searched for the "Russianness" that still existed behind the exterior of an increasingly Westernized consumer culture. Things insignificant to the average Russian became monumental to me and my compatriots: the excessive bureaucracy involved in getting a document as basic as a metro pass; the constant presence of boyish soldiers carrying assault rifles; squat babushkas hawking handkerchiefs on the same street where Russians cruised along in their new European cars.

As the months passed, I realized that my own life and experiences had a great impact on how I interpreted Russian culture. Of course, my peers and I could not be "unbiased" observers of life around us – if such a thing existed.

Eventually, I became fascinated not only by Russian society, but also by the society of my peers, whose perspectives differed significantly from my own. I understood that by observing our attempts to understand Russians and “Russianness,” I could learn a great deal about what it means to be an American and “Americanness” – in other words, a great deal about my own culture and identity.

When I returned to the United States with the intention to write about my experiences, I had a vast amount of material to draw upon. Indeed, the process of taking a myriad of experiences and expressing them creatively is quite a daunting task. When deciding what form I would use for my creative writing thesis, I realized that I could not confine myself to a single narrative voice. Therefore, I decided to write a set of linked stories about a group of foreigners in Moscow.

In Susan Garland Mann’s landmark study on the topic, linked stories, otherwise known as short story cycles, are defined as being

...both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story.<sup>2</sup>

This form provides readers with a variety of perspectives from which they can observe a culture. In *The Strays of Moscow: and Other Stories*, I use both reoccurring characters and the setting of contemporary Moscow to explore the

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 15.

range of individual responses to topics such as Russian-American relations, Westernization, love, culture, race, and identity. Like the “lovers” in Broyard’s quotation, my characters are also looking for “consummation” of some kind: through a deeper human connection. Travelers are lonely people, even if they have companions. This loneliness stems from not only the physical isolation of being in a foreign nation, but also from the intense personal self-reflection – the emotional journey alluded to above. Thus, the traveler is put in a paradoxical position: while searching for a deeper emotional understanding, the traveler faces limited opportunities in which to connect with others.

I wanted to explore this paradox as my characters either succeed or fail in their attempts to connect. I was especially interested in the different levels of self-awareness that my characters possessed. From my experience, I know that fellow travelers make assumptions about each other as often as they make assumptions about the foreign culture in which they live. Thus, in these stories, characters’ lack of understanding of each other and of themselves is frequently exposed. Perhaps the most celebrated short story cycle in English literature is James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), in which his idea of the epiphany is repeated throughout the collection. Although it is difficult to generalize about one’s own fiction, many characters in *The Strays of Moscow* resist or fail to understand their own moments of epiphany. Like travelers trying to make sense of an unfamiliar idiom, they hear only the external translation instead of the metaphor.



To prepare myself to write a collection of linked stories, I read Russian short story cycles in translation, including Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), Isaac Babel's *Red Calvary* (1926), and Vladimir Nabokov's *Prin* (1957). The short stories of Anton Chekhov have also been an essential part of my Russian reading list. In addition, I turned to non-fiction sources about Russia and Russian culture. When in Moscow, the *New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* kept me informed about current events. When I returned to America, I also interviewed my fellow peers and recent travelers to Russia to listen to various perspectives. For an academic view of contemporary Russian culture, I read selections from *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev*, edited by Adele Marie Barker. I also sought out works on the topic by contemporary Russian and American authors. Two short story collections that interested me in particular were Katherine Shonk's *The Red Passport* (2003) and Lara Vapnyar's *There Are Jews in my House* (2003). Other contemporary works I have read include Andrea Lee's *Russian Journal*, Tom Bissell's short story collection *God Lives in St. Petersburg* (2005), Victor Pelevin's collection *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia* (1998), Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's novella *The Time—Night* (1994) as well as various other short works, and Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002). The anthology *Wild East: Stories from the Last Frontier* (2003), edited by Boris Fishman, showcases a variety of contemporary stories written about Russia and Eastern Europe.

In writing these stories, I was also inspired by the technical achievements of a wide range of short story writers. I looked at Peter Taylor's use of the double-eye narration technique in his story "The Old Forest" when crafting "The Strays of Moscow." The compact, sparse writing in Melanie Rae Thon's story "The Snow Thief" influenced the story "A Birthday Party for Kostya." Alice Munro's story collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* provided me with a wonderful model of how a short story can contain layers of complexity and rounded characterization. Other writings which I looked at for technical inspiration were Tim O'Brien's seminal fiction collection *The Things They Carried*, and the essays of James Baldwin.

Though I had always intended to develop this thesis as a collection of linked short stories, my project's evolution has been extensive. My original idea was a collection of ten stories featuring a group of seven reoccurring characters. Since then, characters had been added or dropped, entire stories cut or re-written, and the ideas and themes contained within these stories emerged both purposefully and unexpectedly. Though only a portion of my thoughts, feelings and experiences could be expressed in this final collection, I hope these stories create windows that frame both extraordinary and mundane moments in a traveler's experience. My characters may not always be completely sympathetic to the reader, but nevertheless, I want the reader to appreciate and relate to their desperate attempts to bridge the multiple divides that separate them from each other, divides caused by cultural and personal misunderstandings.

## Neighbors

The ring was made of gold and set with a triangular amethyst. Daisy stared at it in the velvet box, the tears gathering in her eyes, before David slipped the ring on the third finger of her right hand. Right, not left, because even though it was the third anniversary of their first date, Daisy understood they were still much too young to think of marriage. She knew why David was giving her this tiny box though; in less than two days she would be on a plane to Moscow.

“This is a promise ring,” he explained. As soon as the words came out of his mouth, a measure of dissatisfaction weighed down Daisy’s joy. Promise rings were for high school cheerleaders and their jock boyfriends, not for two mature adults in college. “I know it’s not much, but I wanted you to have something from me for when you go.” He looked into her eyes as he took her hands in his. “I’ll miss you so much,” David said, giving a squeeze.

Daisy felt the ring dig into her hand with the added pressure. “I’ll miss you too,” she said gently.

But he surely knew why Daisy needed to study abroad: she went to college in a place where only cows kept her company and spent her summers at home mucking out stables while he did field surveys for his father. No excitement at school or here in Penacook, New Hampshire. David had cried when she had announced her desire to travel, a reaction that was both touching and slightly offensive to her. Why did physical distance intimidate him so much? Admittedly,

their relationship had been born out of an intense hook-up at a high school party. But Daisy believed that over the years their passion had evolved to embrace a higher, metaphysical level. And now they'd play out the metaphor of Donne's compass: she would move around the world, rooted to David as her center.

"My little butterfly," he said, a phrase he had been repeating for the last month or so. "You'll come flying to me." He had gotten the idea while they were listening to a Mariah Carey song on the car radio. The idea was sweet, yet she wished that he had thought of it himself instead of lifting it from a pop song.

Daisy held the box in her hand and read the name of the department store printed in silver on top.

"I put in the gift receipt too," David added sheepishly, turning red as if regretting that decision already. "You know, because I didn't know if you'd like it or-" He smiled. "Well, just in case."

She grinned, her widened lips stifling a sense of disappointment. Didn't he trust her to like it? After all, it was from him. Giving her this ring, she figured, as she looked around the diner at her fellow early bird customers, had to be a test of her dedication. A final step toward something better, perhaps.

Leaning over, she pressed her lips against his. David's lips always felt uncommonly soft for a man's. Letting go, she saw her boyfriend smile, reassured. Yes, no more words of comfort were needed.

Daisy adjusted the ring on her hand, filled with expectation. When she returned, he'll go down on his knee with a real ring in hand, one of white gold and diamonds. She was sure.

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Daisy sat at her host family's kitchen table in Moscow as she twisted the promise ring around her finger. Boris shuffled in, still dressed in his striped, faded pajamas. He muttered a deep-voiced "*Dobroe utro*" and gave a half-wave to his boarder.

Boris reminded Daisy of a bear constantly trying to retreat into hibernation. Her host mother Galina explained to her that a few years ago he had had an accident that prevented him from continuing his work at the Academy of the Sciences, but Daisy was simply surprised to hear that the man hadn't gone into retirement yet.

Galina was at the stove cooking breakfast. Upon seeing her husband enter, she quickly pulled out a chair and tucked him into his seat. During moments like these, Galina reminded Daisy of her own mother when she visited her grandfather at the nursing home.

"Let me get your kasha, Papochka," she cooed before fetching the pot from the stove. Boris nodded and slowly rubbed his spoon with a clean napkin. Galina stirred the kasha and dished out ample portions into both of their bowls. She stuck her head out of the threshold and yelled, "Nastya! Come and finish eating!"

Daisy poked at the steaming mass as little Nastya, dressed in jeans and a bright yellow sweater, came running to the table, her pigtailed bobbing.

“Hello Papochka,” the six-year-old girl said, climbing into her chair. “Hello Magaritka!” *Magaritka* meant “daisy” in Russian and had become a family pet name. Boris bent his shaggy, silver head toward his daughter in acknowledgement, his spoon making its steady progression toward his thick lips. As Daisy watched the pair sit across from each other, a familiar question sat on her lips unasked: how could a man so old have a child so young?

“Eat up, little bird.” Galina took a sip of coffee from her cracked mug – Daisy had long assumed Galina chose coffee instead of food to sustain her – then stepped out of the kitchen to the open living room where she and her husband slept on the fold-out couch. When she re-entered the kitchen, she was putting on a pair of oversized silver earrings that hung like tiny moons off her ears. “Come, come, Nastya,” she said, “Are you done?”

Nastya licked her spoon one last time. “Yes, yes.”

“Good child. Now put on your coat. Mamochka is late for the clinic.” Galina worked at the reception desk at the European Medical Center; she told Daisy that back during the Soviet days, she had worked for Intourist, and she knew English, French, and German. The only time Daisy had seen any English, however, was during her first day in Moscow, when Galina put up a sign by the bathtub that said, “Please remember to clean hair.”

Soon, both Galina and her child were fortified against the cold in a mass of bulky outerwear – Nastya so much so that she resembled a plushy pink ball. Galina gave both Daisy and her husband a kiss on the top of the head and ushered her child out the door with a “Hurry, hurry, little cat!”

An awkward silence filled the kitchen once Boris and Daisy were alone. Boris took in his kasha one steady spoonful at a time, smacking his lips after each bite. He usually spent almost an hour at the table, eating the same amount that Daisy finished in ten minutes. During these times, she never knew what to say. Once, she asked Boris what he had planned to do with his day, and he looked up at her with such bewilderment that she could only apologize profusely, afraid that she had somehow insulted him.

Daisy remained in her chair, scraping at the bits of kasha stuck to the sides of her bowl. “Did you...sleep well?” she finally said.

Boris nodded. “*Da.*”

“That’s good. Very good. Excuse me.” She left the kitchen for her school bag, deciding that it was time to head down to the metro.

On her way out of the apartment, Daisy saw the door beside hers open up. Her neighbor in room 2F. She held her breath.

A man, tall and lean in that gracefully starving Slavic sense, stepped out of the door. Running a hand through his blond-streaked hair, he smiled. “*Dobroe utro Daisy.*” A curious thrill danced along her vertebrae whenever she heard him say her English name in that rough voice of his. She had passed off this sensation

as the typical excitement caused by any sort of accent that twisted the familiar into the strange.

“*Dobroe utro* Anton.” Daisy clenched her scarf in her hands, suddenly unable to lift her arms.

Anton was dressed in a crisply-pressed suit and dark, shined shoes. They were so much nicer than David’s work clothes: mud-stained jeans and a flannel button-down. Her neighbor took a black wool hat out of his coat pocket and pulled it over his wavy hair.

“You taking the elevator?” Anton used his briefcase to point at the clattering metal death trap by the stairs. Daisy shook her head, knowing that he never did. “Let’s walk then.”

The two of them descended the concrete steps, with Daisy hurrying to catch up with her neighbor, who went down two steps at a time.

The poor amount of Russian she knew froze in her brain. She struggled for a cohesive sentence. “How are you today?” she asked.

“Not bad,” Anton replied. “But today is very busy.” That was what he said to her everyday. He must be in banking or, she thought with awe, maybe even finance. Some job that paid well enough so he could live on his own in this expensive city. She wanted to say more, but she knew better than to try. The possibility of stuttering in front of Anton was too horrifying; it would only prove that she was, indeed, an ignorant foreigner.



Their apartments were on the second floor, so it was only a brief descent until Daisy and Anton reached the lobby. Anton pressed the button to unlock the door and swung it open. “For the *Americanka*,” he said, giving a little bow.

Daisy went out into the windy street, not feeling the stinging wind one bit, even with her bare head. “*Spacibo*,” she thanked.

“You stay out of trouble now,” Anton replied. He hopped out of the threshold, letting the heavy door slam shut. “*Poka*.”

“*Poka*,” Daisy said faintly.

With another wave of his cap, he started jogging down the street away from her. Soon, his lithe body disappeared around the corner.

“*Poka*,” she repeated to herself. *Later*, it meant. Daisy held onto the word as if it were a promise.

An icy wind pushed at her. Hastily, she wrapped the scarf around her head and hurried in the opposite direction to the metro station.

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Trapped in a Soviet-style classroom listening to an underpaid woman drone on about case endings, Daisy felt the restless surge of boredom almost swallow up all of her vitality. Before leaving America, boredom was emotion she had least associated with Russia. She had become enraptured with the country when she was ten years old and watched an animated film about the princess Anastasia. The evils of Rasputin, the tragedy of the Romanovs, and the story of the poor orphaned girl searching for her past became implanted into her childhood

fantasies. For years, she dreamed about Russia, with posters of Tsarskoe Selo and the towering onion-domed cathedrals pinned to her bedroom walls. Anything Russian was rare in Penacook, and so she devoured whatever she could get: tiny tins of imported caviar at the grocery store, subtitled films that never seemed to end happily, a set of colorful nesting dolls bought online. The sharp sensation of their Russianness fascinated her, until she thought that even the country's soil must be infused with a deeper sense of feeling. She had predicted that her daily existence in this foreign land would be a rush into the exciting and the unknown, and she would return to Penacook knowing that she had lived her life instead of drifting through it.

As Daisy tapped her pencil on the classroom table, she watched the light bounce off the small amethyst on her hand. Where would David be at this hour? Probably in bed, fast asleep.

Yes. He would be lying there wrapped in his sky blue comforter, his short bangs falling over his eyes. Two months had passed since she had last shared a bed with him, when they had snuck into his parents' house after their last dinner together back in August. They had crept in through the back door, and the thought of deceiving his parents gave Daisy a special thrill, and she remembered how her knees shook as she tip-toed past the darkened master bedroom. David's parents were quite conservative, and usually he drove for two-and-a-half hours to Daisy's college every weekend to so they could spend a decent amount of time alone and unbothered.

She stopped herself from dwelling too much on what she and David did during the weekends. Daisy straightened up in her seat, concentrating on her instructor's voice, her face reddening as if she suspected that the others in the classroom could smell the sudden shift in her thoughts. Shifting in her seat, she turned to gaze out the window and saw her classmate Trevor slouching in his chair, doing the same. *He's the type to resort to mental masturbation*, she thought, turning back to her paper. And certainly, Daisy was not like Trevor, who probably went out with a different girl every weekend.

With that comforting thought, she exhaled, sharply, leaning forward over her workbook. Yet after a few minutes, the blocky Cyrillic letters shifted and parted before her eyes, replaced by the door of apartment 2F. The door opened, and she saw another pair of eyes, darker than David's and full of mirth. *Hello Daisy. How is my Americanka?*

"Daisy?"

Her friend Melissa poked her side. "Daze, Ludmilla wants you to read. Page 31."

Daisy cleared her throat hastily and crossed her legs in the other direction.

Pushing all distracting thoughts from her mind, she picked up the book and began to read.

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"That is hideous." Melissa frowned. "Why would someone ever wear that shade of green?"

