

## What We Keep

*Alikzandr Malakov*

**D**ear Mr. James Bright,

I am a private writing instructor. In my first year of college, I began my employment at Mr. Ames' company on a part-time basis. In addition to the teaching experience, I enjoyed traveling to each student's home, where I could understand them more on an individual basis. I continued as a contractor, allowing me the flexibility necessary to complete my graduate degree this past spring. On the morning of October 1st, I received a letter from Mr. Ames informing me of his dissatisfaction with my recent work performance:

*The purpose of our service is to achieve results for our students.*

*They expect improvements in their writing from your sessions, not*

*merely a list of recommendations for revision. Your lack of*

*initiative over the last few months has led to several parental*

*complaints and demands for reimbursement. Based upon your experience and exceptional performance with us over the past six years, I am willing to provide you with a final opportunity to express your commitment to your future with us. I appreciated your decision to come and work for us full-time after graduation and would like to consider this a matter of transition. A Mr. Gustell has been in association with us for some time, unable to locate the appropriate fit for his daughter, Natalia. I have been told that her material is due this month. She is, by every standard, in need of guidance and would benefit from your tutelage.*

In addition to the handwritten note were other documents: Mr. Gustell's address in Beacon Hill, Natalia's college personal statement, and the expected meeting time the following day.

I had expected to be briefed on the steady reduction of clients I was being assigned. Mr. Ames' warning, however, caught me by surprise. Pacing around my studio apartment in a nervous panic, I reread the letter, considering the chronology of the dates mentioned, and realized what had happened. At the onset of my collegiate career, I received a generous scholarship based on the merit of my creative writing. I had intended on becoming a professor after completing my schooling and so took on as many clients as possible to present my future employers with as much practical training as I could. At the time, I did not consider anything beyond completing their assignment. They often watched on in silence as I typed up their research paper or book report. I never heard a single complaint from either student or parent—least of all Mr. Ames. This business arrangement continued throughout graduate school. By the

time I earned my diploma and received the last of my stipend, I failed to hear back from any of my applications for a professorship and slowly began reevaluating my approach to education, starting with my students.

I discovered a sense of meaning in teaching that eluded me throughout my time in school. Instead of filling out their assignments for them, I encouraged them to try their hardest and write their own material. Even when they failed, their efforts brought us both a great sense of pride for their having extended themselves beyond what was comfortable. My favorite moments were when they realized their capabilities were substantially more than they had considered. My success had been tethered to theirs. This, I found, began to counteract the isolating nature I had developed as an artist. Many of the students were already known by their teachers and parents to struggle in class. Despite my efforts, little was written in these sessions. Several only attended with the expectation their work would be completed for them and never scheduled a second meeting. However, for those who did return, I felt I was genuinely beginning to make the impact I wished for. These few must not have been enough to satisfy Mr. Ames.

Gripping his letter, I searched for any hesitation in the stroke of his words. I hoped, with enough time, I could determine some alternative solution for reconciliation beyond changing my current methodology. I remember a tightness in my chest and a steady migraine building at the back of my head. I lay on the couch. When reading the words became too much of a strain, I closed my eyes and repeated Mr. Ames' words out loud: *The purpose of our service is to achieve results.... They expect improvements.... Your lack of initiative.... A final opportunity....* I listened for any shift in the cadence of his sentences—one unintentional, one telling me there was some possibility for discussion and explanation—but I only heard my voice growing more desperate each time. Briefly, I opened my eyes to the rest of the documents on the counter at the top of a

pile of bills. I shut my eyes again and folded the letter, placing it in my pocket. The market was tight. My scholarship had kept me out of debt, but I had little savings. I decided to rest, waiting for the pain in my head to stop.

I nodded off and awoke with the lingering fantasy of abandoning my duties and the last remaining part of my dream to teach. It was late evening and my head was still pounding. Neither had I discovered anything of worth in Mr. Ames' words nor had I attempted to review Natalia's paper. The pink glow of the sun faded from my room. I turned on the light by the door to see the documents still awaiting me, reminding me of their existence. Forcing myself up from between the leather cushions I made my way into the kitchen. I heated some coffee and opened her statement. Out of self-preservation, I edited her writing repeatedly until the morning. It was the smell of dew through the cracked window and the blue mist rolling over the tar atop neighboring tenements that alerted me to the day.

