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SAMOVANETS (THE PRETENDER)

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by Matthew Louis Garrell

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2023

Abstract

The Russian word *Samozvanets* most directly translates to *Imposter* in English. However, for this thesis, I have selected the alternative interpretation of *Pretender*. *Imposter* implies the taking or assuming of another's position. *Pretender*, more personally, carries the meaning of presenting self as something one is not. It is through the lens of the *Pretender* that I examine the idea of what it means to be a member of a particular ethnicity, and to engage with one's cultural heritage. I do this through a collection of fictional stories, investigating various lives within the Russian diaspora following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I use this lens to present some of the various ways in which Russians preserve and redefine their sense of self apart from their home country.

The collection focuses its attention on themes of identity and nationalism to present the unique challenges faced by a modern diasporic community. *Shadows in the Field* sets the reader in a remote area of Russia and follows a young man as he attempts to pursue his dream of becoming a tailor in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, eventually leading him to immigrate to the United States. *The Distance Between Us* brings the reader to a dilapidated porch outside of a house party in Boston, Massachusetts where a Russian adoptee and a runaway discuss what it means to be free from the past and present. *What We Keep* brings the reader further into the home, following the experience of a private tutor called to work with a traumatized Russian orphan. *Moonflower* expands on the idea of "the home" by inter-weaving three time periods across Moscow, Boston, and London, into the journey of a young woman

seeking to overcome the grief of the sudden death of her mother, while attempting to establish independence from her controlling oligarch father. *The Pretender* concludes the collection with a Russian immigrant's meditation on masculinity, power, and nationalism in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Preface

This collection began as a meditation on my identity—a member of the last generation adopted from Russia to the United States—and as a moral response to Russia’s war in Ukraine. I wrote this to examine a people I am still learning to understand as I learn to understand myself in relation to them. These stories attempt to offer a doorway into how I have interacted with, and been a member of, the Russian Diaspora based in Boston, Massachusetts. It is my belief that there will never be a complete view, from any one person and or research, of this community. There is simply too much variety, disparity, and nuance within the Russian community (like any other), and this collection does not presume to fully represent anything or anyone. While fictional in their presentation, many of the events, contemplations, and interactions herein truly occurred. That is to say that this collection reflects my life lived in proximity to heritage, one’s people, and tradition without ever fully experiencing those things wholly.

The collection is entitled “Samozvanets (The Pretender)” as a statement echoing my own sentiments regarding what being Russian means to me. While I have met wonderfully accepting members of the Russian community in Boston, initially the majority of those I encountered expressed a complex, yet direct, rejection of my claim to be a member of the community. For many who immigrated to the United States pre- and post- the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a sense of necessary preservation of culture, history, and ethnicity was at the center of their lives. For many of those I encountered in this demographic, there was a complete dismissal of American values. Instead, their lives and the lives of their family members (including those born in the United States) were dedicated

to maintaining their interpretation of what it meant to be Russian. The majority of those I encountered who shared this viewpoint felt that unless you were born in Russia, were raised there, spoke the language, and understood its social, political, and historical significance you could not be considered a true Russian. As a naïve child, raised as an American by American parents, I thought country of birth and genetics solely determined national identity. Loudly professing my Russian heritage in English at my first Russian festival, I was immediately presented with the reality of my circumstance by the organizers and attendees. Orphans raised by non-Russian parents are considered, by many, to be orphans of the Russian people.

When framed within the scope of cultural preservation, my presence disturbed and insulted the majority of those I encountered. Despite this initial pushback, I continued to seek out means for connecting with my heritage. Eventually, I found a family of loving, open-minded immigrants from Moscow to teach me. Yet, regardless of their instruction and my own research on the Russian Diaspora, the feeling of being deemed a fraud, or an imposter, by those in the Russian community I first met never diminished. As time passed and I could better deconstruct their arguments against me, I found a truth in their words that stands at the center of this thesis. I may be Russian, but I will never fully understand the weight associated with that claim. The further I move from my American sense of self and closer to the idea of what it means to be Russian (if only to me), the more I am removed from both—willfully and persistently trapped in an “in-between”; moving toward the impossibility of being Russian, and away

from my American self: something familiar yet simultaneously alien and imposed.

Perhaps it is this notion of imposition that is so critical to analyzing identity in this context. While attempting to connect with my heritage I am, concurrently and unintentionally, removing myself further from both my Russian and American sides. The unique state of in-between becomes its own identity. In the analytical process and relative cultural isolation from either my Russian or American selves, I feel a sense of connectivity to this (third) sense of self. In this state of personal determinism—disassociated from nationalism—I find new appreciation for being an orphan of not only my birth parents, but of my birth country. The in-between I have found myself in, as a result of forces predominantly outside of my control, has allowed me the opportunity to envision an alternative sense of identity—one beyond cultural or geographical borders, and dissimilar from hybridity. My conception of identity places the human experience at its center and views culture and heritage as purely symbolic markers from which to learn as one defines self—a thing that is ever in a state of post-cultural adaptation.

I first noticed hints of this perspective while observing the children of Russian immigrants born in the United States. Those who were raised to exclusively preserve their Russian heritage in America without having ever returned to their “homeland” (due to socio-political reasons) felt what I believe to be a comparable sense of loss; not of something having been removed, but as a result of having been educated to believe that there was something missing—that

even if they returned, they would still be Russians raised in America. While distinct from my own experience, this feeling of loss remains for both—a sense of loss derived from a desire (a need?) to be accepted by, what one considers to be, their community. In recognizing this acceptance is unlikely to ever manifest, the loss one experiences progresses into the natural development of a post-cultural mentality (and eventually an identity).