Daisy agreed. “Makes her look like a lima bean.” Typically, she liked it when Russian brides chose a color other than insipidly virgin white, but this was an exception. It was too bad: the woman wearing the gown was certainly pretty, and could be even considered beautiful, if it weren’t for the way her long nose interrupted the contours of her face.

That Friday afternoon, like every Friday afternoon, Daisy and Melissa sat on a bench in front of the Kremlin’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Daisy liked the Tomb’s simple grace, so different from the rest of the city’s extravagant monuments, which stood as if announcing their presence. The Tomb was a slab of red granite, covered by a bronze molding of a draped banner upon which a soldier’s helmet and a laurel branch rested. A flame seated in the middle of a five-pointed star burned perpetually. Two Honor Guards in full ceremonial uniform stood inside glass booths placed on either side of the Tomb. Each balanced his shined rifle by his side and watched the group of fifty or so tourists with dull, uninterested eyes. At every hour, the changing of the Guard took place, and these tourists were expecting the Guard replacements to arrive in a few minutes. Daisy appreciated how symmetrical they looked, even down to the same chiseled jaw line and intense black eyes. After observing the Tomb these past few weeks, she decided that being handsome must be a qualification for being placed on guard duty.

But these men were not the reason why Melissa and Daisy watched the Tomb for two hours every Friday afternoon. They came for the wedding dresses.

Every weekend, dozens of young couples and their wedding parties arrived at Red Square in rusted cars or fashionable limos to have their pictures taken. Living within walking distance of the Kremlin, she had never had a day pass without seeing a bride standing at a street corner, holding her veil tight against the wind.

Daisy pointed out the trio of women in short shirts that accompanied the lima bean bride. "I like that more than the bridesmaids have. Much classier."

A photographer trailed after the bride and her husband as they ceremoniously placed a bouquet of yellow flowers beside several others on the ground before the tomb. Daisy once asked Galina why the brides chose to come to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Galina had given her a look that seemed to emphasize Daisy's ignorance and replied, "For luck. She's asking the soldier's spirit to save her husband from the draft." After that, Daisy always looked at these young women with a sort of tender pity. If she were Russian, she would do the same for her husband.

Several men in tuxedos cleared the area of tourists. The couple posed for the photographer wearing dignified, unsmiling faces. After the flashing lights ceased, the wedding party slowly made its way through the curious crowd (who were now taking pictures of their own). The newlyweds and their attendants soon headed toward Aleksandrovsky Gardens.

Almost immediately, a new couple pulled in. *These people must be rolling in the money*, Daisy thought, noticing the roses and ribbon that decorated their

limo. “Oh, she did red!” she exclaimed, watching the new group emerge and gather on the sidewalk. Out of all the dresses she had seen, deep scarlet gowns appealed to her the most; Daisy had read somewhere that red was a traditional color for Russian brides – the color of passion.

“Not bad,” Melissa observed. “But I don’t like the way those sleeves puff out.”

“I love the beading on the bodice, though.” Daisy paused. “I would like a dress like that.”

Melissa raised an eyebrow. “When David asks?”

“Well, if he asks,” Daisy said quickly. “I mean, not that I’m pushing it...” The scarlet bride moved past them, whispering something that made her groom laugh. “We’re too young anyhow.”

“Yeah, but they don’t look any older than us. Do you think it’s a cultural thing?”

“Maybe.” *Maybe because there are so few good men here*, she thought in passing, but bit her tongue. Looking around, Daisy realized that the only decent-looking men that didn’t appear to be tourists were the ones standing guard right across from them. Even the grooms, though young and fresh-faced, appeared less handsome when they stood within sight of a towering Honor Guard in his shined black boots and tailored olive uniform.

Melissa rubbed her gloved hands together. “I’m freezing. Let’s get something to drink.”

They got up and went down one of the side streets by the Kremlin where they had noticed a café. The small space was crammed with suits and mint-colored skirts: the lima bean bride and her entourage had taken refuge there themselves. The newlyweds sat on a tabletop with their fellow guests surrounding them, holding fluted glasses. The bride's face was twisted in mild irritation as she pried off her heels and rubbed her feet.

Daisy and Melissa moved past several ushers and the mint trio on the way to the counter. While Melissa ordered, Daisy watched as one grey-haired man raised his glass.

*"Gorko!"* he cried. *"Gorko!"* Others picked up his cry. The shouting grew as people raised their glasses into the air.

*"Gorko! Gorko! Gorko!"*

Their voices rattled her ears and in confusion, Daisy pressed her back against the counter. Why were they shouting 'bitter, bitter'? Were they drunk? At the pinnacle of these shouts, she saw the groom pull his bride to him and claim her with a kiss. The room burst out into shouts and applause as everyone took a drink from their glasses.

"Whoa, we should have found some place quieter," Melissa whispered, holding her hot chocolate. "I'll try and scope out any free tables."

Daisy nodded, eyes still transfixed on the bride, who started laughing once she was freed. She gave a joking rebuke to the toaster, "Oh, I will be!" and threw

her arms around her husband in a tight embrace. Her wedding party gave another cheer.

Daisy retrieved her order and turned to search for her friend. The lima bean bride caught her attention one last time: the angled shape of the bride's face seemed to become fuller and less sharp when she released her husband from their kiss. Perhaps she was quite beautiful after all.

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*Dear David,*

*How are you? How's life in Penacook? The time is passing so quickly in this city! I feel the weeks flying by, and sometimes, I even forget to think about you (but of course, that's not very often!)*

Daisy stared at the words scrawled on her flowered stationary and frowned. By now, it has become habit for her to sit down at the end of each week and transcribe in her best longhand everything that had happened. She liked the idea of these letters traversing the many miles between Penacook and Moscow. She hoped David was keeping her letters – when she returned to America, she wanted them back. There needed to be a keepsake to mark that momentous time in their relationship when a whole ocean had come between them.

*I feel the weeks fly by...* Daisy crossed out that line and crumpled the paper, cringing at her own sentimentality. Suddenly, she heard the slam of a distant door. Her head perked up. Galina had already brought Nastya home from



school – it must be Anton’s door that slammed. She checked her watch. Seven o’clock exactly.

The walls of the apartment were quite thin. Sometimes, she could hear the throbbing bass of Anton’s music while still sitting in her room. During her first week in Moscow, she pressed her ear against it and made out the faint techno beat. Whenever she wanted a break from her homework, Daisy leaned her body against the cold plaster and wondered which room of Anton’s lay on the other side and, perhaps, what he was doing in there.

“Magaritka!” Nastya stuck her head in her room. “I made a picture!”

“Oh?”

“Here.” Nastya proffered up the sheet of paper. She had drawn her parents: the hunkering Boris and a thin and perky Galina with giant yellow earrings that reminded Daisy of floating lemons. The crayon rendering of Daisy carried a striped flag near the edge of the page. Nastya pointed to her. “You’re our guest,” she explained, “and so you’re walking to visit us.”

Daisy tousled the girl’s hair. “That is very pretty.”

“*Spacibo.*” Satisfied with the comment, Nastya waved the paper and charged toward the living room. “Papochka!”

Daisy followed and saw Nastya pushing against her recumbent father on the unfolded couch. “Look what I have!”

Galina called out from the kitchen, “Little cucumber, leave Papochka alone! He’s napping!”

Daisy leaned against the doorframe. “She is a very active child,” she observed to her host mother, pulling together her Russian the best she could. Galina looked up. “She’s very much like her father,” she commented.

“Oh?” Daisy looked over her shoulder again. Boris stuck out an arm and pulled in the little girl, kissing her on the forehead. “Beautiful, Nastya.”

Finally, she drew out one of the questions that had lingered in her mind. “Was Boris an active man before the accident?” she asked.

Galina laughed. “He certainly was not. He and Nastya are quite different in that sense.”

“Do you mean...” With her suspicions now confirmed, Daisy didn’t know how to respond. Checking over her shoulder, she leaned forward and breathed, “Does Nastya know?”

“Of course. But I always tell her that Boris chose to be her Papochka, and that’s what’s important.” Giving a crooked smile, Galina patted the table. Daisy slid into the chair beside her, clearing away Nastya’s crayons. Galina locked her fingers together and stretched out her arms before her as if preparing for a nap instead of a possibly scandalous family confession. Giving a sigh, she spoke, looking at Daisy with the same blunt forwardness that her daughter used earlier. “I’d married when I was quite young. He was only a boy and I didn’t know anything.” She tipped her head toward the living room. “He left when I had Nastya.”

“Oh.” Daisy reached for Galina’s hand in sympathy, but the woman flicked her wrist away. “I would have not trusted him with my little girl,” she said airily. “But Boris isn’t like my first husband. He’s a steady, gentle man, a good man. Those are rare.”

Daisy’s heart was stirred by Galina’s words. A marriage for Nastya’s sake! Suddenly, the ease with which Galina sat in her kitchen chair became suffused with ethereal grace.

“Is it hard to... support the family because he is...sick?” She wanted to ask about other, more personal, complications Boris’ sickness must have brought to Galina’s marriage, but this was the most tactful question that came to mind.

“We get by. The clinic pays enough.” Galina glanced at Daisy’s hands. “I see you have a ring of your own.”

“It...it is not the same. This ring is a promise,” Daisy explained. “My boyfriend David gave it to me when I left.” With a hint of pride, she added, “He calls me a butterfly. Because I will come back to him. That is what this ring means.”

“That’s a very charming idea.” She propped her chin up with her fist. “He trusts you to live without him.”

Galina’s immediate approval made Daisy shift in her seat. His trust was a given, she wanted to clarify, but right now David was also testing her. Any Russian equivalent to the concept of “testing a relationship” was lost to her,

though, and again, she wondered what kind a man gave his girlfriend only a *promise* ring.

“Of course,” Daisy replied, covering her ring with her left hand, “He wants me to do what I want.” Her throat tightened when she spoke, as if trying to catch her words before they slipped past her lips.

Galina propped her cheek against her fist. “You must be happy being his butterfly.”

Daisy pushed against the budding annoyance Galina’s responses planted. “Yes,” she declared, her voice louder than she expected. “I am very happy with David.” Perhaps her love for David contained the seed of spiritual dedication, like Galina’s. All Daisy had to do was wait long enough for it to sprout. These thoughts crammed themselves into her brain, but Daisy could not say them. Instead, she tasted sour disgruntlement in her mouth, feeling slighted by her own situation.

She could only add, “David knows that I need to go to Russia, but when I return to him, I will be happy with him again. I will be very happy.” Her words immediately struck her as awkward and disingenuous, though she did not know why.

“You’re a good girl,” Galina complimented, patting her closed hands. “Maybe you’ll marry him someday.”

With unusual energy, Boris strode in carrying Galina's daughter. "Your Nastya tells me it's too early to sleep," he announced. He bounced her in his arms, and she squealed. "Whatever shall I do with this child?"

"You are her Papochka, you tell me," his wife replied.

Daisy saw the light radiate from within Galina's face and bitterness bubbled inside her.

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"So Galina tells me that you have a boyfriend." Anton commented to Daisy a few days later. He stood by the mailboxes in the front lobby, looking over his letters. After a few moments of silence, he glanced up from over the envelopes, his left eyebrow slightly raised.

Today must not have been a busy day for Anton, for he was engaging her in the longest conversation they ever had together. Almost fifteen full minutes had passed since she arrived to find him in the lobby, and Daisy couldn't believe how well her Russian was holding up. But this question had shattered any newfound confidence.

She stopped herself before a stutter could pop out. "Galina said that?"

He leaned his elbow on the wall. "We're neighbors. We talk."

"I did not know you talked about me."

"Galina's students in the past were very rude. They had never said even a hello. But you're a very polite American."

“Thank you.” She felt like Nastya after being told how beautiful her picture was.

“It must be very difficult because your boyfriend isn’t here.”

Why was he asking her about this? “It is very hard,” she agreed.

“Ah.” Anton’s head tipped to the side. “And he gave you a ring?”

“It is not for marriage.” Why was she still talking to him? She should say some excuse, she should go...

“Galina explained.” Anton finished flipping through his mail and tucked it in his coat pocket. “If he means it, he should have asked.”

“Oh, I don’t know-“ Daisy started as heat tingled in her cheeks.

“A man should never hold back.” Anton got on one knee before her. Daisy stared, mortified. Spreading out his arms, he exclaimed, “He should tell you, ‘You make me so happy. I want to have you and never let you go. Marry me.’”

“Well, David, he... he wants us to wait.” A choked laugh. Daisy backed away. “We are too young!”

“What kind of man is he then?” Anton winked, getting up. “I’m only teasing you, little *Americanka*.”

But his words bit into her. “Of course,” she replied, keeping her voice even.

“It’s cold standing here. Let’s walk.”

They ascended the stairs together, with Daisy matching his steps all the way to their apartment doors. “Sometimes, I invite Galina and her family to dinner.” Anton put his key in the lock. “You should come too.”

“That would be...interesting.” Daisy bobbed her head timidly.

The corner of Anton’s mouth went up at her word choice. “Interesting.” Before disappearing through the threshold, he wagged his fingers. “*Poka*, Daisy!”

His smiling face made her heart beat in ways that it hadn’t in many weeks. Her hands, now clammy, slipped into her back pockets as she shuffled her feet. Daisy’s lips parted; she inhaled slightly; she wanted to grab Anton, to seize him and hear her name said again—

Daisy managed a slight nod. “*Poka*,” she whispered.

His door slammed shut. She slumped against the wall as she exhaled slowly, her knees starting to shake. She jerked her hands out of her pockets and rubbed them together, trying to get rid of the sticky feeling that clung to her palms. Distractedly, Daisy gripped David’s ring and twisted it, letting Anton’s impish smile play on her lips.

*That would be nice*, she thought, *having dinner with Anton*. She let her head fall to the side as every moment of the Russian’s jocular attention replayed itself in her mind. A jumpy, bird-like happiness filled her chest. Daisy finally did it; she had opened herself up to Anton, and now he wanted to know her better. They’ll become friends – intimate friends, she hoped – and then they’ll spend so

much more time together....Would David become jealous, if he knew about Anton?

In the midst of her fidgeting, the ring worked itself off her finger and fell onto the concrete floor. Daisy looked down, surprised, but couldn't see where it had landed. After a few moments, however, she saw that the ring had stopped rolling at Anton's door, so close that she could have pushed it beneath the crack. Stooping down to pick it up, she heard the start of his stereo's muffled, thumping beat. Daisy balanced herself as she rose to her feet by pressing her free hand against the door. She took a step back, slipping the ring into her front pocket. David wouldn't understand. He'd only cheapen her happiness with his jealousy; after all, the boy comprehended only the surface of things.

Daisy felt the immense possibility held in this moment, although she couldn't define the precise reason why its significance made her tremble. Maybe – just maybe – she was edging towards the depth of feeling she had been craving. Her fingers lingered softly against her thigh, rubbing against the rough fabric. Yes. It had to be.



## A Birthday for Kostya

Tanya couldn't figure out why the American student was sitting across from her. Rima's previous students had disappeared during family visits, and Tanya wished this one hadn't broken the established pattern. For the past half-hour, she watched as the American slowly cut up her cabbage and pork. As the pile of minced food grew on the American's plate, so did Tanya's disdain: at least the girl could try eating what Rima cooked for tonight. Beside the American sat Tanya's great-nephew Petya, who shoved the food into his mouth in dripping chunks.

"Chew, Petya," she whispered to him. "And put your napkin in your lap."

Thankfully, the American did not notice Petya's atrocious habits, since she was being questioned by Grisha.

"Do you drive?"

"No."

"No?" Grisha raised both bushy eyebrows. "I thought everyone drove cars in America."

"I don't have a license," she answered. The American student pushed the bits of cabbage and pork around as if realizing that she couldn't keep on mincing it into non-existence. The mass of dangling bracelets that decorated her wrists clinked together whenever she moved her arms. With her lacey blouse and trailing colored skirt, the American reminded Tanya of what a well-to-do gypsy might look like.