I arrived at the Gustell residence at 4 P.M., having decided that I would do everything in my power to assist Natalia, but I would not forge any material, regardless of the threat to my job. I refused to give up the last remaining element of my original aspiration to become a professor—the satisfaction of seeing a student succeed through constant trials. Teaching is always a matter of meeting the individual where they are and providing guiding questions that inspire them to think for themselves. These are values I've recently been reminded of since graduating—ones I carry with me; inspired by those who taught me when I was first learning, growing up in Dorchester. Mr. Gustell welcomed me with a brief tour of his red-brick townhouse. He wore a light gray pinstripe suit and polished brown monk strap shoes which shone beneath the crystal

chandelier hanging in the foyer. Motioning toward the drawing room where I'd meet Natalia, he led me up the stairs into his office.

The room was small and gleamed with lacquer. "My daughter," Mr. Gustell said, leaning against the front of his desk, "is particular about her work, and I am particular about with whom she works." In his light suit, he stood apart from the dark millwork. With his dark green eyes, he looked me over from the lace of my shoes, up the creases of my pants, to the folds of my lapels. Between us on the wall hung a singular photo of Mr. Gustell and an especially tall woman, who I took to be his wife. They posed in the stands, dressed in cricket sweaters. "Mr. Brooks," he continued, as his eyes raised past my collar and his gaze met mine, "Mr. Ames and I have had a long dialogue about what is best for Natalia, and he's assured me the three of us are in agreement."

"Yes," I heard myself say. My voice sounded strange in the tight space. The thick carpet, the wall of books, and the coffered ceilings dampened my voice—as if smothering it from identifiability. Confronted by the reality of defying Mr. Ames and Mr. Gustell, and by abiding my resolution, I felt an indeterminable unease ripple through my body. I paused, fearful of the pull of something beyond me, that might sever me from my oath to myself if I spoke much more.

Mr. Gustell pushed himself up and walked over to me, standing by the doorway. "What did you study at Dartmouth? I had several friends at Tuck. They used to come down to New Jersey for Princeton's finance talks."

"My Master's was in Writing and Literature, Mr. Gus-tell."

He straightened up, took one step back toward his desk, then faced me. "*Goo*-stell, Mr. Brooks," he enunciated slowly, with delight. "Do you know where it's from?"

"Is it French?" I asked, pulling back my shoulders to mirror his posture.

He shook his head. “English! It’s English, Mr. Brooks,” he laughed. “Anyway,” he said, his face relaxing, “I took a creative writing class back in undergrad—Writing the Other, my professor called it. I learned so much in that course,” he said, moving back behind his desk and taking a seat. “When I went back to my core lectures, I saw everything differently! The world was no longer dictated purely by monetary interests—passion and expression... everything you do... that’s where true meaning comes from. Now I’m not sure my writing ever improved much, but that lens, that way of looking at things, *I* feel, is the reason I am here today... why *you’re* here today and not another one of those jokers,” he said, slapping his hand against his desk. After a moment, he pulled out a file from a drawer. Tapping the manilla folder on his palm, he looked back at me. “I’ve written down some notes. Consult them as you like.” He handed me the document. “What matters most is her voice. She can be quiet with people she is not familiar with. The others,” he began, gesturing to me in a vague, impersonal manner, “just wrote something and handed it to me.” He stopped, shook his head, and turned away from me. The tall back of his chair concealed the majority of his body.

While I waited for him to finish, I glanced up at the library of bespoke case bindings, which by their spines, looked to have never been opened.

Eventually turning around, he said, “One cannot sacrifice the authenticity of the author.”

Mr. Gustell’s explanation clarified why Mr. Ames had decided I was the proper instructor to satisfy their particular situation. Mr. Ames’ understanding of my refusal to write on behalf of my students in conjunction with Mr. Gustell’s desire to retain Natalia’s characteristic prose ironically left me with no other approach than the one I had recently maintained, and the one that had resulted in my presence there that day.