The research associated with this thesis is unlikely to present new information about the Russian Diaspora. Instead, it attempts to bring attention, through a modern lens, to the lives lived within the Russian Diaspora. As each story is inextricably connected to my own experiences, what I hope to be taken away by its conclusion is an understanding of what it means to be approaching, or within, a post-cultural mentality. There is an unraveling of individualism at the breakdown of a hybrid identity that embracing post-culturalism can reinforce. Lastly, by integrating a post-cultural perspective into the analysis of hybridity, one can begin to reexamine the ideas surrounding ethnicity and nationalism as a whole. These stories endeavor to start that examination.

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Shadows in the Field

Mrs. Spiva tapped her wedding ring against the exposed metal of the steering wheel. Gripping its worn leather, she steadied the minivan against the persistent winds. The sky was overcast yet the highway shone from an indifferent sun. Hidden from view, its rays dispersed across the two-lane road, the homes lining the street to the east, and the farmers' plains to the west. "I thought the collapse of the Soviet Union was going to be a time for hope—a chance for something new! A renaissance of art and music..." she said driving through mirages, her gaze fixed on the blank horizon.

Adjusting himself, Mr. Spiva reversed his legs, placing his left shin over his right knee, and leaned in toward his wife. "How is it not? Raevskii's never had so many travelers."

Mrs. Spiva stopped her tapping.

Awaiting a response, Mr. Spiva stared at his wife.

"Last night's performance—the *final* performance—was a complete waste! What does Andrei think he's doing with these damn actors? Why doesn't he use some of the local talent instead of these traveling cheats?" She cracked her knuckles. "We performed on that stage together as children too. I get he's trying to bring something new to town but ever since he's taken over the theater..." she sighed and rubbed the crumbs from her eyes, "he's lost the spirit of the place somehow, you know?"

Mr. Spiva scratched his stubble. "New actors every few weeks at least keeps a constant crowd. We didn't have that growing up."

“No. And that’s why we met.,” she said with a smirk. “These actors don’t care though. That’s the problem,” she said, resuming her tapping. “You have to know the audience to connect with them in places like this. Yes, there’s a greater turn out but that’s just because it’s something new. Saint Petersburg, Sochi, Kazan... why don’t they stay there? You think these drifters are good enough to get a genuine reaction from anyone? If they were, why’d they leave? Did you feel *anything* by the end?”

Mr. Spiva switched his legs again and looked past his wife, out the driver’s side window. “I felt a passionate director’s attention to innovation perhaps override his ability to consider those in the crowd.” The van shifted from one side of the lane to the other. Feeling his bodyweight move in his seat, Mr. Spiva stared at the grassy plains that seemed still in comparison.

“Perhaps?” Mrs. Spiva spun the wheel, correcting against the battering gusts.

Rotting fence posts and rusted gates laid in the poured gravel by the road. The grass blurred with their speed until all Mr. Spiva could discern from the foggy windows were the tips of yellow—hovering as if above the fields, announcing the inevitable change of the seasons. “Yes, *perhaps*. That troupe is gone. Forget them. I heard the next batch he has coming are from Moscow. And I see what you’re saying about knowing the audience or simply performing for them. Andrei has certainly made it clear his concern isn’t quality with the people he brings in... but maybe that’s what the people want? Or maybe he’ll get lucky with these new ones and you’ll feel something more than this spiteful nostalgia.”

Mrs. Spiva smacked his shoe, knocking it from his leg to the floor. “If that’s how you understand my feelings... I think I’ll go by myself from now on.”

Mr. Spiva chuckled and sat up straight. Looking ahead to the narrow road disappearing into the distance, he closed his eyes. “Apparently Andrei’s ambition has reached the attention of at least a few promising ears. Vera, his second or third cousin?—I can never remember with a family that large—anyway, she said Andrei got at least a few of them from the Vakhtangov Theater.”

“If you believed her, she’s the best actor in all of Raevskii and greater than anyone Andrei could find at Vakhtangov, Bolshoi, or Mariinsky.”

“Anyway,” Mr. Spiva said, opening his eyes and lifting a cigarette from his coat pocket, “Ufa should be a nice change for the weekend. The city may be a hassle when it comes to you, but if you go to it...”

“You know what to expect. I’ve also been meaning to see what their center for the arts was like.”

Placing the cigarette between his lips Mr. Spiva turned to the back seat. “What do you think, Radovan? Are you excited?”

“Father, please don’t smoke in the car. It’s a long ride and I’d like to be able to smell the flowers when we arrive.”

Mr. Spiva lit the cigarette and turned around. Radovan focused on the small colorful houses to the east—wondering about the lives of the people that lived there. His father filled the car with smoke, returning to look beyond his wife, to the pasture to the west. Mrs. Spiva’s attention remained on the blank horizon, her eyes watering from the haze escaping her husband’s mouth.

The sky had cleared by the time they arrived at Ufa. The air was humid. Mr. and Mrs. Spiva consulted about their itinerary for the day as Radovan raced ahead, eager to see the botanical garden. For the last several weeks, since the start of his senior year in high school, Radovan had taken a devout interest in the state of his family's garden. He had been inspired by his classmates' intention on learning a trade in order to find work once they graduate. Some of Radovan's friends had already dropped out, claiming school to be nothing but a distraction from the practical training they could be learning as an apprentice. The others of his friend group, committed to a similar path, remained in school at the request of their parents—performing well enough to just narrowly pass their courses without incident. Many of the teachers even offered to waive these students attending class—believing their lack of commitment toward education negatively impacted the rest of the school, diverting finite resources from the more deserving pupils. Radovan felt uneasy about the entire arrangement but understood the limited availability of occupations in Raevskii. At times, Radovan wondered if the recent shift in the last year toward learning languages, history and literature made any difference or if it made more sense to return to the educational system of the USSR.