“How old do people need to be to drive?”

“Sixteen. But I don’t want one.”

Tanya watched her husband’s amazement. “But how do you travel?”

“Other people take me places.”

“But there are so many wonderful cars to choose from! My friends agree that your Chevrolet and Ford are not good companies, but how about Audi or Volkswagon?”

“Grisha,” Tanya said, “enough of that.”

She knew that Grisha was only trying to engage in polite conversation. But his current obsession with foreign cars unnerved her. Twice this month, she caught him coming back from the dealer, carrying flashy laminated booklets filled with blown-up pictures of sports cars and SUVs. They could get the money somewhere, he reasoned. He could try his friends at work, or ask for a loan from the bank. Tatiana scoffed at this – neither his drinking pals nor a private bank could be trusted. “Or we could put a foreigner in the back room,” Grisha had suggested. “That would be six hundred dollars a month.”

“We already have Petya to care for,” she huffed in response. “One more would be too much.” She thought about their cramped, often untidy, apartment and dreaded having a stranger discover her messy home.

She would have had more time to maintain her household if it weren’t for her new job. Tanya worked part-time as a tour guide at the Tolstoy Estate-Museum, a disappointing little wooden house mostly obscured by a towering red

picket fence. A friend of hers worked at the busier and more prestigious Tolstoy Museum branch on Prechistenka, and helped Tanya get the guide position when she was looking for work. Though Tanya couldn't speak English, she could read the Latin alphabet fairly well. Tanya received a blurry photocopy with the tour guide script typed out in English and was shown the necessary choreography throughout the narrow and dim residence. The job was simple: memorize this, Tanya was told, and recite it in front of tour groups as you led them through the house. And don't forget to smile. Foreigners like it when you smile.

She gave the American sitting across from her a close-mouthed grin and took a moment to recall her name. "Melissa," she said emphatically, "would you like some more salad?" Tanya offered the bowl of tomatoes and cucumbers.

"No thank you." Melissa pushed her limp brown hair behind her ears, and Tanya noticed the multiple piercings that bristled up along their edges like a hedgehog's quills.

So far, the memorial dinner had been tense, but Tanya tried to maintain her sense of respectability before Rima's boarder. Her sister, in contrast, was sobbing in the bathroom, the second time she had fled there since they returned from the cemetery. Tanya remained numb to this excessive grieving. Rima cried everyday for her lost son, and by now, Tanya had to remind herself of the familial obligation she should feel toward her sister. This day was particularly significant: Rima's son would have been forty years old.

Seven years ago, Lieutenant Major Konstantin Pavlovich Beketov was killed while on patrol in Chechnya. The news devastated Rima and reduced her to complete incompetence. While Tanya made the funeral arrangements and settled Kostya's debts with the government, Rima locked herself in her room, holding an old jacket of Kostya's and imagining how he must have died a noble death. "Killed by enemy fire" said the letter, but Rima obsessed over the many meanings of those simple words. She wrote letters daily to Kostya's unit and when she did not receive any response after many months, she started babbling about plans to go down south to find his comrades and ask them how Kostya had died, spending entire nights packing and repacking suitcases while still in her nightgown. Wishing to ease her sister into some sort of state of acceptance, Tanya once asked her why she wanted to know the painful details. "Because he's mine!" Rima snapped in return. Why wouldn't a mother want to know – as the suitcase zipped shut once more – about the fate of what was hers and hers alone?

A pair of unshaven and tired-looking young men arrived at Rima's doorstep before her delusions of travel could progress any further. Tanya was present at the time and watched as Rima sat them down for her interrogation. Once Rima found out the truth, she repeated the details of her son's death to everyone she knew, especially when she saw her orphaned grandson Petya. Rima had been in the middle of the tale, explaining how his father's eyes were still blinking as his fellow soldiers carried his body, when the sobs suddenly overtook

her and she rushed to the bathroom. From the living room, they could hear her low wail and the thumping noise of her hands slapping against the tile.

Young Petya continued to sit at the table and pick at the bits of cabbage that remained on his plate, unaffected by his grandmother's grief. For all Tanya knew, Petya had never remembered Rima acting otherwise, since he was only three when his father died. Rima had cared for Kostya's son since babyhood when Petya's mother had vanished soon after her husband was sent to the Caucasus. But raising Petya had become Tanya's responsibility after Kostya's death. Rima had become completely oblivious to the child's presence during the weeks after she received notice from the army; she hadn't protested when Tanya took Petya away.

"Petya," Tanya asked, "could you check to see how your babushka is doing?"

The boy glared back resentfully, and Grisha put his napkin down on the table. "Listen to your Auntie Tanya." With an adult sigh, the ten-year-old child slipped off the chair and left the room.

Tanya turned to the American, Rima's boarder. She pushed aside her resentment towards this girl, one of the many wealthy strangers that Rima chose to take in to supplement her pensioner's income. "My sister has led a very difficult life," she explained. "You must understand, Kostya was a treasure to her."

Melissa, she noticed, spoke Russian well, which was vaguely impressive.

“I’m sorry. It must’ve been terrible.”

Tanya heard the mechanical intonation of her words and inwardly frowned. Sometimes confused foreigners would come to the Estate-House and speak in that same polite but unsure manner, at least until they realized that Tanya couldn’t understand their English questions. Those people must have gotten lost or mislead into thinking that the small house on Ulitsa Lev Tolstovo was the same as the impressive golden mansion where all of Tolstoy’s more important artifacts were displayed. Tanya hated these tourists in particular, because these people didn’t leave despite their mistake, and she had no choice but to give them a tour. As Tanya struggled to recite the script, these tourists kept the mask of excitement held up to their faces as they wandered across the creaking floorboards. During these times, Tanya wondered if they chose to remain to watch her fumble over their language as opposed to looking at the meager selection of illustrations and photographs on the walls. Was this why Melissa chose to stay, Tanya wondered, because she took some perverse pleasure in witnessing the continuous spectacle of Rima’s grief? Or did she want to project some superficial sense of sympathy for the sake of politeness?

Petya hurried into the room to take refuge in his seat as Rima appeared in the doorway. Seeing her sister’s sunken face and skinny frame always saddened Tanya. Until her son’s death, her sister had a peasant’s figure: rounded and soft.

Now, her plump body had deflated into splotched skin and hard bone, as if someone had poked a pin into her side.

“Tanya, Petya has grown so disrespectful,” she declared in a scratchy voice grown raw from sobbing. “Doesn’t he know the importance of this day?” She clutched at her wrinkled sweater. “Why doesn’t he cry for his poor father? Not even at the cemetery, did you notice, Tanya?”

At the graveyard, Petya had asked whether he could remain in the car, and when Tanya replied with a firm no, Grisha had had to drag the child to the grave. Rima held her own made-up ritual there, pouring three shots of lemon-flavored vodka over the grass and then falling to her knees with her arms upraised.

Being mindful of the American, Tanya answered, “Don’t be harsh on him, Rima, please.”

The child hunched over his plate. “Aren’t you grateful, Petya?” Rima croaked. “Your babushka raised your father to be strong enough to sacrifice his life for us, and you can’t even shed a tear? Shameful!” She sank down in her chair, her knees cracking.

Rima lifted her tiny wine glass. “Happy birthday Kostya!” Her wide pale eyes roamed the table until murmurs of “happy birthday” went up all around her. Out of the corner of her eye, Tanya spotted Melissa lowering her head as Rima made the toast. Even Petya managed a tiny congratulations, but didn’t sip his milk.

“Drink Petya,” Rima said. The boy slumped over further. Her thin lips puckered up in dissatisfaction. “You shouldn’t forget your milk. Your father, he couldn’t drink. He never could. Kostya was a special baby.” Tanya repressed a sigh. “He couldn’t have cow’s milk, it made him sick,” her sister went on. “So I had to go find an alternative. It was so difficult, but I couldn’t let my Kostya drink only water, babies need more than water. I found some Jews who kept a goat at their dacha. They sold me goat’s milk for my boy. The Jews!” she repeated for emphasis, searching everyone’s faces.

Tanya stared at the delicate silver patterns on her plate as Grisha murmured some form of sympathetic agreement. Why did her sister always have to say such vulgar things, especially now? Was Melissa fascinated by this behavior?

Satisfied, Rima ended with, “Yes, yes! But I had no other choice, it was for poor Kostya, he couldn’t have anything else.”

Suddenly, Petya seized his glass and with his dark eyes – Kostya’s eyes – pinned onto his grandmother, he chugged down the whole cupful. A trail of white ran down his chin, and when he finished, Petya swiped at his mouth with his sleeve and slammed the glass down.

Rima’s lips spread wide, her gold teeth revealing themselves like hidden jewels. “My boy! My little grandson!” Rima exclaimed and rose to kiss Petya on both cheeks.



How could Rima be so oblivious? Tanya couldn't tolerate seeing the resentment in the boy's eyes. She wanted to rise up and tear at the tablecloth; she wanted to roar and scream at her sister. But Tanya knew then she would be acting no better than Rima. Instead, she turned to the American. "Melissa," she said, "what interesting things have you seen here?"

"Well, quite a bit," she admitted. "Our director schedules weekly cultural trips."

"How delightful!" Keep the smile; foreigners like it when you smile. "Isn't it, Grisha?"

Grisha scooted his chair closer to the table. "Have you seen our art? The Tretyakov Gallery? And the Pushkin Museum?"

"Um, yes, I went to the Tretyakov with my friends last week."

"Your family must know all about these wonderful trips," Tanya said. She hoped they knew more about these trips than about Rima. She imagined Melissa's family lounging together in a clean and spacious living room, faceless yet refined, chuckling over the news they received from their daughter about Rima and her outlandish behavior. "Do you call them often?"

"Phone calls are very expensive, but I write them e-mails."

"Good, good!" Tanya pressed her hands together.

Rima pushed her fork around her plate. "Melissa is always flying off to places, you know. I'm always lonely, Tanya, because she's gone so much. I have no one to talk to."

“Well, she is young and a student,” Tanya replied tersely. “She should take pleasure in as many things as she can. That is why she is here.”

“Your family,” Grisha went on, “have they ever been to Russia?”

“No. They don’t travel much.”

“Ah, I see. And do you have any brothers or sisters?”

Melissa took her time adjusting the napkin in her lap before she answered.

“An older brother.”

“Oh, does he work or go to school?”

Melissa hesitated; the question seemed to make her curl into herself. Her arms stirred in her lap with a faint jingle. “He...was at school,” she answered.

“But not anymore.”

“Of course.” Tanya sensed her discomfort rising.

Grisha asked, “Why is he not a student?”

“Never mind that,” Tanya interrupted. “What do your parents do?”

Melissa pressed her lips together. “My dad is a lawyer. My mom takes care of my brother at home.”

“Oh?” Under the table, Tanya clenched her fists. Her eyes darted to Rima, dreading her reaction.

“Your mother,” Rima exclaimed with instant empathy, “she must work hard for your brother. Is he sick?”

“He...he is.” A faint blush rose to Melissa’s cheeks, and Tanya could not help but be drawn to watching this girl. She thought about how Melissa’s

excessive jewelry and fashionable clothes seemed to cover up how young she really was.

“He got into a car accident years ago. He cannot move from his bed, and so my parents take care of him.” Melissa folded her napkin again in her lap. More silence. Everyone avoided each others’ eyes, except for Rima who bobbed her head up and down at her foreigner.

“So,” Rima finally said, breaking the stillness. “That was it? An accident?” She eyed Melissa in a hungry way that made Tatiana uneasy.

“It was unexpected. I was in high school. It was wintertime, and his car went off the road and hit a tree.”

Rima kept nodding her head, probably waiting for Melissa to add a gruesome detail, like whether her brother’s head had crashed through the windshield or if the car had twisted around his broken body. But the girl said nothing more.

“Well, that’s fate,” Rima conceded, slapping her palms on the table.

Melissa nodded. “I guess so.”

“But your parents, at least they have a son!” Rima’s brow furrowed. “They must be grateful for that. That is terrible, terrible, but it is fate! Fate drew your brother to crash his car, just how fate took my Kostya away! But my Kostya, he was brave, a fighter, and I always knew-!”

Grisha growled, “Rima-” but it was little Petya who spoke up.

“Babushka,” he snapped, “if Papa had been a cripple, you wouldn’t have been grateful at all. You’d only cry because he wouldn’t be able to walk!”

His words stunned the table. “Petya!” Tanya snapped.

“But it’s true!” Petya retorted. “Don’t tell me it isn’t!” The boy stood up, back straight, eyes burning, as if responding to a challenge.

Tanya felt the need to hit her great-nephew yet she also wanted to embrace him. But Rima didn’t spring up to defend her son’s honor. Instead, she curled into herself as if Petya had struck her, her shoulders heaving up and down.

“So shameful!” she hiccupped. “To speak such words about Kostya...shameful!” She rose, swaying, and stumbled to the bathroom. They heard the empty slam of the door and the wails rose up again.

Grisha put his head in his hands, swearing softly. Petya trembled, and he looked towards Tanya in a way that made her tremble as well. She shook her head warily. “Go to the kitchen, Petya,” she murmured. “Go and sit for a while.”

Petya puffed out his chest, his chin raised, his face pressed into tight rage. Yet the boy followed her orders and marched out of the room.

Tanya, defeated and ashamed, reached across the dishes of cold food and squeezed Melissa’s hands between her bony fingers. She leaned in close, worried that Melissa would cry, and the girl would feel horrified by these strange, ruined people. But Melissa’s face simply reflected her own passive weariness. It was very much like looking into a mirror, she realized.

Tanya’s grip tightened. “I’m so sorry about your brother,” she whispered.

## Infiltration

After his girlfriend Lena hung up on him for the third time, Trevor took this as a mark of failure. Trevor didn't like failure, because he wanted to think that he, more than most people, did not deserve to fail. Lena's stubborn ferocity and how much it differed from the sweet and delicate Russian girl he knew, annoyed him. But it was her accusation, sinking in, that made him cringe.

Their fight had taken place after a dinner party with a couple from Houston that Trevor categorized as one of the worst social decisions he ever made. On the deserted Moscow sidewalk, he and Lena had gotten into a stupid argument during which Trevor had said several things that he now regretted. He stood beneath the streetlamp in the exact same spot where he was when Lena left him the night before. Despite all of his attempts to contact Lena, somehow, he knew that she wouldn't forgive him any time soon, and that he should have alternative plans ready. So now he was back in front of the abandoned building, on a rendezvous with a piece of crumbling architecture. A smooth drawling voice from recent memory popped into Trevor's mind. "A site in development," Harold would have called this. *Hmpf, development my ass*, Trevor thought. Why couldn't he stop thinking about that pompous cowboy?

The abandoned building in front of Trevor looked in sore need of that Texan's development. It slumped forward toward the street, as if the weather had caused it to suffer. A huge tarp with a rendering of an old, somewhat classical,

architecture design covered the front. Trevor assumed that the building must have resembled this drawing once. The building appeared to rebel against the Soviet blockiness of its peers and shun the neo-modernist leanings of its younger companions. According to the tarp, the color of the stone was a creamy grey. A pair of Ionic columns framed the entrance, and a series of low windows ran along one side of the building. Between the columns was what looked like a signboard, and a set of letters in elaborate Cyrillic spelled out the single word, *Teatr*.

A torn flap by the side of the building, which had been pinned back by the snowy wind the night before, hung limp and rumpled. Trevor grabbed the plastic and pulled it up. He could see the brick of the building, crumbling and grey, and, a bit further into the darkness, a broken window. Trevor smiled, envisioning his best friend Robby jumping through the opening at that very moment, equipped with his Maglite and hiking boots.