“My daughter is waiting for you downstairs. The deadline for her submission is tomorrow.”

As he spoke, I discovered the true meaning of Mr. Ames’ request and felt the magnitude of my task. The same tightness in my chest returned from the day before.

“I have some work to complete myself,” Mr. Gustell continued, “so take your time and get it right. She’s worked with tutors most of her life, so she’s used to people like you,” he said, pausing for a moment. “You *did* review her work, yes?”

I wanted to speak out about the impossibility of his request but feared my words would betray me again.

His green eyes were unmoving and offered no option of rebuke.

I nodded.

He leaned back in his chair. “What did you think? I know it needs some revision, but I really feel she’s on to something with the camping trip.”

I felt the urge to navigate Mr. Gustell’s inquiry with extreme care. Natalia’s paper needed considerable attention, but I did not want to disappoint Mr. Gustell any more than he already had been. “I’ll be able to help her,” I said, plainly.

Mr. Gustell looked at me in silence. His head turned to the photo hanging between us and then back to me. After some time, I noticed a smile rise at the corners of his lips. He waved me off, signaling for me to close the door as I left.

I retreated down the steps. Reaching the first-floor landing, I stood before the sliding mahogany doors and considered reading the notes Mr. Gustell had given me. Opening the top of the manilla envelope, I stopped myself and decided to teach the way I thought was best—the way Mr. Ames intended me to. As I slipped the envelope into my bag, I wondered what sort of

impact I could even have with such a limited amount of time. Sinking my hand into my pocket, I felt the edge of Mr. Ames' letter. I turned to the front door; its glass body filled with swirling iron bars reminded me of the local prison I walked by every day after class as a child, and considered leaving. It had started to rain. My car sat on the curb, streetlights glimmering off its windshield. I sighed and opened the heavy door.

I hesitated briefly as I entered the drawing room and saw the extraordinarily thin frame of Natalia hidden beneath a baggy cricket sweater, sitting at the desk in the far corner beside an empty fireplace. She looked up shyly from the scribbles in her notepad.

“Hello,” I said, taking a seat next to her, “my name is Max.”

“Hi,” she said, meekly, looking back at her drawings.

“You're Natalia, right?” I asked, as naturally as possible.

She nodded and mumbled a sound of affirmation.

“That's a very nice name. Do you have a favorite team?” I asked, raising my eyebrows and nodding at her outfit.

She clenched her pen and started doodling again. I looked over and saw what appeared to be an intricately detailed cloud at the top of her page.

“Do you like to draw?”

She stopped and closed her notepad.

“I read your essay...,” I said, retrieving my notes from my bag.

She looked up at me through the black hair falling over her face.

“...and I think together we'll be able to make it even better,” I said, smiling.

Her eyes lowered. “I knew it wasn't very good.”



“I don’t believe that. You have a lot working here. Your setting, the Grand Tetons, is wonderful. Let’s take a look,” I said, reading over my notes. “You spend a lot of time explaining the history of the surrounding mountains. What most admission boards are looking for is that you overcame some challenge—that you learned something valuable that’s stuck with you.” I turned to her paper, “You do a strong job describing the environment but there doesn’t seem to be much of a conflict right now.” I looked up and handed her my comments.

She spread the sheets across the desk and began to cry softly. “I know I’m not any good. I’m sorry,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“No, Natalia, this has a lot of potential. Here,” I said, handing her a tissue from my pocket.

She blew her nose and dabbed the streaks running down to her chin. I waited until her breathing calmed. While I listened for her sharp little gasps to settle, I hoped Mr. Gustell would not enter unannounced. I remained silent, allowing her to start the conversation when she was ready.

Still staring at the damp pages, “They don’t want potential though,” she said, peeling apart the leaves of paper.

“That’s just not true. Can you tell me some more about the trip? Any details that weren’t in what I read?”

She nodded. “My father and I,” she began, exhaling deeply, “had only ever gone camping in New England, so we thought a trip out west would be a fun adventure. The summer worked best for his schedule, so we left right after my finals in sophomore year. Before the Tetons, we went to Yellowstone. We drove around the grounds for hours in a miserable fog and never saw much of anything. When we were driving to the Tetons though, because of how flat the land is

out there, we saw massive rainstorms but only in small areas, or at least that was how it looked. I had never been able to see so far without climbing a mountain.