Mrs. Spiva had grown extremely fond of the perennials her son had planted. Radovan made it a ritual to water them every morning after completing his other chores around their small, two-bedroom house. Fascinated by plants of all kinds and eager to learn, Radovan knew there would be no future profession available to him if he insisted against his parents' advice and pursued his new

passion. Both his parents worked; Mrs. Spiva at the local grocery, Mr. Spiva as a carpenter for twenty years. Mrs. and Mr. Spiva also volunteered on their days off. Mrs. Spiva patched and sewed donated clothing for reuse at the community center, while Mr. Spiva assisted the new theater director, Andrei, with his productions. The fall was approaching its end and Radovan knew that even though his garden would survive, and the purple flowers of his sage bushes would bloom in the spring, he could not allow his thoughts to linger in fantasies for the unsuccessful future they would bring. After this weekend, he decided he would tear them up with their roots and plant them behind his school. That way, they could continue to grow, and he could turn his mind toward discovering a more promising path for himself once he graduates.

Radovan walked along the cement path through the botanical garden. Kicking weeds that had grown between the cracks, he stepped off into the tall grass. Dew cooled his ankles as he approached an unfamiliar bush of pink flowers. Taking a breath, he could only smell his father's smoke, deep within his clothes. Behind him, he heard his parents beginning to argue. He walked further from the path, around the pink flowers, and into the dense brush. Hoping to conceal himself from his parents for a brief moment alone, he stood in the shade and felt a slight chill throughout his body. Looking around, he noticed a narrow path of pebbles through the foliage. Following them, he watched the skinny trees lean with the gentle breeze—the streaks of light changing between their leaves. At the edge of the path, Radovan saw a spider web wet from the morning's mist. Unable to move around it, he watched his parents continue their argument along

the winding path through the web. At its center were the hollow shells and wings of insects he could not identify. He thought to say something, to call out to his parents for them to observe what he had found but was distracted by the spider crawling along a distant strand, returning from between the bending shadows and leaves to inspect if it had trapped its next meal. Realizing it had not, Radovan watched the spider spin its thread, stitching branches together, expanding its net. He admired the dark creature's nimble legs; how precisely they were able to weave something so beautiful and yet effective. Radovan thought about his garden, how useless he felt its beauty to be, and how he longed to find some use for flowers, some practical purpose for which he could learn to create elegance that could support him and his family.

While he thought, his parents had returned, shouting his name. He readjusted his eyes but before he could call back, he realized the spider's web had already caught a caterpillar crawling along the branches. He yelled for his parents to come and watch. From the cement path, they wandered through the tall grass and to the other side of the spider's web. "Mother, father, look!" The spider had begun to wrap the caterpillar in a cocoon. Strangely to Radovan, the caterpillar didn't seem to struggle.

"Honey, come on. Let's not watch this. It's disgusting," Mrs. Spiva said, indicating for Radovan to retrace his steps and join them on the other side.

Radovan watched in a trance-like state as the spider covered the entirety of the caterpillar.

"Radovan, son... let's go," Mr. Spiva said, glaring at him.

Radovan looked back at his father and the tired expression on his face. Radovan nodded and walked back through the brush, the hanging leaves and peeking sunbeams until he returned to where he had entered. The rest of the day Radovan thought of the web, the spider and the cocoon. That night, after walking around the city streets all day, Radovan asked his mother if she would consider teaching him to sew. She agreed on the condition that he attend the theater with her instead of his father. Mr. Spiva responded in a similarly curious way, Radovan thought, to the caterpillar. His father gave a vague sign of acknowledgement and dismissed the issue entirely. On Sunday they would return and on Monday after school, Mrs. Spiva agreed to give Radovan his first lesson.

By the time they returned to Raevskii on Sunday it was late afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Spiva had not spoken at length since their exchange at the botanical garden. Radovan drove the family car into town. Mr. Spiva sat next to him in the front with Mrs. Spiva in the back. Both had fallen asleep during the long drive from Ufa. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Radovan drove the quickest way home, past the typical off ramp from the highway that connected to the center of town and down a secondary street a few minutes further. The Spivas lived beside a railyard, at the southernmost edge of town. Radovan pulled the car to a gentle stop and parked on the street, mindful not wake his parents as he closed the car door behind him, and ran toward their home. In the early sunset, the cracked paint of their house seemed the structure's most definite feature. Its faded tan color reminded him of dry dirt as he approached the front door. Looking below the wavy glass bay window of their living room, he gripped the first sage bush he saw

as close to the earth as he could and tore it from the ground. Throwing the purple plant on the brown lawn, he turned around and removed the second and third with one hand each. He walked to the edge of the garden bed, where he had begun to extend it around the side of their home. It was his intention to continue planting to cover the side most exposed to the railway. The windows already had a layer of soot from the passing trains which required him to wash them at least once a week. This way, he imagined, there would be less of a need, and he and his parents could see something outside of their dining room window beside railway workers during the day and the blinking lights of the night operators. Examining the final plant, Radovan knew he could not leave it. The flowers would only distract him—reminding him of something that could never support him or his family. As the freshest among those that he planted, he grabbed the shovel from around the back of the house, and carefully unearthed the flower.

He gathered each of the plants into garbage bags and threw them into the truck of the car along with the shovel. First, making sure his parents were still asleep, Radovan then drove along the railways toward the school. Along the way, he passed friends laughing and drinking on the side of the street. He continued along and parked around the back of the school. Shutting the driver's side door and collecting the garbage bags, he dropped the shovel on the asphalt, waking his father.

“Radovan?”

“Yes, Father,” he said, walking around to his door.

Mr. Spiva opened the window. “What are you doing?” he asked, looking around, noticing the garbage bags. “We’re not at the dump, are we?”

“No, father. I’m just getting rid of the flowers like you mentioned.”