Although Trevor had always heard that this activity was called “urban spelunking,” Robby, who liked to play up the dramatics of any situation, explained to him that true enthusiasts called it “infiltration.” But then again, Robby liked using the word when referring to physical exploration of any sort, whether it was with his latest girl or with some ancient building. Once, he and Trevor did some infiltration of the architectural type when they were together at boarding school. They had skipped classes one summery day in April to “infiltrate” the town’s decrepit paper mill. The two boys climbed around falling pilings, skirted about sinkholes in the floor, and ascended onto the roof, where

they stood in the fading sunlight like conquerors. Standing there on top of the sprawling wreckage, Trevor tasted raw and unmasked triumph.

Glancing over his shoulder, Trevor watched a taxi pass by. Otherwise, he was alone. Trevor approached the torn flap and lifted the edge, then took out his flashlight and flipped it on. The half-boarded window held no glass; when he raised his beam, all he saw was floating dust.

He held up the tarp higher, but the weight of the whole thing made his arm ache. With his free hand, he reached over to see how far the window was from where he stood and grabbed the edge of it. The un-boarded space would be just large enough; the thought of pulling himself through the window came to his mind, but then the dread of having the tarp fall and trapping him inside made him hesitate.

Backing away, he let go, and the giant cover fell back gracefully against the building. Trevor noticed that the tarp only covered the front and part of the side; peering with his light down the narrow alleyway, he could see where the cover ended. He walked down the narrow space and saw a boarded door with a Russian “Do Not Enter” sign stuck on it. He placed a hand upon one of the boards and found that it was loose. With a couple of tugs, Trevor wrenched the board off of the door and leaned it against the brick wall.

“Robby, you are missing out,” he muttered, trying to stir up that old excitement again. Trevor checked to see if he had his camera with him. The night before, he only had his Blackberry, and so he had committed himself to

returning. For a moment, he heard Lena's voice, and how she scoffed at him when he talked about his friend's hobby. Trevor zipped up his coat, clutched the tarnished door handle, and, with one strong heave, threw his shoulder at the door, banishing the resentful feelings that welled up with the thought of her.

The sound echoed through the cold air. Caked snow flew like shaken dust.

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The snow had been falling in clumps when Trevor and Lena first came across the abandoned building. Trevor had cursed the cold and tightened the scarf around his neck. This snow was not the kind that frosted buildings on postcards, but a dense precipitation that weighed down everything it touched. Like New England snow, Trevor observed. Massachusetts had more than enough of it to go around. *But there's always Florence*, he thought. He couldn't wait until his art history program started up in the spring. Moscow had been fun, until the temperature killed it. He had sufficient enough reason to come here: because the currency rate was favorable and the school work close to none. He had needed some fun after two uneventful years at his parents' alma mater, so he applied for his college's Moscow language program and the Italian art program. He had neither real interest in language or art, but his parents had enough money to cover the costs for both. With a grimace, he kicked at a deformed clump of icy slush that had formed in the street.



His Blackberry beeped and he took it out of his pocket. He opened his inbox and read the words: "Heard it was 11 degrees there. HA HA. Robby." Trevor clicked the Blackberry off. Shoving it in his pocket, Trevor muttered, "The weather report didn't say snow."

"You can't always depend on those television reports," Lena replied as they walked down the blustery street, leaning into one another for warmth. "I never do."

The justification inherent in her voice poked at him. *There she goes again*, he thought to himself. "It shouldn't be winter yet," he muttered. "Halloween hasn't even passed." Lena placed her hand on his glove. Trevor glanced over at her. A stray snowflake fell onto her glowing cheek.

His irritation subsided as he reached out to brush off the melting snow. Even in this weather, she looked perfect. Trevor wasn't the type to believe in The One, but he did believe in perfection and took advantage of it whenever it came across his path. "When looking for fun, there's a country for every man," Trevor had confided to Joe, the only other guy in the Moscow program. They were at the bar of The Boar's House (he personally thought the place was a shit hole, but the tavern was *the* place for expats, and no one else in the group wanted to try anywhere new). "But Russia is *any* man's country."

Lena had certainly made his experience a positive one. They had met at the opening meeting for the Russian-English student dialogue at the University. About ten English speakers came: all six from Trevor's group, plus one splotchy-

faced Canadian boy and three English girls. Thirty Russians showed up to welcome them. There weren't enough seats, and the foreigners ended up all standing against the wall near the door. Trevor dressed carefully for the occasion, wearing a pin-striped button-down, jeans, and polished leather shoes. He casually picked at his fingernails during the meeting, pretending he didn't notice the cluster of girls who whispered to themselves while looking in his direction.

Joe, a clueless political science major, spoke about his experiences in Russia with a stutter and kept shuffling his feet. Knowing better, Trevor remarked how isolated their group was from the rest of the student population. One tall girl named Olga with black ringlets and high arching eyebrows caught on immediately. "I know some great places where foreigners don't usually hang out," she offered, "if you want me to show you the real city!" The entire room had laughed awkwardly at her comment, though some of the girls gawking at Trevor gave her disdainful glares.

Trevor had smiled in response, but inwardly dismissed her. Russian women who flaunted themselves made him wary. Not that he believed they were gold-digger brides; like any forward-thinking American, he knew that was only a bad Hollywood, post-Communist cliché, not a reality. He usually pushed the idea from his mind, except when joking about it electronically to Robby: their e-mails held warnings against "Gold-digger Tanyas" and the occasional jest about Trevor someday catching "*SPID*" – Russia's acronym for AIDS – from "infiltrating" a bar hooker.

In that first meeting, his eyes had settled on the small, willowy girl who had entered the room, carrying a couple of chairs. “Hello,” she had greeted him in clear English with a faint, endearing accent. “My name is Lena. I’m the student liaison for the American Cultural Center. Please,” she pointed to a chair that she snagged from the hallway, “have a seat.” After speaking, Lena bowed her head as if ashamed of her boldness. Trevor had felt touched by her hesitation and took her offer as genuine.

Now on their way to eat with the Texan expats, Trevor noticed one of the streetlights ahead of them blinking intermittently. With one or two more winks, the light died as they passed it.

Trevor noticed that the two other streetlights ahead were dimming as well. “A power surge?” he murmured, reaching into his pocket. He took out a small flashlight. Moscow building owners apparently didn’t believe in lighting apartment hallways, and so he had purchased it to navigate his way whenever he stumbled back to his host mother’s apartment at night. Trevor flipped the switch, and let the dull yellow halo shine ahead.

“My babushka would call this a bad omen,” Lena observed.

“Well, my parents would call this bad infrastructure.” Trevor waved his light around. A couple of closed street vendors were nearby, their storefronts shut and bolted. By these dead lamps stood a building blanketed by a tarp. On the front was a simplified architectural drawing of what Trevor assumed was the

building's actual face. "I've seen these around," he commented. "Is it renovation work?"

"In a way." Lena shrugged. "It's only a condemned building."

"Condemned?"

"There are many near my dormitory. People drape a huge cover over a place and say they are renovating it. But they let the building fall apart. And later the constructors claim that it was too late to fix the problems, and so they had no choice but to knock it down."

Trevor gave a low whistle. "How long do you think this building's been standing?"

"A long time maybe," Lena said. "They put the tarp over it before I left for summer vacation."

"This would be a great place to infiltrate." He raised the light towards Lena's face. "Ever do that?" he asked. "Explore an empty building?"

"Infiltrate? Sounds like something the KGB would've done," Lena said. She arched an eyebrow.

"Or something for Robby. He's a friend from back home." Trevor thought wistfully about the paper mill. "It's a word he throws around all the time."

"Why would you do that?" Lena shook her head. "Is this another crazy thing you do?"

Trevor crossed his arms. "Since when did I ever act crazy?"

"Well, how about when you make strangers invite you for dinner?"

“What? Charlotte seems like a perfectly respectable woman.” The week before, Trevor had agreed to dinner because the words “good ol’ fashioned Texan supper” were too hard to resist. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard decent American voices!” Charlotte had exclaimed during their conversation in the metro. The wife of a contractor, she said that she had spent the last several years in the city, but had no grasp of the language. He had seen her shopping at the little Western supermarket by the University in the past but never gave her much notice. Nevertheless, after their long conversation in the metro, Charlotte offered them dinner in her home, a penthouse in a luxury apartment a few blocks away from the University.

“Why not?” Trevor defended. “We’re getting a free meal.”

“You are a strange man.” She gave him a light push as they walked back into the metro. “*Ty soshëls uma,*” she added in Russian. Crazy in the head, she meant.

“I’m sure the people at the American Cultural Center never cooked decent chili and tacos,” he teased. “You probably think we eat pizza and hamburgers all the time. It’ll be fun.”

“So when I go to America, should I ask strangers for dinner too?”

“If it’s a woman like Charlotte, then that would be fine. But if it’s a man,” Trevor grabbed her around the waist, “you better stay away from those sketchy bastards.”

Lena laughed. He knew his silly turns of phrase amused her; they had spent their first date exchanging all sorts of slang. “Even if that man is Robby?”

“Especially Robby.” He looked wistfully over at the broken tarp. The plastic peeled itself back, slapping against the wind. “Let’s go then. We’ll be late.”

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Perhaps Trevor should have seen the signs. Lena was sweet to him for the first few weeks and, as he bragged to Robby and Joe, she was “a lioness in bed.” Despite his jokes about “*SPID*,” Trevor did not consider it an obstacle with Lena. Whenever his host mother worked late at night, Trevor and Lena would clamber into his *khozyaika*’s queen bed with its creaking wooden frame, kicking off the sheets and covers to have sex on the bare mattress. He was never a cuddling sort of guy, but afterwards, he would lie in her arms as she stroked his hair or rubbed circles along his back. Before his host mother returned, Trevor would sit in his boxers cross-legged on the floor and watch Lena make the bed, tucking in the sheets with sharp folds underneath the corners and yanking up the blankets.

But soon, her demeanor and her comments changed from humble to critical. She laughed at the daily vitamins he took, because Americans overmedicated themselves. When he complained about his host mother’s cooking, she pointed out that at least the vegetables were grown naturally on a humble family *dacha*, unlike the harmful chemicals and hormones pumped into the food he grew up on. Even the expensive electronics he owned had been copied from

the original European models (there was no debate – Russia was a purely European nation to Lena).

The worst of it was when Lena started to turn every conversation against him. The last time she tried was in the metro a week before the dinner. They had stood huddled together during the five-minute ride down the escalator as Trevor stared at the large rectangular subway signs pasted on either side of the white tunnel. Most were propaganda-like ads touting the Metro system and featuring blonde, slim women in tight-fitting uniforms. He realized that Lena could easily be one of these models, smiling and reminding passengers to stand on the right side of the escalator.

Lena touched his cheek. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing important.” Trevor kissed her on the forehead. “So, what are you doing tonight?” he asked. “My *khozyaika* won’t be back until eight.”

“I have an English Literature essay I need to prepare,” Lena countered.

“Great, I can help you out.”

Lena smiled. “It is on Shakespeare. Do you know Richard the Third?”

“Like the back of my hand.” Trevor extended an arm before him. “To be or not to be, that is the question.”

“Trevor!”

“Trust me on this. I’m an actor.”

Lena gave him a padded slap against his wool jacket. “This is serious.”

“I *am* serious,” Trevor frowned. He waited until uncertainty knitted up her expression before he broke into a grin and hooked his arm around her waist.

“Kidding. That’s *Hamlet*, I know.” He kissed her cheek. “But really, if you need help with that stuff, why not stop by later?”

Lena bit her lower lip. “But I need to concentrate tonight. We have seen each other almost every night this week. I could not work on it before.”

“You can concentrate at my place.” He pulled her closer, but she gently eased herself out of his hold.

“I need to use my computer.”

“You can type it up on my laptop.”

“And you don’t have any schoolwork?”

“Lena, are you kidding me?” Trevor laughed. Classes at the University were a joke. He had heard a rumor from the English kids that the teachers were incredibly lax in grading their foreign students. And his instructor was such a bitch that he stopped bothering to go to class two weeks before. He checked in with his group at lunch to see if he missed anything vital. “I’m studying abroad. Grades aren’t the important thing.”

“Then what is?”

“The experience.” He leaned in to kiss her again, but she moved away, her arms crossed.

Lena put on what Trevor called her “babushka face,” after the squat old ladies who didn’t hesitate to hassle him on the street for forgetting to zip up his



coat. “We all can’t be actors,” Lena pouted. “Don’t you study theater at your acting school?”

“Well, you don’t really need to study acting, Lena. It’s a natural thing.” Trevor didn’t want to admit that he hadn’t attended what Lena would consider an “acting school”; places like Emerson and NYU had been too competitive for him to get in, and so he ended up at his parent’s alma mater. “I’ll be the next Jack Nicholson, y’know,” he said. “Do you know him?”

“Jack Nicholson?” she asked dubiously.

Trevor pulled a crazy face. “Here’s Johnny!” At Lena’s blank expression, he rolled his eyes. “*The Shining*. It’s a famous horror movie.”

“What about Stanislavsky? Do you know him?”

“Well, of course I do.” She was going to go into interrogation mode soon, and he had to stop her somehow. “C’mon,” he said with a smile, “you’re starting to sound like my dad. Let’s just go to my apartment, you can work on your paper, and we’ll have a little fun, okay?”

Lena had turned away so he couldn’t see her face. “Who do you think I am,” she retorted, “your mail-order bride?”

“You are ridiculous.” He forced out another laugh. “Lena, Lena, honey, listen to me,” Trevor said, lowering his voice. “Why did you have to bring that up? You know I don’t mean that. What-” he paused, “what kind of guy do you think I am? I don’t want to hear about school, that’s all. It’s the weekend,

y’know?” He brushed his hands along her shoulders. “Why talk about it? Couldn’t we just relax?”

Lena wasn’t moving. Trevor silently cursed. Why did she have to be so stubborn like this?

On the platform by the concrete pillar stood a stout woman in a fur stole that he vaguely recognized from the grocery store trips he took by the University. Trevor kissed Lena on top of the head. “I’m sure that lady would understand.” He dashed away. Lena whirled around, her mouth agape, as Trevor tapped the woman on the arm.

“Well, hello there, ma’am,” he greeted loudly, making a point to speak in English. “My girlfriend Lena over there thinks that I don’t appreciate her, but I wanted to tell you that she is one of the most wonderful people I know. Hi, my name is Trevor, how are you?”

Lena covered her mouth with her mitten, her irritation turning to laughs as she ran over to jerk him away. To both their surprise, the woman smiled, a very untypical Russian reaction. “Well, Trevor, that’s so sweet you’d say that about her,” she said with a slight Texan drawl. “My name’s Charlotte. It’s a pleasure.”

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The theater side door gave away after Trevor rammed his weight against it a few times; he was so unprepared that he fell through and thudded onto the dusty ground. He coughed, brushed himself off, and waved his flashlight around. The light touched upon the moldy wallpaper that hung like the withered leaves of a

dying plant. Trevor guessed that this room was a back office of some sort: there was a rusted chair which had fallen on its side, broken bookshelves, and a rickety-looking desk. There was no door leading out of the room, but a gaping threshold.

Trevor kicked the exit door open so that the cold wind blew in. Reassured of an escape route, he stepped forward, walking gingerly through the dust and strewn mounds of old programs, which had piled up like snow. The air inside the building was as cold as the air outside; he moved in the clouds of his breath.

Trevor lifted up one of the programs between his index finger and thumb.

Chekhov's *Chaika*.

"The Seagull," Trevor translated, amused, and carefully brushed the grit off of the program and folded it into his coat pocket.

Blank account books were open on the desk, along with an old, empty metal box, covered in rust. Piles of faded and water-damaged programs stood along the wall: productions from obscure Russian authors, alongside others from Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Tennessee Williams.

He picked up the Tennessee Williams program. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it read in Russian. Trevor remembered the play as the only one he had auditioned for at his college. The theater crowd in high school had been an all-female-or-fag affair, and Trevor had been plucked for any necessary masculine role, garnering a few plum parts. He assumed college would be a continuation of drunken cast parties and applause. When he auditioned for Stanley, the director bluntly told him that he wasn't "developed enough," and the part went to a stocky

football player. Right then, Trevor decided to bring his talent elsewhere. That stupid director would regret it, once Trevor's name became synonymous with Broadway.