“We stayed in a small hut and shared bunks with strangers. I got lucky and ended up with the only single room. On our first day, a safety instructor for the campsite showed us how to use bear mace and where to store our food across the grounds in case one wandered into the area. What I remember most clearly about his speech was how important it was to lock our door at night because even if our food is locked away, if someone has even a single snack, it may be enough to attract one to try and enter the hut. My father never listened to warnings like that. Still, the other hikers made sure our main door was always locked. Regardless, I made sure to lock my own each night for extra safety.

“We ate at picnic tables under a massive gazebo every day, so I struggle to really call what we did camping. We did have to make our own grill to cook, although we could always go into the main lodge and microwave whatever we wanted. When we tried to go hiking, even though it was the summer, we still couldn’t explore the areas we wanted to because of the heavy snowfall at the top of the mountain. A ranger we bumped into said it was uncommon, but it happens. We stuck to lower-altitude trails instead. At night, my father stayed up drinking and talked with some of the hikers in our hut. The others were able to sleep through their conversations from what I assumed had been years of experience. Even with a door between us, it was still difficult for me to get a full night’s rest, despite being sorer than I can ever remember being.

“In the last days before we were scheduled to head back to Boston, a man my father had befriended disappeared and left all his possessions behind. My father told me the man was especially strange: never answering questions about his family, or where he was from. Out of

curiosity, three days after he vanished, my father looked through a few of his things and found another person's faded name written on the inside of his sleeping bag. On the way to the airport, when I asked about the man, my father explained to me that it was likely he had gone into the mountains without any intention of returning and only stayed in the hut for the time that he did to make up his mind. I wondered—looking out of the window on the flight home—if he *had* somehow made it past the bears, through the snow, and to the peak, how beautiful the view must have been, and how far he might have seen.”

She twirled her pen and stared at her desk.

“Did you ever find out what happened to the man?”

“My father might have. I know there was some local report put out about him. I never wanted to know.”

“That’s a remarkable experience. Why didn’t you include any of that in your paper?”

Her head lowered. “It doesn’t feel like my story to tell. It’s also just sad and I learned about most of it second-hand, anyway.”

“I’m sure there’s a way we could—.”

“No. I-I don’t want to write any more about it, okay?”

“How about we approach this a different way? Why do you want to go—what is it you’d like to study in college? It helps to include these things.”

“I’m not sure.” She sighed and looked out the dark windows to the autumn leaves blowing in the wind. “I’d really just like to move somewhere different.”

“Let’s think about location for a bit. You’ve grown up in Boston, correct? What’s the environment like where you’re applying? Is it rural? Is it urban? Is it—.”

“I didn’t. Not entirely,” she said, opening her notepad to continue her drawing. “I also grew up in Moscow,” she said, sensing my curiosity.

“When did you move to the US?”

She started shading in her picture.

“The school is in the country.” She pressed harder into the paper, etching a dark blob into the bottom corner of the page.

“How did you come to decide on that?” I took out a piece of paper and started writing down what she told me.

“My father selected it,” she said, filling in the center of the paper with a grid. “It is by a forest though.”

“Did you do a lot of camping in Russia?”

She continued to draw, filling the grid with people. “My father took me for the first time when I came to America.”

I looked up from my notes. “When was that?”

“I was five.”

“And your father, he had been here before?”

She drew walls around the perimeter of the grid. “He lived there—here. With my mother. He came by himself and got me.” She started filling in the walls with windows and entrances.

I stopped writing and listened to her scratch through the paper as she combined and transformed each façade into a city skyline.

“Father decided I should keep my name when we got here,” she said, shifting slightly inside her clothes.

“Mr. Brooks,” Mr. Gustell called from the foyer, “may I enter?”

My back straightened.

Natalia looked up at me, shutting her notepad in a hurry. I gave her a soft smile, got up, and walked across the room. I opened the door to find Mr. Gustell carrying a large canvas bag of firewood.

“I thought I’d check in to see how things were going,” he said to Natalia, walking past me.