“Oh. Good. All right.” He looked in the back to see his wife still asleep. “Just be quick about it and don’t wake your mother.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Spiva rolled up the window and closed his eyes again. Radovan walked back around the minivan and picked up the shovel and the remaining garbage bags. Feeling like a criminal—like an intruder—he replanted the flowers out of sight and fled back to the minivan. He gently laid the shovel in the trunk and returned to the driver’s side door. Mr. Spiva had fallen back asleep. As Radovan sat down, he noticed his mother looking at him through the rearview mirror with a sad expression. For a moment, they stared at one another. Radovan was not sure what sort of emotion his mother was perceiving from him, but her sadness seemed to deepen into grief. Eventually, he looked down to insert the key into the ignition. He put the minivan into reverse and looked back again through the rearview mirror. His mother was no longer looking at him, but in the orange light, he thought he saw tears on his mother’s cheeks. He wiped his face of sweat and dried his hand on his pant leg. Feeling the sting of salt in his eyes, he drove home in silence. When they arrived, Mrs. Spiva quickly exited the minivan, opened the trunk, and retrieved the shovel. Before Radovan could open the door to wake his father, his mother had already filled the holes Radovan had left in the garden.

Groggy, Mr. Spiva woke and immediately requested his son to help carry in their bags. Relieved, Radovan collected as much as he could from the trunk and brought it inside. His mother sat at the dining table with a glass of water. Mrs. Spiva watched the sun set through the window. Radovan watched her, silent in the corner of the home, as freight trains slowed into the railyard. The sound of the high-pitched brakes rang in his ears. His mother sipped her water, undisturbed until Mr. Spiva kicked the half-open door into the wall and proceeded to clumsily drop the remaining luggage across the floor.

“Son, bring ours to our room,” Mr. Spiva said, stumbling over backpacks to reach the refrigerator.

Radovan kneeled to collect his mother and father’s things. Mr. Spiva opened the refrigerator door, filling the room with a dull blue light.

“Honey, leave that to your father,” Mrs. Spiva said, continuing to look out the window.

Both Mr. Spiva and Radovan turned to look at her. Gazing at the tracks changing in the railyard, disconnecting and connecting, Mrs. Spiva again sipped her water. Mr. Spiva looked at his son and then at the luggage. Closing the refrigerator, he swiftly grabbed what he could from the floor and kicked the remaining bags down the hall to their bedroom.

“Is something wrong?” Radovan asked, moving closer to his mother.

“You drive very well. I was able to sleep for most of the trip.”

Radovan looked out the window. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Spiva finished her water. “Can you get me my kit—pretty sure it’s in the pantry. I think I’ll teach you to sew tonight.”

Radovan smiled and went to retrieve her materials.

To Mrs. Spiva’s surprise and delight, her son took to the craft naturally. By the time Mr. Spiva returned for dinner a few hours later, she had covered the basics. By the time she went to bed, he had learned almost all of the techniques she had shown him. By the time she woke to prepare breakfast, he had comfortably familiarized himself with everything they had covered the night before. When she asked to see how he was training himself, he pointed to the laundry bin beside the dining table. Curious, she inspected them and realized every hole and tear had been repaired. Forgetting about breakfast, she worked with him, explaining why some stitches had been successful and how others were faulty.

Laying his toolbelt and workbox by the door, Mr. Spiva entered the dining room. He fixed himself some coffee and sat down at the table.

“Did I miss breakfast?” he asked, observing his wife and son review how to properly account for woven patterns when repairing different materials.

“N... No,” Mrs. Spiva said, realizing how sidetracked she’s become. “Just grab something from the pantry today. Sorry, dear.”

Mr. Spiva sipped his coffee. “All right.” He got up and opened a cabinet. “Son, something to eat?”

“Coffee, please,” he said, attempting to thread a needle.

“Put the ends in your mouth and spin them together like this,” Mrs. Spiva explained. “That way it’s so much easier when you try to get it through.”

Mr. Spiva returned and placed a full cup in front of his son and bit at a dried loaf of bread.

“I see!” Radovan exclaimed, rolling the thread between his fingers.

Mrs. Spiva watched her husband eat. He ripped the stale cuts apart before taking quick hard bites.

“If you want to learn, maybe Vadik will teach you,” Mr. Spiva said, with his mouth full.

“Can I—,” Radovan began, looking up at his father.

“He needs to master the basics first,” Mrs. Spiva said. “Vadik’s got enough to concern himself with as is. Radovan, just focus on practicing what we’ve gone over. When you’re ready, I’m sure the community center would appreciate another capable volunteer.”

“When you think he’s ready,” Mr. Spiva began, “have him help out, but let’s see if Vadik will have him... an apprenticeship or something. Who knows what could happen.”

“Son, what do you want?” Mrs. Spiva asked.

“Mother, is there any chance you can teach me at the community center? I’ll do other work too!”

“Recently, I’ve been working with a few veterans from Afghanistan. If you want to help them, that would free up some time for me. That way... we could make it work, I think,” she said, slightly hesitant.

“Luka’s father?” Radovan asked, resuming his stitches.

Mrs. Spiva held out her hand. “He’s there. There are others too if you’d prefer not....”

Radovan placed the needle and thread in her hand.

“Son, if you’re ready, I can drop you off,” Mr. Spiva said, standing up.

Mrs. Spiva gave her husband a confused look.

“Got a job at the school today. Radovan, let’s go,” he said, dropping off his plate in the sink.

“All right.” Radovan stood up and collected his textbooks, throwing them into his backpack. “Mother, I don’t mind seeing Mr. Noskov. I’ll see you there after school.”

Mrs. Spiva nodded with a faint smile.

Radovan looked back at her, opened the front door, and walked out toward the minivan. Mr. Spiva grabbed his things and followed his son, closing the door behind them.