Trevor peered around the threshold, thrusting his light forward into the theater's cavernous interior. Whatever outside light that came in from his exit didn't reach there, but the gloom in the house was actually lighter than the room he stood in. He looked up to see why: the roof had partly caved in at the far end of the house, by some of the upper balconies. The overcast sky, swollen and colored a milky violet, seemed to sink down through the beams.

A sharp speck made his eye twitch; Trevor blinked and shook his head. The sensation vanished – it had been cold, not painful. He raised his head and saw flakes of snow and dust floating down from the rafters. They caught in the beam of his flashlight and glinted briefly before swirling away.

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Lena had tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow when they arrived at Charlotte's building. Walking past the doorman, an imposing man in a black and red suit, Trevor noticed how her small mouth opened and her blue eyes widened. Black and white marble lay beneath their shoes and a small fountain gurgled in center of the lobby, its crystalline water leaping towards the huge gold chandelier hanging above their heads. He was impressed as well; here was none of the concrete and greenish "cream of algae" paint he associated with most Moscow

apartments. It was as if this entire building had snuck past the country's borders to settle down among dying stone giants.

"They are like the New Russians," she whispered as they walked through the lobby.

"I'm not surprised," Trevor replied, thinking of Moscow's class of fledgling elites. They were mysterious, haughty beings who dwelled behind the tinted windows of sleek BMWs and white limos that pushed the rusted, box-shaped cars to the side of the road. Even Trevor hadn't dared to compare himself to these millionaire businessmen and their cohorts.

Charlotte, dressed in a drooping pile of cashmere, pearls, and silk, paused at the door when it opened. "Oh, lovely!" she exclaimed as if Trevor and Lena had been pieces of art. "Come in, come in!"

The apartment Charlotte and her husband shared was more graciously put together than she was. Trevor walked through the apartment appreciatively, noting everything that screamed out money to him: from the polished black granite countertops to the mother-of-pearl insets on the coat rack. The color scheme reminded Trevor of warm summer nights, but the most prominent item in the apartment was an oversized painting of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which hung like the Savior himself over the fireplace. His head was bowed, contributing to the illusion that Jesus stared down at them with pained compassion. Trevor adjusted his shirt collar, suddenly feeling uneasy.

Her husband sat in the living room nursing a glass of wine. Trevor expected the whole etched boots, Wrangler jeans, and Stetson hat deal, and was mildly surprised to see a thin, almost diminutive, man with threadbare hair and a simple polo shirt and khakis. As Charlotte served them hors d'oeuvres, Harold talked, conducting his own words with effusive hand motions.

Harold worked in the field of urban planning and development. "Last thing I did today was finish a deal for a building by the Old Arbat," he bragged. "It's an old, crumbling thing, pre-revolutionary. Been abandoned for years. Well, there's a new office building they want done over there. So what I do is check the building regs and go through all the paperwork with the previous owners and boom! In a year that mess'll be torn down and replaced with something modern."

"You ever heard of the Moskva Hotel near the Kremlin?" Charlotte added, placing an affirmative hand on his forearm. "Harold was a negotiator when that place went down. Now they're planning to put up a Holiday Inn. Isn't that exciting?"

Trevor tried to imagine a Holiday Inn replacing the huge triangle of billboards, each board over a hundred feet across, which surrounded the location of the former landmark of Stalinist hospitality. But nothing could compare to that initial shock he got when he looked back through the brick entrance of Red Square only to see a 50-foot high ad for Hewett-Packard.

Over a dinner of chili and chicken enchiladas, Harold and Charlotte went on about their lives in Moscow, but soon, Trevor became bored by their self-

involved chatter. It reminded him of his parents' dinner parties. Growing up, Trevor thought that one day he was going to be famous, and while as his parents and their friends gossiped and bragged, Trevor spent his time practicing his signature on cocktail napkins. As his mind drifted off, he slipped a napkin from the table.

Lena paid enough attention for the both of them. She leaned forward on the edge of her seat, nodding and laughing when appropriate. Her face became flushed, her eyes unusually shining as Harold talked about his "sites of development." After awhile, Trevor scribbled, "So when's the test?" on a napkin and directed her gaze to it from under the tabletop. She swatted his hand away. Grudgingly, he crumpled it up, stuffing the napkin in his pocket.

"Do you speak Russian?" Lena asked after awhile.

"*Koneshna!*" Harold laughed, switching with ease. "How could I stay here for so long and not know?"

"You speak very well!" she complimented in her native tongue, despite Harold's outrageous accent. "Did it take you long to learn?"

"A few years, yes, but I'm also fluent in Spanish. Languages aren't hard for me."

Harold smiled at Lena. "Do you want me to get you something to drink?" he continued to her in Russian. Noting the change, Trevor glanced up and saw the two of them exchange smiles.

Lena tilted her head. "I would love one," she replied in her own language.

“Char, honey,” Harold said in English, “be a sweetheart and make us some whiskey sours, would you?” With a little pat on her back, he sent her off to the kitchen. Then, turning to Trevor, he asked, “Do you ever practice with her?”

“*Nyet!*” Lena laughed, answering for him. “Why, every time we try, he only becomes frustrated and stops.”

“*Ty v Moskvu. Ty doljen ezuchit yazuk,*” Harold told Trevor in a stern tone. Trevor exhaled slowly, trying not to take offense. Sure, he didn’t ask for a translation of what Harold said, but it probably had to do with learning Russian.

He gave a rueful grin. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “I’m trying as hard as I can here.”

“*Po-ryssky?*” Lena cupped her ear.

“I arrive here because I have reason,” Trevor managed to say in stiff Russian. “I come here for culture,” he went on, taking out his standard excuse. “I like the literature and the history.”

“But not the language?” Harold asked and laughed, slapping Trevor on the back. “It’s not a big deal,” he said, returning to English. “Besides, you’re young; why not try a few things, eh?”

“What did I miss?” Charlotte walked in and gave Trevor a helpless shrug. “I got some of that,” she said apologetically. “But most of it’s gobble-dee-gook up here.”

As Lena and Harold continued their conversation in Russian, Trevor’s resentment grew as he tried listening to Charlotte. Charlotte went on all about



“her children” and what she was planning to do for them. Trevor had assumed she meant her actual children, until she mentioned that she had fifty-three of them. Charlotte’s brood was settled in an orphanage by Victory Park, where she took her Bible study group for weekly volunteer work. She showed Trevor page after page of little pale children, propped somehow alongside Charlotte’s larger frame – by her side, in her lap, cradled in her arms as if they were babies.

Trevor’s eyes kept drifting over to Lena, chatting away with Harold. Now, both of them got up to stand by the mantelpiece, and he was showing her a framed blueprint of some significance. Both their bodies leaned in as they examined the plan. Trevor gripped underneath the table and pressed his lips together. Charlotte called her husband’s chatter “conversing with the natives” with a playful laugh, but Trevor wished he could decipher his girlfriend’s “conversation.” He looked down at the table and saw that he had unconsciously doodled his signature all over several napkins. In a sudden burst of self-consciousness, he stuffed them all into his pockets.

During coffee, Harold leaned close and in a serious whisper vented to his guests. “Char’s Bible group wants to go to one of those real backwater places,” he explained, pressing his hands on the table. Trevor wondered whether Harold feared that Charlotte would sense his gestures of disapproval. “Like one of those ‘-stans’ in Central Asia or off to Irkutsk. Now tell me, what 60-year-old woman in her right mind wants to go to Siberia? But it’s those missionaries who plant these crazy ideas. She says that it’s what she wants to do, but I think she doesn’t know

what she's talking about. I've been to Irkutsk, and you can't do much preaching when the wind's blowing forty below." He faced both of them. "But there's no stopping her when she gets this way. Maybe you and Trevor should keep me company once she's gone." Trevor swore Harold's eye fell on Lena when he said this, and he got up. "We might," he said with a smile. "But, unfortunately for now, it's late, and we need to get going."

"It's been a pleasure," Harold said, offering his hand. "Another time?" Trevor shook it with a propped-up grin.

"We'll keep in touch," he lied.

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In the threshold of the theater, uncertainty made Trevor pull back. He stood there and took three more photos of the theater house. The seats hadn't even been pulled up, and he saw row after row of decaying red upholstery laid out before him. The red velvety covers had frayed and burst, exposing the dark, rusty springs. Trevor walked down the center aisle. His light exposed the fact that the first dozen seats of the orchestra had been pulled up, piled into the stage, and left there.

Would Harold's men be working in a place like this? Trevor wondered. The thought that Harold could be funding corruption cheered him up. Some progress!

A set of four side steps led up to the stage. The nascent wistfulness about his past stage success, that had been gaining steadily, overtook Trevor. How

stable would the stage be, he wondered. Curiosity overcame him and he ascended the steps.

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Walking back into the icy, dark street after the dinner party, Trevor felt bitterness creep into him. Lena took his arm and leaned on his shoulder. "I like them," she declared. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

He smiled, fighting back his distaste for Harold and Char. "Char's cooking is amazing," he answered. "We should start weekly dinners with them."

Lena giggled. "And they are such interesting people."

"What? And I'm a bore?" He heard the first tinge of irritation in his voice, sliding in like sandpaper against his throat.

"No. You are very interesting in your *own* way." Lena tilted her head up to kiss his cheek, but Trevor moved his head and loosened his hold. Lena's eyebrows moved up slightly. "Oh? What is wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just cold." Trevor tramped ahead. "Let's get underground."

Lena touched his arm. "Are you feeling sick?"

"No." He jerked out of the way. "Hey, give me some room to breathe for God's sake."

"Tell me. What is the matter?"

"Nothing that would be *interesting* to you, I'm sure."

"Trevor!" Lena's brow furrowed and she bit her lower lip. "Did I do something?"

Suddenly, he grabbed her arm. “You think that I didn’t see the way you were playing Harold back there?” he hissed.

“What?”

“All that ‘native conversation’ between you two.”

“‘Native conversation?’” Lena frowned. “I was being polite. That is what you do when you are a guest in someone’s home.”

“What, you mean suck up to the richest man in the room? Yeah, maybe that’s what you learned to do.”

“‘Suck up?’” Puzzlement crossed her face, and her voice sharpened. “I do not even know what you mean.”

“Well, let me enlighten you then, my dear. Sucking up is slang for flattering a guy.” A sardonic laugh.

Pulling away from his hold, Lena narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t do that. You’re simply jealous.”

“Maybe that would be true if I were five years old.”

“And maybe you *are*, Trevor. You are always angry if you do not have all the attention. If people do not say ‘Oh, Trevor, Trevor, Trevor!’ you whine like a child.”

“So you do think I’m a child!”

“No. I think you are spoiled fool!” she shouted.

Trevor glared at her as the words resonated in the empty street. Scant flakes of snow floated in the air and the wind began to stir.

“I talked to Harold because he’s doing interesting things in the city,” Lena said, her delicate hands balled tight. “And even Charlotte wants to help people. It’s better than what you do, skipping class and speaking English all the time.”

“That man isn’t doing work! He’s just plowing down buildings!”

“It’s better than pretending to be an actor!”

The words stabbed at him and he snapped back with a sneer, “Better than being a self-righteous whore.”

“You-you selfish *babnik!*” Lena’s cheeks were flushed by now, her eyes nothing but slits, her nose scrunched up and red. Why was he suddenly being called a womanizer? Trevor felt disgusted that he had ever thought her beautiful. Lena made a frustrated noise, like an insulted cat, and stomped away from him with highly exaggerated, almost comical steps. If the sidewalk had been icy, she would have been able to shatter it with her heels.

Trevor tried to think of a worse insult than “bitch” or “motherfucking bitch” or “motherfucking bitch-whore,” but he couldn’t, and so he yelled out all three until his throat stung. Then he stood there, gasping for breath, staring at where she disappeared into the metro. “Ugh!” he grunted, kicking up the drifts until they started swirling about him like he was trapped in a snow globe.

He rubbed his hand over his face, sighed, then went over to the side of the building and started kicking at the wall again and again until his toes ached. Slumping down against the stone, he ran both hands through his hair and let his head fall forward between his knees.

“Stupid,” Trevor spat. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

Why did that have to happen? The night could have been fine, and she would have been fine and that was all there was to it. He *had* acted like a jerk, and this temper tantrum didn't help. Flipping open his Blackberry, he thought of calling her before she would lose reception underground. Instead, he saw Robby's message still displayed on his screen.

“Oh hell. Would he get a laugh out of this?” Trevor got up, brushed off his clothes, put away his phone, and tucked his hands beneath his elbows. *I'll call her tomorrow, apologize, offer to take her out*, he reasoned as he walked down the street. *Say that I didn't mean any of it. That, yeah, it wasn't fair – well, no, that I was sick from the food or something and wasn't thinking... We'll hang out with Joe, Mel, and Daisy; they're cool, she'll like that... Give her time tonight and then tomorrow...*

But he had never seen her so angry at him before. What if she wouldn't respond to his calls? Quickly, he dialed her number. Nothing. For some reason, the thought that this was the end, that Lena would never speak to him again, frightened Trevor.

When the glare of the streetlights abruptly stopped, he glanced up at the abandoned building they had passed. His eye caught the edge of the tarp. It lay loosely open, beckoning. *Tomorrow*, he thought.

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The wooden planks of the stage creaked but held. Trevor breathed in the musty air slowly as he absorbed everything around him. He surveyed the darkened theater, watching his meager light vanish over the empty rows. Lena was wrong about him. Here was his purpose, his goal. Trevor wasn't a pretender. He was an actor.

“Hello!” he called out. “Hey, out there!”

Remnants of his voice echoed back. Trevor took a step further on the wooden boards; they seemed sturdier than he thought. He put down his Blackberry and his camera on the edge of the stage, and paced along the floor back and forth, familiarizing himself with the view. How comforting, how safe, how oddly familiar this small dirty stage was to him.

Trevor looked out and imagined that stupid director sitting in the third row, wearing that critical glare. Not “developed enough!” What kind of comment was that? He was developed, only no one had discovered it yet except for him.

What kind of performance should he give? A song perhaps? He did a few musicals... Or a monologue? Looking at the third row, he saw the director sneer. Trevor frowned. Now how did that go? Stanley... he was talking with Stella about Blanche... it had been so long since Trevor did a monologue, and even for productions, he had always forgotten his lines immediately after the run...

Hmmm... In the state of Louisiana... In the state we have...

“In the state of Louisiana,” Trevor said aloud. The words faded and died. “In the state of Louisiana,” he repeated, louder, “we have the Napoleonic code according to... to what belongs to the wife also belongs to the husband, and –” he

paced, staring outward, getting the thrill of speaking and having everyone staring! “– if I have a piece of property, or you had a piece of property...!” He stomped his foot. “Something, something, something...” A line flashed across his memory. “It looks to me like you have been swindled, baby, and when you’re swindled under the Napoleonic code, I’m swindled too! And I don’t like to be swindled-!”

Another stomp of his foot-

He heard a long, sickly groan, as if his imaginary audience were booing. The wood buckled beneath his feet, sunk down, and broke. Trevor felt himself fall and he yelled in fright.

His upper arms banged against the stage. Luckily, he had them stretched out when he fell so he braced them against the floor. The hole he had created was just wide enough to encompass his waist. He could feel his feet dangling helplessly. “Shit!” he screamed. “Aw, shit!”

Trevor made a move to lift himself out of the hole. Pieces of splintered wood clawed at his jacket and he stopped when he heard another groan.

“How the hell do I get into crap like this...Goddamn...” He saw where he had left his things and reached out, swiping his Blackberry before he could slip down further.

Before he could consider his options, Trevor pressed the redial option. Lena’s name flashed on the screen as it dialed and he watched, half-surprised. He had been trying to contact her for the past day and a half; of course, he would



think of her number first before anyone else's, he reasoned. Besides, her dorm was only two metro stops away...