“Very well, father,” she said, with an equally upright posture, looking him in the eyes. “Wonderful idea, a fire would be lovely. The rain is making it a bit chilly. Don’t you agree, Mr. Brooks?”

Mr. Gustell set the canvas bag down by the hearth. “It’s the historic touches, Natalia. These windows are over a hundred years old!” he said, stacking the logs.

“What’s the point in embracing history if all it does is leave me freezing?”

Only her face seemed to remain of the young woman I had just been interacting with. I watched stupefied. As a matter of fact, her appearance also seemed to change with the way she carried herself, her hair pulled back out of her eyes, and her assertiveness which appeared to manifest from nowhere discernable.

“Mr. Brooks,” Mr. Gustell said, “what about you? Do you feel a bit of a chill coming on?”

“Yes,” I said, stepping toward the two. “A fire would be nice. Thank you.” I walked over beside Mr. Gustell, making it known that my assistance was available.

He waved me off. “Take a seat. Please, Mr. Brooks. I’ll only be a moment. Do not let me disturb you,” he said, retrieving a handful of kindling from a small metal box on the mantel.

“Continue. Please,” he said, turning to face me, indicating the empty chair.

I turned to Natalia whose lighter, yet similarly green eyes remained fixed on her father.  
“How about we start on an outline now?”

She stared ahead at her father.

“Outline?” he said, as sparks crackled. “I thought you two were working on the camping story, no?” Mr. Gustell said, prodding the wood with a poker.

“It’s a common tool for organizing one’s ideas. It also helps a great deal with the flow of the story,” I said, over his thrusts into the fire.

“Sounds like a wonderful idea,” he said, scraping the tip of his poker along the brick of the hearth, and setting it down. “It may expedite things to use the one I included in my notes. I believe we would all prefer to avoid unnecessary expenditures of time, yes?” He closed the screen and locked its clasp, and the fire began to blaze. “Mine already refers to Natalia’s latest draft. It would be impractical to start constructing an entirely new framework when one already exists,” he said, making his way to his feet. “I would like to ensure Natalia feels as little pressure as is feasible. She does her best when she is relaxed,” he said, stepping toward us. “Keeping to only what is essential then is the obvious and most advantageous route to take.”

I glanced at Natalia who began to squirm beneath her sweater and whose stare had calloused into a listless complexion.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Brooks?” he said, clapping his hands clean of soot.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Natalia’s attention break as she reached for her notepad.

“I believe you are correct, Mr. Gustell.”

“Right,” he said, warming his hands, “the fire should heat things up soon enough. One reason at least to appreciate history, wouldn’t you agree, Natalia?” he said with a laugh. “In the

meantime, would either of you care for a cup of tea?" he asked, looking partway behind his shoulder.

Natalia opened her notepad and continued to draw. Slowly, the scene stitched itself together: a bright day and open sky over a large courtyard surrounded by an expansive cityscape—the blob at the bottom of the page now a wandering shadow of the clouds overhead, encompassing crowds of people, rolling over the world.

"Natalia?" he asked, turning around fully.

As quickly as before, her confident personality surfaced. "The fire should keep me plenty warm. Thank you, father," she said, dropping her pen and closing the book before his attention had fully shifted.

"Mr. Brooks?" he asked, stepping across the room.

"That sounds delightful," I said, looking up at his eyes, feeling his insistence.

He offered the two of us a tightlipped smile and left, closing the door.

Neither of us spoke. I was at a complete loss as to how to proceed. The tightness in my chest constricted to the degree I could hardly measure my breathing. My heart raced and every breath felt more debilitating than the last. I rubbed my eyes and reached for my pair of reading glasses from my bag. I pulled them out along with Mr. Gustell's notes. Natalia continued to draw. My vision had become too blurry to determine anything beyond the simple black-and-white colors on her page. I removed my glasses from their case, cleaned them, and began reviewing his notes. Even with my glasses, I could not decipher his writing. My throat was dry. Natalia's eyes had begun to shift between me and her doodle. I feared she sensed my utter helplessness.