Mr. Spiva noticed his son staring at the empty flower beds as he started the engine. “Were they sick?”

Radovan turned to face his father.

“Diseased... the plants?”

“Yes,” Radovan said, wondering why he lied.

Turning down the street and toward the school, “Good. They made the house stand out a bit too much as it was. Hard things to take care of, right?”

“Right.”

As they drove along the railway, the only reason Radovan could think of for lying was that he was somehow justifying his immediate decision to himself. His father might not have appreciated the flowers’ beauty, but he had several weeks to voice any objections and never mentioned anything. “Did you ever garden?” Radovan heard himself say, impulsively out of curiosity for his father’s words.

“I don’t need to have planted flowers to know that growing or building something is hard,” he said as he drove to the front of the school, “it’s maybe even harder to maintain a thing like that.” He parked the minivan and turned off the engine. “Hopefully you learned how important it is to learn the sciences from all of this. Now that this hobby is over, you should have all the time to focus on your studies. Tailoring... there’s some money in that if you get it right. Just don’t pass up your other opportunities in the process. Things have changed in this country. You don’t have to do what all your friends are doing. Maybe biology? Think about it. You might find out what happened to those flowers.”

“I will,” Radovan said, opening the door.

“I’ll see you tonight and... Mr. Noskov is doing a lot better. I see him now and again when I pick up your mother. You’ll be all right.”

“Thanks. See you tonight.”

The school had removed the empty desks from the classroom. Radovan found the increased attention from his teacher, Ms. Tsyganov, comforting on the surface. However, her seeming inability to dispel his suffocating sense of urgency to determine his future path made him doubt the significance of her care. Between instructions, he felt were the only moments he had to genuinely consider his next steps in life. His father's recommendation to become a biologist seemed to be reflected in his school's curriculum, most of all seemingly by Ms. Tsyganov's lesson plan. The most promising student in school was a girl two years younger than Radovan named Ksenia. She had advanced not only into Radovan's year, but to the top of the school's list in science and mathematics. She had even won regional academic contests and competed nationally. There were rumors she was preparing to apply for the most prestigious universities in the country with the support of the head of school.

During class, Radovan looked at his notebook and listened to the rattling of the air conditioning unit in the corner of the room. It was so hot Ms. Tsyganov decided to keep the brown curtains closed. Occasionally, the air would knock the drapes, spilling sunlight across the green chalkboard and yellow painted walls. Radovan felt the future was arriving too fast and that, like Ms. Tsyganov struggling to keep the room from the warmth outside, nothing he could do would work. At the end of the day, he walked out back, behind the school and plucked a branch of purple flowers. The thought of submitting to the world around him lingered in his mind. Feeling as though he would somehow be dishonoring the independence afforded him by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he attempted

to dismiss the thought entirely as he departed the school grounds for the community center.

As Radovan walked along the street, trains arrived and departed in the distance. Thinking of the prospect of attending university to study biology, he struggled to find the art and beauty in simply understanding how a thing worked. When he looked through a microscope at a batch of cells or dissected frogs during labs, he felt inspired by the intricacies of life. He felt the urge to build something himself. He wanted to live inside his art and see it worn by others and so rejected his father's desires. Feeling the heat of the concrete through his shoes, he struggled to see the feasibility of becoming a tailor and considered the creeping reality of his mandatory military duty. Cutting through the cemetery, he passed headstones and felt a burgeoning sense of hope for what Russia could become and wondered if it was the kind his mother spoke of in the car. He stopped beside a large tree, a few of its leaves already beginning to change into a light ochre.

"Luka, would you..." he said, turning to the nearest headstone, distinctly new compared to the others around it. "Would you have fought as hard as you did if you knew things would change this much? If you knew we'd end up leaving Afghanistan... a month after.... When I get drafted, and *I* fight for this country... what it's becoming... what it isn't anymore... does that mean we'd be enemies?" He placed the branch on top of the gray stone. "Maybe it's good that so much is changing... maybe that's what you would have wanted." He shifted his posture, moving his weight from one leg to the other. "I'm almost done with school. There aren't many of the teachers left from when you were there. Just not enough

money, I guess. I hope you've been able to reconnect with your mother. It must have been hard. I'm sorry. I—when it happened, I was too young to understand. I still don't think I fully do but if you were here... it's possible I'd be able to help you instead of always having you bail me out of trouble." He sighed. "I heard your father is doing better. He's so proud of you. I... I'm on my way to see him now. I'll stop by later and let you know what he's like." Radovan wiped the sweat from his forehead and continued toward the community center.

Mrs. Spiva was already organizing donations when Radovan entered the large glass doors. She had her hair tied back and the sleeves of her grocery uniform rolled up. Tables were set up throughout the spacious room with large plastic boxes stacked up behind them. Piles of clothing covered Mrs. Spiva's workstation.

"Son!" she called out with excitement from across the busy room.

Radovan walked through the crowd moving from one area to the next in a daze. By the time he reached his mother, her elated expression had changed to concern.

"Are you well? If you are worried about seeing Mr. Noskov—."

"I'm not," Radovan said, "I spoke with Luka on the way here. That's all."

Mrs. Spiva walked over and hugged him. "Let me show you to where you'll be working," she said, tightening her hold of him before letting go. "Mr. Noskov was in a good mood when I told him you'd be taking over for me today," she said, leading him across the room.

"Is he still in physical therapy?"

“No,” she said, turning to face him with a smile, “he’s all right... as much as is possible anyway. “He’s also been trying some new medications and I’ve seen him at a few of the meditation sessions.”

“So, the pain... I mean it’s still there?”