When the phone rang four times, Trevor hoped that she wouldn't pick up and that he would try calling his program director, or even Joe (he couldn't imagine any of the women in his American group coming to rescue him), but then came Lena's voice. "Trevor?"

The relief was so great Trevor almost screamed into the phone. "Lena!"

"Stop calling me." With that, she hung up.

Immediately, Trevor redialed. "What?" Lena demanded when she answered after ten rings.

"Lena, I'm hurt."

"You should feel hurt."

"No, I mean, I'm trapped. I-I got myself into a bad situation."

Her voice softened. "Are you saying you feel sorry?"

"No, well, yes, yes, Lena. Extremely so. I made a mistake. You-" his legs swayed beneath him, and he started hearing a series of sharp cracking noises around him, "-aren't going to believe this." His face grew hot, and Trevor became convinced that he must be suffering from some sort of oxygen deprivation or asbestos poisoning and that his end was imminent. Anything other than this keen embarrassment.

"What is that sound in the background?"

“Lena, I’m trapped in the theater and I think it’s going to collapse and please could you help me out because I’m really, terribly sorry and I’ve majorly screwed up.” The words came out in such a rush that Trevor had to take another breath when he finished.

Silence. Did she hang up again or had their connection been cut off? After a few moments, Lena asked, “What did you do?”

“I went infiltra- exploring that theater we passed by.”

“Exploring-?”

Her inability to grasp the situation frustrated him. “I went inside the old theater. Y’know, the building with the tarp? And now I got myself trapped.”

“Where? Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think so-” Trevor felt a particularly long piece of broken wood dig into his back and winced. “Maybe a bit. I don’t know. And I don’t know how long I can stay like this.”

“But where are you in there?”

“I’m... I’m on the stage.” Trevor braced himself. “I fell through.”

It was another small miracle that she didn’t burst out laughing. Instead, her voice rose. “You fell *though*? You went through the stage?”

“Yeah, stupid, I know-”

“I am leaving right now,” she said seriously. “Please, hold on.” The phone clicked off.

Trevor stared at the phone, amazed at her response. After refusing to speak to him for so long, and then dropping everything to run to his side when he got into such a stupid situation ... Trevor smiled. Even after he had called her a whore, she would still come back to him.

The series of cracking sounds continued around him, but his stomach no longer jumped when he heard it. Lena was coming for him. She didn't care that he had acted like a jerk. He should really apologize when she arrived. But she was coming for him. Why had he ever been jealous of a stupid Texan gnome like Harold?

*Because,* a voice whispered, *she liked him better.* And why? Lena liked those Texans because they were trying to fix this ruined city, while Trevor was nothing but a tourist. Even if Harold turned out to be a fraud and Char a fanatic, at least Lena thought they had a reason to be there.

All this introspection sickened Trevor; it made him too aware of that second self within him, the one that felt hurt with every criticism Lena made. Why did it suddenly matter to him what Lena thought? *Could she be...?* Trevor couldn't even finish the sentence. But the idea coated him like the surrounding dust.

Looking up, he pressed his lips together. Carefully, he surveyed the bits of wood and dust bunnies that clung to his sleeves. With slow, leisurely movements, he flicked them off. The thought of Lena, with her face red from the cold and her hurry, filled him with relief and excitement.

As the minutes passed, Trevor went over every single detail of their relationship. Memories came to him in glowing shades, colored with newfound care. He saw her that first day at the University, with her head bowed in submission. Then her again in the apartment, making the bed. Her laugh. Her smile.

A second light began to glow from the rear of the house, and Lena came running in, holding a flashlight. Trevor stopped picking at his clothes and called her name, overjoyed but still embarrassed.

“This is definitely a five-year-old moment right now,” he joked.

“Trevor!” Lena ran down the aisle but then stopped at the stairs. “How do I-?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking,” Trevor said, “the steps should be safe, and the area right in front of them too. You could grab my hand and pull me out if you stood at the top of those steps.”

She nodded, mute, and put down her light, propping it so the light shined on him. Lena skipped up the steps, and with one foot on the top step and her other on a lower one, she positioned herself and stuck out her hands.

Trevor hesitated. “Take my stuff first,” he said. She gingerly lowered herself onto the stage and took his flashlight and Blackberry from him and placed them on the very edge of the stage beside his camera. “Now, here’s the tricky part. I’m propped up by my arms here, so you’ve got to pull me out fast, because

if you don't, I might go through. Can you do that?" Another nod and Trevor released a quick breath. "Okay then."

Lena reached out and grabbed his hands. She held them tighter than he ever thought she could, squishing his fingers and sending pain down his already aching arms. "On the count of three," he said. They stared at each other intensely. "One. Two. Three-!"

She pulled, gritting her teeth, and Trevor pumped his legs out at the same time. His weight shifted; he heaved forward; the wood around him cracked, splintered; she pulled again, harder; a loud *snap* was heard.

She fell backwards down the steps as Trevor fell on top of her and both of them tumbled and landed, winded, onto the theater's disintegrating carpet. A puff of dust rose up like it did in cartoons. They rolled away from each other, coughing heavily, and then each got up slowly. Trevor waved his hand in his face to clear the dust from his eyes, and saw Lena hunched over, still coughing. He stumbled over to her.

Lena cleared her throat and rubbed her lips with her glove. "You hurt?" she croaked, looking up at him with endearing concern. He shook his head. She took his things, picked up her own, and led him by the hand out of the theater into the open street. She made him turn around three times, padded down his jacket to remove any splinters and found a little gash where a piece of wood had torn his wrist. She gasped and took out her handkerchief from her purse, pressing it against the wound. Trevor noticed a tiny cut on her hand as well and searched for

an extra tissue on him. All he found was his scribbled-on napkins stuffed into his jacket, which he rolled up into a ball and tossed onto the ground. Trevor took a clean corner of her handkerchief to wipe the blood away.

“Oh, Trevor, Trevor, Trevor,” Lena kept murmuring the whole time, fussing over him. She smoothed back his hair and slapped the dust from his jacket. Dirt streaked her coat and face, and the night shadows brought out the circles beneath her eyes and the paleness of her cheeks.

He stopped her hands with his and kissed her. “I knew I could depend on you.”

“It is good to know that you are safe now,” she replied. She stepped away from his embrace.

“Lena, I’m sorry about last night. I was an idiot and shouldn’t have said those things.”

“I...accept your apology. I am glad that I helped...” She hesitated.

Trevor’s spirits lifted. “Let’s celebrate. I’ll get you a drink.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” He moved forward. “True, I messed up, but-“

Lena gave a quizzical look. “Of course you messed up,” she said.

He frowned. “Well, I’m not mad at you anymore. We’re okay now.”

“That is not it.”

“Then what is?” Trevor spread his arms and swallowed hard. “Lena, you know we love each other,” he said gently. The night cold hit his face, and he

suddenly felt more helpless than he had in the theater. Another pause. “That’s why you came.”

A look of bewilderment crossed her face. She blinked once, twice. Her lips parted but no sound came out.

Trevor was stunned. *Why is she acting like this?* He dropped his arms.

“I...This is ridiculous,” Lena finally said.

He inhaled sharply. *Ridiculous-?* “What did you expect, me to come begging on my knees here? Look, I got in trouble, and I called you. Doesn’t this mean anything?”

“It means that you don’t know how to stop yourself from doing stupid things,” she replied in a cool tone, crossing her arms. She bit her lower lip and turned around. “Good night.”

Trevor opened his mouth, but Lena was already walking away. And he knew nothing he could say would make her do otherwise. Trevor balled his hands, holding back his yell, and stuffed them in his pockets. A splinter remained inside one and pierced his knuckle. “Ow!” He sucked sullenly on his injured fist as he stared at her back growing smaller in the distance.

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When he returned to his host mother’s apartment, Trevor e-mailed Robby with the rest of the pictures he took and the message, “You OWE me for these.” His host mother was out late at work again and he spent an hour lying on her bed. He peeled back the sheets and pressed his nose against the sunken mattress, trying to

breathe in whatever scent Lena left behind. But all he could smell was the dust, the scent of failure. His fists hit the bed as he gave an angry sob.

On Monday, Trevor came to the University late to avoid any chance of seeing Lena in the hallway. For lunch, he went out to eat at a café, and when he returned, he hung out in front of his classroom, showing pictures from his camera to Joe. “And they just knock the whole place down afterwards,” Trevor explained as Joe flipped through the images.

“So that’s what that the covered buildings are about?” Joe mused.

“Yeah. Crazy piece of shit, isn’t it?” He looked behind Joe to the end of the hall, where a wider corridor led to other student lecture halls. He saw Lena climbing up the stairs. She paused at the front of the hallway, but then she left to take the next flight of stairs. Trevor leaned down to pick up his knapsack, intentionally ignoring her.

He watched the flow of Russian students returning from lunch. He wasn’t used to being at the University this early. Normally he would have still been with Lena. Trevor shuffled through the things in his bag, trying to push her from his mind. When he raised his gaze again, he saw another vaguely familiar face. Dark curls, tall boots, and those distinct arched eyebrows...Olga. Her name was Olga, Trevor recalled. Would Lena be jealous, he wondered, if he went out with Olga?

Olga noticed his stare and she stopped to wave. One of her friends whispered in her ear and both escaped up the stairwell before Trevor could do anything in return.



“She’s pretty hot, isn’t she?”

“Who?” Joe looked up from the camera.

“Olga. Remember her? During that student dialogue thing we went to?”

“Oh yeah,” Joe replied, uncertainly. “I think I still have her number on me. She gave it to the group before we left.”

“And you never called her?”

Joe shrugged. Trevor rolled his eyes. “No wonder you haven’t gotten any all semester.”

A thought came to his friend. “Hey,” Joe asked, “aren’t you with that blonde? What’s her name?”

“You mean Lena?” Trevor scoffed. “That gold-digger?” With a grimace, he snatched the camera from Joe’s hand. “I broke it off.”

## The Strays of Moscow

When I was nineteen years-old, I saw my first dead man. And he wasn't a relative either. That morning was cold, and the overcast sky weighed down on me. I took a shortcut from my host family's apartment, past the neighboring Japanese restaurant, down the treacherous ice-coated sidewalk, and around the corner into a little square that was some sorry Moscow excuse for urban planning. Earlier that fall, children kicked a soccer ball around in this little patch of brown-green grass and brick, so I'd assumed this was supposed to be a park. There hadn't been any children for an entire week, not since the bitterly cold winds howled into the city, so I was alone when I encountered the man.

Two benches stood alongside three stone tables with etched chessboard designs. I had never seen this set-up attract any chess-playing pensioners, though I had seen mothers sit there with string-bags and carriages, calling to their children in high, nasal voices. When I entered the square, a lone figure sat on the farthest bench from me. His body was hunched over; I thought he was sick. The colors of his padded jacket jumped out at me: garish orange and neon green. The wind blew and played with the black hairs on his uncovered head.

My parents had taught me to be wary of strangers, including unexpected, sickly ones, and so my first reaction was to backpedal slowly and leave. The only sound came from the twittering little sparrows above. In my pocket I had a baggie filled with *myusli*, a dry, bland mix of oats, sunflower seeds and nuts that

my host mother passed off as breakfast cereal. During my three months in Russia, I had learned that it was a cultural sin to refuse food from your *khozyaika*, and so daily I slipped my morning meal into my pocket to redistribute to more grateful creatures.

But that day, the sparrows remained in the trees, and only one cock-eyed, white pigeon hobbled around the square. Taking a hint from the birds, I clutched the *myusli* bag in my gloved fist and backtracked into the street. Quickly, I went around the corner, and, muttering an apology to the birds, I took the longer, fifteen-minute walk through the December cold. Once I entered the overheated University building and shed my layers, the image of the man on the bench eased itself to the back of my mind.

My daily routine continued uninterrupted: in my monotonous classes, I sat filled with a sense of despair that was surely related to that infamous Russian fatalism. For lunch, I went to the *blini* stand by the Novaslobodskaya metro station to get one of the huge pancakes stuffed with mushrooms and cheese. On the sidewalk before the metro entrance stood a row of grey enclosed booths that sold various items to the surging crowds. Bored Muscovites sat behind plexiglass counter windows, waiting for customers to tap on them. The booth by the *blini* stand sold an array of annoyingly bright flowers in bouquets and in clay pots. I remember that stand because of the Vietnamese flower-seller. I always took care that she didn't recognize the similarity between her face and mine. I considered it a way of preventing any awkward moments that might arise if she chose to speak

to me in her native tongue, a language that I could not speak myself. I grew up with a fear of Vietnamese people, despite (or because of) having two such people for my own parents. Back then, I considered them a social embarrassment and a shame, and I suspected they felt the same way about me.

After classes, during my journey home alone, I entered the park through the other direction and saw the man on the bench again. By that time, the entire square stood empty; even the hobbling pigeon had taken wing. This time, I could see more of his features, though not much. Whether he was old or young, native or immigrant, I couldn't tell. He wore dirty jeans and his coat hung too large on him. But it was his shoes' unmarred, leather shine that gave his status away. A newspaper sheet had plastered itself against his shin. After a few moments, seeing that newspaper, the realization seeped into me: this man before me was dead and truly dead and sat less than ten feet away.

Morbidly enough, I wanted to touch him. To place my hand on his shoulder and feel how cold it was, or, perhaps, to shout in his ear just in case it was a mere coincidence that he hadn't appeared to move for the last six hours. Fears about disease or blood contamination entered my mind and I picked up a pebble. Weighing it in my glove, I thought about what would happen if I threw it – or rather gave it a gentle lob – in the man's direction. And all the while a blabbering voice in the back of my mind raved: “You should call for help – no, don't – he might be a vagrant – a gypsy, even – get away from this, this *thing*...”

I dropped the stone and retreated once again, homebound and silent.

If I'd come back to an empty apartment, I wouldn't have been able to stand it – too many horror flick scenarios involving masked men and big knives were cycling through my head. Thankfully, my young host brother Pavel was at his computer when I banged through the front door.

I entered the living room and announced to his turned back, “There's a dead man in the park.”

For a second another vision from my overactive imagination came to me, and I saw instead of Pavel's ruddy-cheeked face, the oozing mug of a zombie or a demon. But then I closed my eyes, took a breath, and his kind face reappeared. He took this statement as a curious bit of news and scratched behind his ear. “Where is it?” he asked.

“On the bench. I saw him this morning and he was there when I returned.” I was still in my coat and gloves and pointed to the door. “Can we call the police?”

“You didn't touch it, or do anything to it, did you?”

“No.”

He propped his fist under his chin. “Maybe it's homeless.”

“I don't think *the man* was homeless. I thought that maybe he was, but his shoes-” My raised arm fell back against my side. “What will we do?” I thought I knew Russian well enough then, though I had the habit of avoiding the subjunctive and the conditional. There were no woulds, coulds or shoulds in my foreigner vocabulary, only the determined future and unchanging present.

“Maybe the neighbors in buildings nearby will call,” Pavel reasoned, “or another passerby will spot him.”

“But-”

Pavel folded his arms. “There might be trouble,” he said seriously. “We don’t know who he is.”

“So we will *leave* him there?”

My host brother could sense my distress and crossed the room. “It’s not our problem. The people who maintain the park will take him away. Don’t get upset, Emily. It happens all the time.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. Pavel stood a head taller than me, and I felt especially humbled at this moment, since this well-informed Russian teenager obviously knew something that I did not about a citizen’s responsibility.

*It happens all the time.* As if we were living in a mafia movie.

I remained standing, even as Pavel entered the kitchen and began rummaging through the cabinets. I tried to test the various meanings of his words. Was the appearance of a dead man a common foreign student experience? Was Pavel’s response based on manly reassurance or his way of comforting a worried American? Or did he simply not care, as long as I was safe and didn’t catch any diseases?

“Mama forgot again,” he wailed. The knot in my stomach which had formed since seeing the body loosened itself, and I shrugged off my coat.