I tried to speak but my throat felt as though it had closed entirely. I coughed violently, my ribs aching as I forced out what little breath remained. “Has your father shared these notes with you?” I asked, hoarsely, passing her what her father had written.

“Yes,” she said, without looking up.

“I’m having some difficulty making sense of them,” I said, facing her. “Could you tell me what he said?”

She leaned over her desk, curling around her notepad, away from me. I waited patiently for some sort of response, watching the fire distort the shadows of the room.

“What is it you’re making,” I finally asked.

“The day I met my father... we came here,” she said, tapping the tip of her pen on the paper. “Masha wasn’t supposed to, but when she saw how he looked at me, she let him take me for a walk. Outside there were large gates. He took me through them and across the street to the river. I remember being surprised at how many people there were on the ferry even though it was snowing. He led me to the Red Square and asked me if I had ever been there. I said no. My shoes filled with snow and my legs got tired so he carried me on his shoulders,” she said, playing with her pen. “He carried me until we got to the cathedral with the spires that look like flower buds. I felt like I could see things differently with him.” She paused. “It had nothing to do with what I saw... it was how I was seeing it. On the way back, the snow stopped, and the sky was almost clear.” She pointed to a cloud. “That’s my father.” Her finger lowered and hesitantly settled on the shadow at the bottom of the page.

I found myself unable to empathize with the way in which she spoke. Her vulnerability had an element of pleading that moved and unnerved me. I asked myself if this could perhaps be due to her understanding the delicate position I was in with her father, and if this was her attempt



at telling me to accept the situation. I pointed to the shadow on her page. She looked down at my finger and then back at me.

“Is your mother here too?”

She dropped the pen and her hands retracted into the sleeves. “Mom is here,” she said, tilting her head down toward her sweater. “It was her idea for my father to come and get me.”

“Where are you?”

She looked back at the shadow beneath my finger.

“Tea is ready!” Mr. Gustell said, opening one of the sliding doors.

Natalia leaned in and whispered, “My father’s comments say that he wants me to write the story I told you.”

I did not shift to meet the echoing voice which filled the room. I felt like the subject of a drawn out game between Mr. Gustell and his daughter. *Is that all it said?* He had already mentioned as much. Was this some con they played on every tutor? My eyes lingered on Natalia as her face returned to its listless guise.

“That’s wonderful, father. Thank you!”

“Mr. Books, how do you take yours?”

My migraine returned. The room was dry from the heat. My eyes were watering, fogging my glasses. As I removed them, my skin felt as though it was cracking. The fibers of my shirt had become jagged needles and my hands were a clammy mess.

“Mr. Brooks!” said Mr. Gustell. “I understand you are deep in thought but surely you have a moment to enjoy a cup of tea, no?”

“Yes. Yes, Mr. Gustell. Thank you,” I said, taking a cup and facing him. “I was wondering, if perhaps I may speak with you privately for a moment?”

“Natalia,” Mr. Gustell said, “is that all right with you? This *is* your time.”

I placed the cup down and picked up Mr. Gustell’s notes.

“That’s not a problem at all,” she said, glancing between the manilla folder and her father. “You two talk. I’ll enjoy my tea by the fire.”

Mr. Gustell indicated to the foyer. “After you, Mr. Brooks.”

I peeked at my car through the window. “I apologize for my bluntness, Mr. Gustell, but for Natalia to complete her essay by the deadline, it is necessary we be allowed to begin work on a new paper immediately.”

Shutting the doors, “Is that what you wanted to discuss? We have been over this, Mr. Brooks.”

“Natalia and I have discussed the matter. Your recommendations, while accurate, are, unfortunately, in this circumstance, more inhibiting than intended.”

“I am not sure I completely understand your meaning.”

“Natalia does not feel comfortable writing about her camping experience.”

“Does she have another story she is prepared to share?”

“Not at this time. However—.”

“Pushing oneself is essential for writing, is it not, Mr. Brooks?”

“This is not that. There is nothing intellectually or emotionally constructive about this approach.”

“What would you have her talk about then when the structure... everything is already there and all she needs to do is write it?”

“I cannot say right now.”

“Mr. Brooks, how can you expect me to change my mind when you have nothing to offer in return? Maybe I was wrong,” he said, pacing. “Maybe you are another joker.”