She turned back and continued toward a heavy-looking metal door. “He doesn’t talk about it much but... I think he understands that it will likely always be a part of him,” she said, stopping in front of the entrance. “He’s trying, Son. He’s a soldier. Throughout everything he is.” She paused, as if she wanted to say something more. “This way,” she said, pushing open the door with her full strength.

A white hallway connected the event space of the community center with the veteran support wing. Their footsteps echoed off of the tiled floors which led them into a living space with several large couches, armchairs, and wide windows. Several of the residents played cards or read quietly. Mr. Noskov was sitting in the center of the room watching television with the sound off. As Radovan approached him, he noticed the program was a documentary about France’s occupation during World War II.

“Mr. Noskov?” Mrs. Spiva said warmly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Hello again, sir,” Radovan said, moving between Mr. Noskov and the television.

“How was Ufa?” Mr. Noskov said, his eyes unmoved from the screen.

Kneeling behind him, “It was a lovely trip,” Mrs. Spiva said. “Radovan is picking up sewing because of it in fact.”

“I decided I’d like to become a tailor, sir.”

Mr. Noskov nodded. “Want to make suits? The finest dressed folks here are those on stage—they got something to do, something to be seen doing.” He chuckled to himself. “In the Soviet Union it was never about getting things done... only that you looked like you were getting things done. It’s crazy some people are surprised it collapsed. I’m surprised it didn’t collapse sooner!” he laughed and stomped his prosthetic leg. “Maybe if they weren’t such good actors Luka would be here.”

Mrs. Spiva took Mr. Noskov’s hand. “These new ones... the actors Andrei keeps bringing in... maybe they should read more about history instead of taking classes then—if they ever want to improve. That way maybe I’d be able to enjoy a performance here again,” she said, looking into Mr. Noskov’s green eyes.

“French actors,” Mr. Noskov began, turning to face her, “when they were occupied by the Nazis, they actually traveled into Germany to perform. They were paid better, had greater professional prospects—it created what we know today as French cinema!” He gripped her hand. “Those were people who knew how to take advantage of a terrible situation.... They say the French did nothing to fight back, in many ways they’re right but,” he let go of her hand, “they knew how to adapt, how to make something beautiful from tragedy—through acting! That’s what these fucking amateurs Andrei’s bringing around could learn from... what we should have learned from the USSR but no. We just know how to hide our failings until everything’s falling apart. Radovan,” Mr. Noskov said, turning to him with a look of sincere urgency, “there’s hope for you here now. There’s an

opportunity I only imagined; one I wished Luka could have seen... don't be afraid to take a risk. You want to be a tailor? Try it! If it works, that's wonderful! If not, you can try something new." He looked down at his prosthetic leg. "It's all something new."

"Mr. Noskov," Mrs. Spiva said, "I need to return to the floor now. Radovan, maybe Mr. Noskov can tell you about the meditation he's been practicing?"

Radovan smiled at her and Mr. Noskov. "I would love to hear more about what you've been learning about at the center, sir."

Mr. Noskov sighed. "All right, maybe you can help me up then," he said, offering Radovan his arm. "We should try near the windows. It helps with a view—really clears the mind I find. We should also turn this television off. If I remember correctly, they get a bit graphic with the scenes around D Day. Don't want to be spooking the others."

"It sounds like you two have things under control. Honey, please get me if anything happens. There are also staff around if there's an emergency."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Mr. Noskov said. "He's safe with me."

"Well okay," Mrs. Spiva said, standing up beside the two of them. "I'll see you both later." She smiled and exited back into the long hallway.

"Where to, sir?" Radovan said, accompanying Mr. Noskov.

Mr. Noskov walked slowly. To Radovan, it appeared he moved decisively, despite his seeming unfamiliarity with an artificial limb.

“Those chairs there will do,” Mr. Noskov said, indicating across the room.

Radovan helped Mr. Noskov into a seat and took the spot next to him. Sitting down, Radovan noticed Mr. Noskov messaging where what remained of his leg met the metal limb.

“Do they make more comfortable options?”

“It’s not the leg. Just... when I think about war—my time in service—it’s like I feel it... like there’s this wound that’s always open.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about the military but if it’s painful... I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s okay. Before you ask me though, let’s just breathe for a minute.”

Closing his eyes, Mr. Noskov exhaled. “Do you ever take a moment to look around town—really just observe things?”

Radovan inhaled. “I try to. On the way here I visited Luka,” he said and exhaled.

“I’m sure he’d appreciate that,” Mr. Noskov said, inhaling.

“For some reason the closer I get to graduating the more I reflect on the people here, the town.

“Attempt to clear your mind. Open your eyes and reflect on what it is your eyes focus on first.”

The two of them open their eyes and sit in the silence between them. Pages of books flip behind them. Indistinguishable chatter continues about an unknown card game among residents across the room.

“What did you see?” Mr. Noskov asked, continuing his measured breathing.

“The smoke... from the train over the houses. How about you?”

“That open window. Specifically, the drawn blinds blowing in the wind. What does the smoke mean to you?”

“I think it means—to me anyway—there’s always reasons to leave the place you’re from; there’s always the thought, always opportunities around you to travel, to run away, to pursue something more than where you call home. But there’s also always chances to return. What does the open window with the curtains mean for you?”

“How to close yourself off from the world without severing your connection to it. How to live apart and as a part of life.”

Radovan examined the man’s face—how intentionally peaceful his expression appeared to be, and how his eyes leapt from object to object.

“In the military they teach you to identify threats. You don’t understand how to fully depend on that skill... your training—conditioning, or re-condition—until you see combat. Now it’s starting over again. I’m looking... always looking... but I’m not sure what for. Something calm. I know that. Even when I find it... it’s so hard to focus on something that’s still, that’s at rest. Never got any training for that.” He paused. “All right,” Mr. Noskov eventually said, “one more deep breath and then ask your question. When we do, fill your lungs completely and then with one more breath you’re going to hyper-inflate them before letting everything out steadily, okay?”