In the kitchen, I saw the reason for Pavel's complaint. My host mother hadn't cooked anything before leaving for work, and there was nothing on the stove but the empty pot from the night before, which I had cleaned after cooking my meal. Pavel took out a packet of *grechka* from beneath the counter. "Want some?"

His nonchalance disturbed me. I picked up the phone in the hallway, ready to dial "09" for directory assistance, but then remembered how horribly I understood Russian over the phone and put down the receiver. Poking my head through the doorway, I watched Pavel pour a stream of brown grains, which clattered against the pot like tiny bullets.

"You make the *grechka* and I'll start the tea kettle," I said.

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In college I was an adventurous person, or so I liked to think. While my other friends went abroad to enjoy the sophistication of Western Europe, I signed up to go on a semester program to Moscow. No one could understand why. My mother especially tried to talk me out of it, categorizing Russia as a "politically-unstable country." But I refused to go elsewhere. Why? The nation's legendary image as a land of conflict and struggle beckoned to me, and it was a perfect rebellion against my parents, who had handicapped much of my life with their overbearing worries. To my delight, my stubbornness infuriated them; in their opinion, only Vietcong sympathizers associated with the former USSR. I sensed that both believed their American-born daughter had foolishly succumbed to feelings of

political entitlement that allowed her to be sympathetic towards their enemies, and she had forgotten the old anger that ate at her parents' hearts. After Professor Adderson told her and my father that Moscow was safe enough for him to bring along his own son, they resentfully consented to my wishes.

But mother's worries ran tremors through me. Beyond politics (though politics had formed the subtext of their lives as well as mine), my parents had valid fears. Yet part of me still retained a nugget of naïve self-denial. Of course, now I know life consists of a series of compromises between how you see the world and how the world sees you, which back then I only vaguely understood.

I had to call someone – someone with authority – about my macabre discovery. My program director, I thought, he'd know what to do, how to handle this. I dialed Professor Adderson's number and sat on the little stool next to the phone, my legs crossed.

“ ‘Allo?’”

“Professor Adderson-”

“It's George.”

“Oh, hi George,” I stammered, my determination thrown. “Is your dad there?”

“He's out. Do you want me to take a message?”

“Um...” I twisted the phone cord around my fingers. “It's nothing. I can tell him tomorrow.”

“Okay. You're Emily, right?”



“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll let him know you called.”

“Thanks.” I hung up.

When I went to bed, I dreamt of someone knocking against my window pane. I got up in my polka-dotted pajamas and pulled back the curtain to see the man on the bench, his face bowed and obscured by the shadow of the building. An unsympathetic moon glowed behind him and imprinted his sooty shadow on my rug. I somehow knew that my mind was dreaming and willed myself to wake up. When I pulled aside the curtain, there was no man, no shadow, and not even a full moon. Outside, inky night pressed up against the glass. I placed my hand there and felt the chill through my fingers.

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Pavel’s confidence in the inconsequential presence of the man on the bench proved true. The next morning, he had disappeared. I walked around the entire perimeter of the park, looking behind all the benches and around the stunted trees. A few sparrows, who must have missed me, had returned to their normal pecking grounds. They followed with little hops, their pinpoint eyes on me as they tilted their heads this way and that. I quickly emptied out my two bags of *myusli* onto the ground and hurried to class.

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Joe, Melissa, and Daisy watched me as I walked down the hallway reserved for foreign student classes. Joe leaned against the wall, returning them all to his issue of *The Moscow Times*, the English-language newspaper.

When I had reached them, I first thought they had read about the man on the bench, and so I blurted out, “What does it say?”

“Nothing good.” Joe gestured for me to sit on the steps beside him, and I dropped my bag. “What do you think of this?” he asked, cutting off my thoughts and pointing to an article that lay spread out on his leg. “Some Indian kids were stabbed in Petersburg.”

He pointed to the article. The headline read “Neo-Nazi Youths Attack Students.” On the front page was an unintentionally ironic portrait of the victim, a dark-skinned man with big eyebrows grinning at the camera. “Officials call it ‘hooliganism,’” Joe remarked. “This is the third one since we’ve been here.”

I leaned over to read. The attack had happened at night outside a popular club. A group of seven had come upon the man and two of his friends as they were leaving. Words were exchanged, and one of them pushed another. Several of the young Russians had knives and attacked the trio. The victim died from seventeen stab wounds; his friends also suffered serious injuries. The foreigner’s friends remained in critical condition in the hospital.

Joe let out a low whistle. “Another one for the collection.” He was the archivist of our group, documenting the world around us as if we were inquisitive adventurers and not a bunch of student-tourists banded together by our peculiar

interest in a failing nation. Once, Joe brought his findings to the University, a huge stack of pictures and articles of disturbing events that filled our lives with more intrigue and danger than they actually contained.

“That’s a keeper,” I agreed. This news, and the previous incidents, had justified my host family’s warnings about going out alone. After the first attack in Petersburg in September (two North Africans beaten by young *khuligany*), Pavel walked me to school for a whole week. My parents had called me, concerned, but I dismissed the incident, implying that I was undaunted by the everyday dangers in this unfamiliar country. When the second assault occurred the following month (a Pakistani girl and her Russian boyfriend), my family didn’t call, but I slipped the news into an e-mail, along with the reassurance that I was fine, which triggered another round of calls. After hanging up the receiver, I treasured the thought of every cent my parents spent on calling me collect so they could yell warnings through the cracking receiver; I hoped that eventually they would come to appreciate my stoic courage.

“Do you think anyone’s going to do anything about it?” Melissa asked.

“As much as they did for the last two,” Joe grumbled as he folded the paper, irritated as if these *khuligany* were from his own neighborhood. That was his habit: to pretend to have a personal stake in everything that happened in this country. “Good to know that we haven’t been hearing anything from Moscow.”

“Hopefully my mom won’t know about this.” Melissa rolled her eyes.

Joe smiled back. “Or else she’ll be plaguing Professor Adderson with calls like last time?”

She laughed. “Maybe this time she’ll remember the eight-hour time difference too.”

Joe and Melissa exchanged knowing looks, and I wished that somehow, I could share that confirmation of solidarity. So I turned to Daisy, who had not commented at all. “You worried about any of this?”

She hesitated. “No, ‘course not....” She brushed a lock of blonde hair behind one ear. “I mean, *we* have nothing to worry about, right?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. We exchanged a nod, but Melissa and Joe’s eyes focused on me. “Well, I’m sure it’s only a local gang in Peter anyways.” Words about the dead man on the bench came to my lips, but I stopped them. Shifting from one foot to another, I added, “You know, these things happen....”

I wanted to choose my words with care. In elementary school, I used the word “racist” against a girl and her clique who prevented me from getting the coveted last seat on the bus every morning. The word sounded so adult and foreign to us children, but it was enough of an insult to stop their harassment. That one day, I enjoyed my elevated social status that came with sitting by the emergency exit. The following afternoon, though, she and her lipstick posse had pushed me against the brick wall of the playground during recess.

“I asked my teacher what it meant,” she had said smugly, “and he said it’s when you hate other people that aren’t white. I like other Asian people, I just

don't like you." Ever since, I'd been wary about making similar declarations against anyone.

Sitting on the steps, I looked up at my fellow Americans standing before me. "Besides," I finally ended, "I haven't seen anything going on here."

My words ended their concerns. Melissa changed the subject, and I let go of my breath. "Well, we're planning to skip class after lunch," she said, "And head over to Victory Park to see the World War II dioramas. Do you want to come?"

The invitation surprised me. It's not that I had intentionally isolated myself from my peers, but my time was usually spent helping Pavel with his English homework or watching Russian soap operas with my host mother or wandering around the open markets to listen to the many languages flow around me. Most people have personalities that encourage social clustering, but I seem to be born with a fault, having the need but lacking the ability. Melissa, Daisy, and Joe had formed their own pack, and I had respected the boundaries of their friendliness. Standing there, I considered Melissa's offer. Another tourist adventure, but it was preferable to the usual two-hour confrontation conjugating verbs with our language instructor.

"Yeah," I said, with a casual shrug. "Why not?" I smiled and put my hands in my pockets to contain my eagerness.

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On the way out, we passed by my *blini* stand. The flower-seller next door had opened her tiny counter window and was handing a bouquet to a young child. She looked up at me, the tendrils of her fine black hair floating around her face. I pulled up my coat collar, feeling exposed by her inquisitive glance.

We ate in Kitai-Gorod at a deserted Middle Eastern café filled with dusty cushions and hookahs. After lunch, when the subway cars pulled to a grating stop at the metro platform, we all rushed to sit together in the first car before a million Muscovites could cram themselves in after us. Melissa linked her arm with Daisy's, which made them appear intimately Russian as they sat hunched together on the seats. Joe sat beside me and turned an ear to their conversation. Slowly, I felt the old babushka in front of me press against my knees. Her padded body, smelling of city streets and onions, moved in close. I shifted in my seat, wondering if the car was becoming overcrowded. Looking past her padded arm and the weighty grocery bags, I saw the people across from us also shuffle backwards onto the seated passengers behind them. A low, splotchy form caught my eye, followed by another, and then a third.

Pushing the babushka out of the way (my concept of personal space and public transportation etiquette had slowly disintegrated during my months abroad), I turned and saw what was creating the sudden Red-Sea split. Three dogs, without tags or collars, trotted lazily down the middle of the car, sending people backing away in all directions. The leader, a soot-and-dust colored mutt moved with quiet dignity toward the center of the car, his pink tongue sticking

out. More passengers crammed in behind them. After the initial intrusion, the dogs were accepted and as soon as the doors closed, the babushka in front of me eased her rear out of my face and scooted closer to the canine riders. Other people gelled around the dogs, until all I could see of them was the tip of the leader's black, wet nose.

Dogs were common enough on the streets. I had often watched one or two cross the six-lane main thoroughfares as if they owned them, or seen a pack spread out like lumps of fur and drool in alleyways or outside of metro stations. When we first arrived, we saw ten dogs all barking amongst each other two blocks away from the University. Daisy had been the most affected by their aggressiveness. She had asked Professor Adderson if pounds or Animal Control existed to take care of them. "If a government can't even care for its own people," he had shrugged, "why would they bother with the animals?"

Now Joe poked me in the side. "Do you think they paid their fare?"

"How did they get in here?"

"It's not impossible," he pointed out. "I mean, Kitai-Gorod doesn't have any half-mile escalators like other stations. They could've walked down the steps from outside and onto the platform."

"Do you think they know where they're going?" I wondered.

"They probably came in here because it's so much warmer than outside. I wish I had my camera. This would've been perfect."

The passengers shifted as the car turned and the dog leader tilted his head in Joe's direction. Next to me, Daisy had gone pale and pressed in against Melissa's side. For a few moments, the canine leader's black eyes assessed us. The other two dogs stared straight ahead, imitating their fellow passengers. We all rode in silence until the dogs left the car at Oktyabrskaya. A metro guard stood at the sliding doors and moved out of the way so they could pass.

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We walked around the Great Patriotic War Museum, our footsteps echoing. Its famous dioramas detailed cities whose names had changed as frequently as their governments: Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Leningrad (St. Petersburg), Berlin (before the infamous Wall split it into East and West). Their vividly painted backdrops featured hundreds of soldiers (living or dying), and obvious national landmarks were placed squarely in the midst of Fascist destruction. The details impressed us, from the shining colored lights that imitated the weather to sculpted wreckage that extended all the way up to the viewing bar. But I thought the artistry seemed Hollywood-esque: I imagined teams of men and women swarming over the spaces like they were Spielberg movie sets, tossing around bullet shells and draping the ubiquitous ratty army net just so, while artists on scaffolds let the propaganda flow from their paintbrushes. Joe paid the extra rubles for permission to take photos and used Melissa's camera to take pictures from every angle.

In a special wing of the building, we walked down the darkened Hall of Sorrows, whose entire ceiling glistened with tear-shaped crystals – one for every



Soviet life lost. Huge tomes set in glass cases held lists of their names. The Hall had its effect on at least some of us; Daisy sniffed loudly as we walked down the reflective black floor, and Melissa murmured, “Holy shit,” as we gazed at the millions of shards above us.

We walked up the hallway toward the red, tiered steps that led to a low platform where a Madonna-like nurse cried over a fallen soldier. While the others took more pictures, I walked over to one of the books and let my gaze trail along the row of names.

Joe stood by my shoulder. “This is incredible,” he breathed.

*Incredible in what sense?* I thought. *Incredibly sad? Horrifying? Expensive?* “Yeah,” I murmured. “Poor suckers.” I wondered how many of these soldiers ended up in those books because they were shot by their superiors for deserting.

Joe, who was well-versed in the gruesome details of Soviet history, instantly got my meaning. “I guess so,” he agreed reluctantly. “But still you never see something like this in the US.”

“Whatever.” I turned away from the books. Museums interested me; memorials not as much. On a school trip to Washington DC, I went to the National Mall and saw another infamous Wall: the one that commemorated the Vietnam War. At the time, I felt the divided dual obligation of being both American-born and a child of the boat people from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). I had touched the smooth granite, trying to conjure up some profound

feeling. Loss? Bitterness? Betrayal? Nearby, a white-haired gentleman had stared at me until, embarrassed, I quickly walked away.

My voice echoed in the Hall of Sorrows as I commented, “How much money did people invest in all of this melodramatic fluff?” Daisy spun around and charged toward me.

“You shouldn’t say stuff like that in here,” she hissed.

“Well, Joe and I were talking-”

Joe looked away. “Emily, let’s head out.”

Enraged over being cast as the insensitive one, I turned from the group and headed for the front lobby. By the time the others caught up, my apparent faux-pas was forgiven and Melissa suggested that we go out for dinner and drinks. That day was a Thursday, which meant drinks for only a hundred rubles at The Boar’s House. There was no question about where we would go.

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On the metro, I watched for the dogs again. Perhaps these animals were smarter than we had given them credit for; they could have an elaborate underground culture we had no idea about. While staring at the blank expressions around me, I pictured the dogs claiming certain metro lines for their own. I imagined them urinating in cars to mark off their territory. Rummaging for scraps at midnight in underground walkways between stations. Howling at the mouth of tunnels.

When I turned to share these musings with Joe, I saw that he, Melissa, and Daisy were engrossed in conversation. For a moment, I feared they were talking

about my outburst in the museum, but the topic was Adderson's final paper, and what clever Internet strategies could be devised in lieu of actual library research. I withheld my remarks as the cars shifted and jostled, the dim lights blinking.

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Years later, I realized that The Boar's House was a sleazy tourist trap that had sprung up when Moscow was building up a nightlife that catered to the growing foreigner population. Back then, however, I had assumed its Western feel was typical of many Moscow dance clubs. We grabbed a table by the tiny twelve-by-twelve-foot dance floor where the bright lights flashed and the smell of alcohol mixed with the odor of sweat and knock-off designer perfumes. We ate *pelmini* dumplings out of thick ceramic bowls and I listened as the other three chatted about classes (boring), our professors (dating), and the weather (freezing). The end of the semester approached, and the three of them began to reminisce about the past three months and what they would miss from Moscow when they were gone. Allusions to unfamiliar events and unknown nightclubs floated between them. Daisy confessed with some worry about how her boyfriend wasn't writing back to her, while Melissa and Joe teased each other. They laughed; I stirred the bobbing lemon in my water and smiled, thinking of interesting conversation starters. The man on the bench came to mind, but bringing him up for no apparent reason felt as mature as a toddler flourishing a new toy. So I sat back and eagerly listened to the inane chatter.

By ten o'clock tipsy office clerks and university students had clustered around the bar counter like it was the communal prop. Now all the drinks of the evening were sold at a discount, and Joe and Melissa brought over our first round of vodka-tonics and a pitcher of Baltika No. 9.