“I do. You hired me because I could provide you with precisely that,” I said, pulling out the letter from Mr. Ames. “What I need from you, to do the job I was asked here for, is for you to permit me the critical space and flexibility to realize the success your daughter is capable of.”

Mr. Gustell stood still for a long time, his eyes wandering the room.

I thought about the chances he would fire me and just as quickly report me to Mr. Ames for my immediate termination. In that instant, I felt I had rediscovered my voice and was content to be dismissed for defending a student’s security and psychological well-being.

Mr. Gustell walked over and sat on the staircase. Looking at me, he picked soot from beneath his fingernails. As I mentally prepared myself for his response, I noticed his face had calloused just the same as Natalia’s.

“That *is* why you’re here, after all,” he said, breaking his meditative calm. “Natalia has a lot to learn about ambition from you. I’ll leave you two be. Please...,” he said, resting his hands in his lap, “do all you can for her. Remember though, there isn’t much time left.”

“Of course,” I said, in amazement and walked back into the drawing room.

Natalia stared at me from the fire as I returned to our desk.

“I’d like us to start from the beginning—on something new.”

She gave me a queer look.

“Your father agrees. He thinks that it’s best we write something you are comfortable with.”

She walked over and took a seat, sipping her tea.

“I was thinking we could begin with this,” I said, holding up her notepad. “You could write what you’ve been telling me about—about your adoption.”

She placed her cup on the desk and hid her hands in her sleeves.

“This is a perfect story to show your growth, how you’ve overcome such an incredible challenge and how you’ve learned so many valuable lessons from your experience. You mentioned how you would like to move away... Natalia, this is how you can make that happen. I promise you.”

“Okay, Max. I can try.”

“Thank you. Please then,” I asked, “would you tell me more about what it was like to be in the orphanage? The more you’re able to explain, the more I’ll be able to help.” I pulled out a fresh page, ready to take notes.

She looked confused. “What about it?” she asked, tentatively.

I moved my chair across from her. Her green eyes were red and puffy. Looking back at her, all I could see was an imagined expression of Mr. Gustell’s discontent.

“Do you still speak to Masha?”

She crossed her legs beneath her chair. “No. She wants to though. I think she and my father still send letters... holiday photos mainly.” She turned her head away from me. “It’s better... the distance. I think it helps,” she said, looking back at me.

“I see. Can you tell me more about the process you went through? Why your mother wanted to adopt?” I asked, writing down what she told me.

She pulled out the used tissue I had given her, dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. “She couldn’t conceive. They tried... many times... but they were never able to have a baby of their own.” Her breathing hastened again, and she started to quiver.

I continued to write. When I tried to think about what I was doing, all I could hear were the words of Mr. Ames' letter repeating in my head.

“If she couldn't give her love to a child she brought into the world, she wanted to make sure someone that never felt... she wanted to share her heart with someone. It just happened to be me she picked.”

“Your mother,” I asked, “is she—.”

“She died—only a few years after my father brought me here.” She started to cry. “I never thanked her. My father... he's all I have to remember her by—to learn who she was. I-I'm sorry. I don't want to do this.” She stood up and walked over to the fire.

I got up and joined her, no longer able to distract myself from Mr. Gustell's reminder of our dwindling time. Watching the roaring flames, I asked myself if I had managed to keep any part of my original plan to educate—what holding on to high morals had got me. I looked but couldn't find her eyes behind her hair and the shadows beneath her brow.

As if removed entirely from my body, I heard myself say, “If you want to get into college, you need to tell me everything. We have to do this. This is the only way.”

I have since stepped down from my position at the demand of Mr. Ames. I send this to you with the hope that Mr. Gustell's case against me might be dismissed in light of my narrative of events.

*Dear Mr. Books,*

*Based on my review of the narrative you provided, I believe you have substantial exposure to be found liable for intentional infliction of emotional distress. It is my recommendation that we*

*settle and do not go to court. It is my belief that any judge in review of your case will most likely view your actions harshly and without sympathy. I understand this is not the answer you want; however, I do feel this approach is in your best interest.*

*—James Bright, Esq.*