Radovan nodded and the two took time to breathe in fully and exhale as Mr. Noskov explained.

“Now, please ask your question,” Mr. Noskov said, turning to face Radovan.

“I think the reason I’m so fixated on the little details—about the town, my family... everything—the thought about joining the military in under a year... it’s a lot to process.” He took a moment to collect himself. “I want to fight for this country. I want to fight for the hope you mentioned—the hope I feel now. I’m worried though that if I fight for what this country is becoming that I’m somehow fighting against what Luka died for. When I spoke to him, I don’t know if he heard me, but I wish I knew that he knew why I feel the way I do.”

“Why do you go there?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a hollow grave. You were told what happened, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All that’s in my son’s grave is an empty casket wrapped in a flag of the Soviet Union. Let it rot.”

Radovan looked at him in disbelief.

“If you find it comforting, please continue to speak to him on your own. But not there. The town felt it necessary to have a burial place for Luka. I told them there wasn’t anything to bury. They wanted to do some kind of memorial for him and the others that lost their lives in service. I told them no. I don’t want my son’s memory to be just one of many others—no matter how brave they may have

fought. So, we decided on a grave as meaningless as the conflict Luka lost his life to.” He shook his head. “No. I don’t go there, and I’d like it if you didn’t either. And to answer your initial question, I don’t think my son would mind if you decided to fight for something real—a change that’s happening, a change that has hope on its side. I think he’d be proud of you for that.”

Unsure of how he felt or how his face was responding, Radovan stood up and saluted Mr. Noskov. His thoughts were uncertain about what he had been told, but he knew he wanted to fight for hope, and for the freedom to let that hope grow. “Thank you, sir. And thank you for your sacrifice.”

Mr. Spiva waited in the minivan outside of the community center. He watched the sunset and families sitting down for dinner through the windows of their home. Radovan and Mrs. Spiva walked out in a rush.

“How’d everything go?” Mr. Spiva asked, turning to greet them.

“Radovan is eager about his military service,” Mrs. Spiva said, slamming the car door behind her.

“I have to do it anyway! I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” Radovan said, clicking his seatbelt.

“Radovan, listen, please really try to listen to what we’re about to tell you,” Mr. Spiva said, calmly. “The hazing is exceptional. It’s cruel. I’d use the term savage. Your mother and I share the belief that if you were to enter the military you would not survive.”

Radovan gripped his seatbelt.

“It is not an environment for people like you,” Mr. Spiva said. “We were going to tell you this on your 18th birthday, but I suppose now is the best time; we’ve secured documentation that shows you are not medically fit to serve. We’ve submitted it to the government, and they have accepted it. It’s done, son.”

“I don’t understand. This is absurd! It’s my choice. How do you know I wouldn’t make it through the hazing? Why would you do this?”

“Honey,” Mrs. Spiva said, “so many have lost their lives or been traumatized for life because of what they went through—not even considering experiencing actual combat! Do you want to end up like Mr. Noskov? Like Luka?”

“Now I can never know though! They had the opportunity to choose. I-I can’t believe you did this. If I went to get it removed, if it’s even possible, I’d be signaling to them that you did this, and I might as well offer you to the police at that point. There’s no fixing this! Fuck!” Radovan punched the minivan door, bruising his knuckle.

“You need to understand, son,” Mr. Spiva explained, “as your parents—as someone that has seen people die from the hazing, from suicide because of how horrible it is—it is our responsibility to protect you.”

“Aren’t things meant to be different now? That was Soviet times. If everything is meant to have changed... why should this be the same?”

“Somethings have changed rapidly,” Mrs. Spiva began. “Others... things such as thing... things have been so long-standing... those will not change quickly.”

“Learning about Communism was long-standing... and now we’re taught about American democracy!”

“Son,” Mr. Spiva said, “what we’re discussing never had anything to do with political ideology. It’s an entirely independent culture that I don’t ever want my child to experience.”

“If this is what you call protection, why should I try to do anything at all?” Radovan said, massaging his injured hand. “Aren’t I supposed to learn things through experience? How can I if I’m never allowed to try things for myself without you approving every decision I make?”

“Radovan, if we felt that way there’s no way we would have let you speak with Mr. Noskov,” Mrs. Spiva said.

“What are you talking about? He listened to me. He lost his son, and he still took the time to work through my problems with me. He’s helped me more than either of you two recently!”

“Son, are you sure that’s what he was doing? Are you sure he wasn’t just using you and your connection with Luka to help himself feel better about what happened?”

“You’re ruining my life! You forge medical documents to bar me from my duty as a citizen, and then tell me you’re not the ones really using me but instead it’s this kind veteran that took the time to listen to my insignificant problems—that you in fact encouraged me to talk to!”

Mrs. Spiva took Radovan’s injured hand. “A few more days volunteering there and I think you’ll see that we’re actually trying to save your life, honey,”

Mrs. Spiva said, attempting to maintain her composure. “When we get home, we can work on the clothes you haven’t gotten to yet in the laundry from this morning. The knuckle will be a problem but with some ice you should be able to pick up the techniques quick enough.”