As the pitchers and empty glasses piled onto our table, the trio pointed out the other packs that visited their tavern. There on the dance floor were forty-year old businessmen who danced only with each other, red-faced and laughing. A rowdy group of Armenians occupied one entire corner of the room, and spent the night yelling and spilling beer onto any attractive ladies they tried to chat up. Two tables away from us stood the long-legged African hooker, nicknamed the Alleycat, who constantly bickered with her goateed pimp. At the bar was a reclusive set of English foreign language teachers, who, despite our common mother tongue, had been more unfriendly to the trio than any of the other regulars ("We're infringing on their territory," Joe joked).

Melissa noted the roving pack of Pakistani medical students, all "fresh off the plane." She sipped her drink and explained, "They're in Moscow for their share of cheap schooling abroad." According to her, these young men came in a last-ditch effort for the prestige that eluded them when they tried to enter medical schools in America or England. All of them spoke perfect English, and usually paid for drinks. "But don't dance with them," Melissa warned. "All they want is a free grope."

“But that’s all the Pakistanis ever want,” Daisy added. “Unless they’re afraid of catching something.”

“Are all night spots like this?” I asked, nursing my full glass.

“I dunno.” Melissa shrugged. “We’ve been to some, but they were all trance-house crap and nothing like this. Doesn’t this remind you of the Boulder back at home?”

“I guess.” This was truly a guess, since I had never gone to our college’s favorite watering hole.

“Anyways,” Joe reasoned, “all the other clubs are far away from the metro. I wouldn’t want to be caught walking home from one of the big places, or end up stuck in the same club all night.”

“Yeah, you’re begging to get mugged there if you do,” Melissa added.

Her tone hinted at something more. I said, “Have you -?”

“We had a couple of guys after us one time,” Joe said. “God knows that we’d been targeted. Those crooks can sniff money like bait.”

“Well, if we bothered to speak Russian, they might have not known we weren’t natives,” Melissa pointed out, hitting Joe in the shoulder.

“As if your accent’s good enough to hide that fact.” Joe rolled his eyes.

This newfound nightlife perspective triggered an uneasy feeling in my stomach. Either that or I had an unwelcome reaction to the vodka. I put my glass down and pushed it away from me. “Do they really come after the Americans?”

“At least they only want our wallets and not our throats,” Joe said. “Like those Indian kids in the paper.”

“Hey Emily,” Daisy piped up, “what do you think?”

“About what?” The stench of the tavern made my insides quiver. I felt the need to use the facilities, but feared what I would find there.

“About that thing. Have you-?”

I blinked slowly. All three of them had interested, somewhat glazed expressions on their faces. I gave a dismissive gesture. “Well, never. My host family’s been great.”

“But in general...?” Joe pressed, leaning forward.

I knitted my brow, pushing the empty glass back and forth between my hands. The man on the bench hovered in my mind as if in warning. “There was, actually, a man in the park...” I shook my head.

“A skinhead?”

“No, not one of those.” I poured the last of the Baltika into my glass. “Yesterday I saw this guy on a bench while walking to school and...” I paused, relishing the effect it caused on the faces of my peers, “he was stone cold dead.”

A simultaneous gasp. “Get the fuck out of here-!” Melissa breathed.

“Really-?”

“I thought he wasn’t when I first saw him.” The story tumbled out: the sparrows, the hobbled pigeon, the newspaper against his leg, everything. An

immense satisfaction filled me as I recounted Pavel's response and the vanished corpse the next day. My face, flushed already, grew warmer.

When I finished, the trio collectively exhaled. "And this guy, he was Indian too?" Joe asked.

"Well, I really have no idea."

"He could have been a homeless man, then," Melissa commented.

"He had new shoes on. Polished leather," I said in a hushed tone. "Did you think I should've touched him? But I saw the top of his head, and-" the detail popped out before I could stop it, "and he did have dark skin, now that I think about it..." The birds, the branches, and the newspaper were jumbled in my head. I tried to recall details about the man's face, but for some reason, I saw instead the vision of the stabbed Indian boy with his huge eyebrows.

"Good God, seriously-?" Daisy squeaked, pressing her lips together.

"Maybe he was an Uzbek," I mused aloud, gaining momentum. "There are some in the neighborhood." Images jogged up of mothers in scarves herding their children through the open markets; of a man sitting on the steps in front of an apartment building, smoking a pipe; of young boys stopped by police for their papers. All of them true, but then these fragments became newly significant, fitting together in my mind, as I used their presence to justify my reasoning.

Joe pitched in, fueled by my words. Yeah, don't you remember how empty the restaurant we ate at was today? (Certainly, y'know how people are....) And have you seen those election ads with those men from the Caucasus littering

on the ground and tripping up the lady's baby carriage? (You saw that too? That party has been running it for weeks, it makes me so mad)... What about being stopped by an officer, Emily? Have you ever felt unsafe?

No, maybe, sometimes (putting on a stalwart face). Isn't that the way the world worked here?

Conversation slowed down, along with the pace of our inebriated words. By the bar the Alleycat argued with the bartender. Suddenly, she threw down a beer glass, and it smashed against the wooden boards. The surrounding drinkers made a wide circle around her as if she was going to jump out and bite them. The bartender called for security and two muscled men grabbed her. The pimp raised his hands compliantly, but the guards tackled him too. The Alleycat screeched, her red nails flashed, and one of bouncers roared, clutching his arm. Everyone watched, as the second guard seized the Alleycat by the waist, threw her over his shoulder, and pushed through the crowd toward the door. Her mangled curses were soon lost in the throbbing music.

Melissa sighed deeply. "That's it. Ain't over until the whore sings." She pushed her chair back. "Time to hop somewhere else."

"Where do you want to go now?" Daisy's head fell into her folded arms on the table. Melissa pushed back the empty pitchers and took her friend's hands. "There's another place a few blocks from here. Let's go."

"Maybe we should take the metro back," Joe said, that look of concern reappearing on his face. "You okay, Emily?"



“Yeah,” I snapped. “Why shouldn’t I be?” The cries from the Alleycat remained echoing in my ears and my knees wobbled as I stood. Joe tucked my arm in his. “I mean, in case you were tired. You know...”

“When have I ever gone out with you guys?” I contested. “C’mon, we’ll be leaving for home in a couple weeks. I need to have one crazy night to brag about.” A laugh erupted from me, and I seized Melissa’s hand. “Let’s go to that bar, Mel. I’ll buy everyone another round.”

My offer was the tipping point and we headed out. Unaccustomed to drinking, I gravitated toward chairs and tables, but Joe kept a firm hold. Outside, the frozen air bit at our hands and faces as we clumsily pulled on our gloves and tightened our scarves. The Alleycat stood on the corner, resilient to the cold despite her miniskirt and tube top, yelling at her pimp. He, looking much warmer in his overstuffed brown jacket, pointed to waiting cabs by the bar, but she fought back, cursing him with a level of vocabulary beyond my grasp.

We crossed the street after passing the immense glass and steel block that was the Kursky train station, leaving plumes of white clouds behind us. We saw no one walking on that side of the street, though Melissa claimed the bar she knew was situated nearby. Outside the train station, a gang of six or seven dogs gathered. I turned my head to see the lights over the station illuminate their eyes with a yellow glow. My pace quickened. Overhead, only a sliver of the moon shone.

Melissa stopped us after we moved further down the street as she looked at the closed storefronts. “That place should be around here somewhere,” she thought aloud. “Hey, Daisy, do you remember from last time?”

“*R-rebyata...*” Daisy stuttered. I looked over, confused about why she would call out “guys” in Russian.

“We’ll be fine,” Joe reassured her, his voice echoing. “Those dogs are too far behind to catch us.”

Daisy went pale. She darted to Melissa, who strode ahead of Joe and me, and pulled her back until we could catch up. “I-I didn’t mean them,” she whispered. “Some guys are following us.”

Joe moved in front of me so I couldn’t see. “What are you talking about?”

“Joe-!” I moved around but saw nothing except streetlights and the stream of wailing cars racing alongside us.

Melissa pressed her lips together. “You sure?”

Daisy stood behind Melissa, her pale blue eyes widening. “I-I think they followed us from The Boar’s House ...”

“Don’t just stand here like idiots!” Melissa snapped. “Let’s go!”

“Watch your voice. They might hear us!”

The trio blocked my view of the street behind us. “Let’s head back to the station,” I suggested. “We can wait them out there.”

“No, no, no, hold on, we can’t make any assumptions.” Joe held my arm.

“They could be just a bunch of drunks going the same direction.”

By that time, I spotted the gang. There were four of them, more like boys than men, with stubble-less cheeks glowing from cold and alcohol. They moved in the smoothly arrogant way only Russian youths could, with their heads high and shoulders loose, commanders of their schoolboy world. One of them sported a leather jacket, and the others had black wool caps over their cropped heads. The gang moved towards us, talking not loudly, but distinctly. If I had known better, I would have told my peers that these boys were harmless, but I could sense the drama building up within them. This was the headlines coming to life, they must have thought. This foolish tension grew within me too and I braced myself. A word or two drifted our way through the winter air.

“Ilya, look at the blonde!”

“She’s cold.” Ilya, the one in the leather jacket, poked his friend’s side.

“Think I can warm her up, Yuri?”

The pack laughed. Daisy pulled at her flowered skirt and pressed closer to Melissa. “Maybe we should head back to the train station,” she whispered.

We turned toward the Ring Road, which was more highway than road: its five lanes stretched out before us. Even at this hour, the taillights of zooming vehicles left streams of red behind them.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Melissa protested, “that bar is practically at our feet.”

“But they don’t have police!” Daisy snapped. The interlopers were less than twenty feet away. The boy called Yuri saluted us. I could clearly see his face

lit up by the streetlight above: he had wide cheeks and a blunt nose that looked like someone had hammered it.

“Girls,” he hooted, moving in. “How’s it going?”

Daisy made a strangled noise, like a puppy’s whimper. Melissa placed herself between Yuri and us.

Ilya was leaner and tilted his head to the side as he extended a black glove.

“You there,” he called to Joe, “don’t you want to share?”

“Oh look,” a third one sniggered at me. “A dark one. Let’s buy her off him.”

As if waiting for his cue, Joe stepped forward. “Don’t touch her, you Fascist!” he shouted in Russian.

I jerked his elbow. “Shut *up*-“

Ilya’s eyes bulged. “*What?*”

“Listen to me,” Joe commanded. “Go away!” His accent hammered my ears. I cringed, balling my hands into fists.

The fourth boy in a red coat yelled back, “Are you stupid?”

“*You* are the stupid people,” Joe slurred, taking two giant steps. The leader strode up to face him, looking suddenly more sober and older than he first appeared.

“Joe, stop!” I yelled in Russian, but Melissa shoved me behind her and Daisy.

“Quiet!” she hissed. “Run when I say so, okay?”

Tears of panic welled in Daisy's eyes, but she immediately secured my left hand in hers. I whirled around to snap, "Stop it!"

"Em-"

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Ilya falling onto his back. Turning my head, I saw Joe with his arms extended as if stunned by his own actions.

"What are you doing?" Yuri demanded, his nostrils flaring. He helped Ilya up as his friends tightened around him.

Joe lowered his arms, his certainty slipping. "I said stay away."

"Who do you think you are, you stupid foreigner!" his friend shouted.

Ilya grunted something and lunged. His punch landed on Joe's cheekbone. Joe fell backwards, and Ilya jumped on top of him.

"Joe!" Melissa dived forward between the struggling men. Yuri yanked her away by the arm and she tumbled back into the dirty snow. The other three boys leaned in, their angry glares falling upon Daisy and me.

Daisy blanched, trembling like a poor animal in front of an oncoming truck. I grabbed her hand. My imagination took a dark turn: I saw Joe slumped over on a bench. Fear slammed against my chest and burst right out of my mouth.

"Go away!" I howled, my voice escalating into a shriek. "Or we'll kill you! Understand-!? *We'll kill you all!*"

My English threat shattered the tension. Ilya's followers stumbled back, their eyes wide. Ilya released Joe's jacket. Melissa scrambled to her feet, grabbing

hold of my waist as I kicked out. “We’ll kill you-! We’ll- we’ll-” My boots slipped against the slush and I collapsed into Melissa’s firm hold.

The Russians’ faces shone paler than moonlight, frozen into a state of true fear. Apparently, they understood me. “You... you good?” Yuri drawled in English, opening his arms. “*Ne nada*. No problems.”

“He is idiot.” The third boy gestured to Joe. I couldn’t answer through my panting breath, taking in the cold air so fast that it seared my throat and lungs. Melissa let me go. “No problems,” she quickly repeated.

One step, two steps, three – she was at Joe’s side, pulling him up and backing away.

Silence. I felt everyone’s eyes assessing everything about me with my unleashed and unexpected anger. Dizzy, I lurched forward; I thought I would fall-

But my feet held up and the hot and painful embarrassment shot through me, twisting with anger and shame. I put a hand to my forehead, as if I was sick or faint, and straightened up.

My return to sanity kicked reality back in place. Ilya shrugged the way Russian boys do, a limp toss of the shoulders. “No problems.” He turned. “*Suchka dyorganaya*.” Crazy bitch.

They shook the snow off their clothes, gave us condescending looks of disgust, and strolled away in the opposite direction. We didn’t know the rules, their posture seemed to say, and how pitiful was that?

After they vanished down the street, Daisy collapsed into blubbering sobs. Melissa lowered Joe onto the sidewalk and kneeled down, holding his face to the streetlight. I huddled beside her. “That fucker gave you a black-eye,” she muttered, opening her purse and taking out some tissues. “Is your lip all right?”

“Yesh,” Joe mumbled. His cut lower lip was the source of the blood, and Melissa stanced it with a tissue. Pink little pricks of ice glistened on his chin as his bloody spittle froze.

I searched my own pockets for anything to offer but found none. Feeling too exhausted to stand, I crawled over to Daisy. At first, she shrank back, but then buried her face in my bosom, hiccupping and shuddering.

After a minute, Joe lisped, “I’m shorry I acted like an asshole back there.”

Melissa stroked his hair. “It’s okay. None of us knew any better.”

“Yeah,” Daisy said hoarsely. “Anything could have happened.”

*Or nothing could have happened*, I thought. Feelings of self-blame clashed with a frustrating sense that somehow I had been nothing but a stray caught in a pointless scuffle. But how could I even begin to explain myself? I bit my tongue and let my guilt silence me.

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We dragged ourselves back to The Boar’s House and crammed into a crowded van, one of the illegal ones driven by gypsies. Joe sat in front by the driver, while the three of us squished ourselves into the back seat. Melissa pulled me in next to

her to be sure I wouldn't be jostled out by any sudden turn, since there were no seat belts. Seeing Joe's face, the driver laughed. "Rough night, eh?"

My offer to pay for the ride was refused, and instead, Melissa handed over a thousand-ruble bill to the driver and told him my address. Aside from feeble jokes about deciding to take a three-day weekend, none of us said much. I watched the flashing signs of the city whiz past the window. Shame weighed down my shoulders. I looked to the passenger seat where Joe sat; he looked backwards at me with his bruised, misshapen eyes. I wondered what he saw.

From Melissa's other side, Daisy smiled – pitiful and relieved at the same time – and I hunched over, balancing my elbows on my knees. Every couple of minutes, Melissa patted me on the back. About half-way through the ride, she sighed. "Wait until my friends hear about tonight." She poked me in the side. "Right?"

"Oh yeah. Right," I agreed. "We're a wild bunch, aren't we?"

We shared a low laugh. Perhaps my companions believed they had rescued me from an exploit worthy of Joe's collection. I'll never know. Perhaps they still feel ennobled by their actions that night, and this event is but one of the many self-glorifying dioramas they had constructed in their minds. It has become a monument in my memory too, but like many other monuments, I take away from it no sense of pity or awe or sadness.



The van dropped me off at the corner of my street. Melissa gave me an awkward hug that I didn't return. When they had gone, I ran gasping to my apartment, as if trying to abandon myself.

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