Radovan removed his hand from his mother’s and sat quietly. Mr. Spiva, recognizing the change in the minivan, shifted the car into drive and pulled away from the community center. Both Mr. and Mrs. Spiva sat anxiously, awaiting a follow-up from their son. They had shown the entirety of their plan but with how unexpected the timing was for revealing it, they feared, in some place far within themselves, that their son may act impulsively and unintentionally turn his parents in to the authorities while attempting to correct the documents they had spent considerable money and resources on acquiring. They drove along the railway without speaking. As they passed the graveyard, they heard Radovan take a deep breath and prepared for what sounded like the moment before he continued the argument. To their surprise and relief, Radovan exhaled without saying a word. Throughout the rest of the drive, without turning around, they listened to the steady breathing of their son. By the time they arrived at home, Radovan exited the car and entered the house peacefully. Mr. and Mrs. Spiva noticed they felt much more relaxed as well. Dinner was cooked and eaten without conflict. When the dishes were washed and put away, Mrs. Spiva took out her sewing materials and taught Radovan as she agreed. Neither of the two raised their voice except to ask or answer a clarifying question.

Over the next two months, Radovan continued to volunteer at the veteran's home. However, during that time, he could not bring himself to again meet with Mr. Noskov. He felt trapped by his parents' decision and the suffocating sensation within him grew steadily. The call to serve disquieted his mind. His country was in the midst of redefining itself and he wanted to contribute in any small manner available to him. Even if his parents were correct about the hazing, he thought, he felt it was his duty to serve, and in doing so, push back against whatever the reality was of what his parents described.

In the evenings after dinner, Mrs. Spiva would practice with him until she felt he was capable of repairing the donated clothing. After the first month of volunteering with the veterans, Radovan started on the floor at his mother's station. He attended to minor rips as Mrs. Spiva took the opportunity to explain more complicated repairs as well as when to discard an item of clothing entirely. If the repair took more than a few minutes, she explained, unfortunately, for the sake of efficiency, it must be thrown away. Radovan realized his parents were right about Mr. Noskov after a few weeks. While working with another soldier injured in war, Radovan overheard Mr. Noskov verbally abuse other veterans and staff members for no discernible reason—repeating much of the same he had told Radovan about the missing remains of his son, how the town forced him to make a grave, and how he hates that people go there to visit the memory of his son. After speaking to other veterans that lost children in the Soviet-Afghan War, Radovan understood that much of what Mr. Noskov told him were, at most, half-truths. He understood Luka had lost his life when a mortar strike made direct

contact with him and two other soldiers. Unsure what to believe after the end of the official report, Radovan decided to find comfort in the positive moments the two shared as children growing up together. Radovan hoped that Mr. Noskov would eventually find his own way to the relative peace he had found in looking forward. Discovering Luka's bootcamp uniform among donated items five weeks after he and Mr. Noskov had seen each other appeared to indicate a change was occurring. Sadly, while Mr. Noskov did continue his attendance at meditation sessions, his interactions with others maintained a steady decline.

Unsure what to do upon reading Luka's name written on the uniform, he asked his mother for instruction. After determining the damage to be repairable, she told him to fix it like any other article—with the minor note to remove all identifying marks. As he stitched the fabric back together, his mind wandered to when and what caused each tear. Radovan had become somewhat able to determine the likely cause of each bit of damage he observed—from wear and rips to cuts. Luka's, however, was puzzling. Radovan had never worked on military training gear and Luka's seemed to have experienced some version of all Radovan had seen working with his mother, and some damage he'd yet to discover. As he completed his work, he felt like Luka was attempting to teach him about his experiences—about what awaited him if he chose to defy his parents' wishes. Looking at the completed uniform, Radovan was not able to bring himself to remove Luka's name patch. His mother noticed and agreed to instead return it as a gift to Mr. Noskov. Mrs. Spiva claimed that he broke into tears when he saw it and immediately blamed his leg flaring up.

At the end of two months from when he started, Mrs. Spiva believed her son had learned all she could teach him. He worked harder developing the foundational skills she could show him than in anything he had pursued in school. Mr. Spiva offered, upon hearing the news from his wife, to reach out to Vadik to see if he would consider hiring Radovan as an apprentice. Radovan appreciated his father's offer, but insisted that as this is to be his passion in life, he should be the one to contact Vadik. His father agreed upon the condition that he be allowed to drop him off on the way to the job site that day.

Vadik worked out of a converted single-family home with bright blue paint inside and out. A sign on the lawn stated that appointments and walk-in were both welcome. In a button-down shirt he pulled from the donation bin, Radovan entered the shop. Vadik was in the center of the room, drawing precise outlines on fine cloth from a list of measurements with a thin piece of chalk.

"Hello, Vadik. May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Is it time to think of graduation already, Radovan?" Vadik said, shuffling over to shake his hand.

"Soon, but that's not why I'm here today, sir."

"What can I do for you then, young man?" he said, examining Radovan's shirt.

"I'd like to see if you would consider taking me on as an apprentice? I have learned all of the foundations from my mother—I've even been volunteering at the community center, repairing donations."

Vadik thought for a moment. “Young man, is this your work? On the shirt, I mean,” he said, pointing to the stitch marks.

Radovan felt self-conscious. He had never had his work scrutinized before. His mother was always supportive and challenged him. However, she never criticized his skills or abilities. “It is, sir,” he said, feeling his chest tighten.

“It’s subtle, unpronounced... and efficient. It will likely hold until the rest of the garment is ready to be replaced. It’s fine work.”

“Thank you, sir,” Radovan said, feeling his tenseness ease.

“What do you know about tailoring?”

“Only what I’ve learned from my mother and the few things I’ve developed while repairing clothes.”

“You say you have learned the foundations—for sewing, maybe yes. It seems that way at least from this example. Tailoring—being a sartor—it’s very different work. Yes, we use similar techniques, but we are not repairing the work of others here. Yes, we do offer adjustments, but that’s secondary to what is core to us. What we do is create! We create something entirely unique to fit just you.”

“That’s wonderful! That’s exactly what I want to do, sir.”

“Have you tried yet? Do you know how to measure a person? How to cut the materials?”

Radovan realized how much of a gap there was between what he knew to be the fundamentals of sewing and tailoring. He shook his head, not even sure where or how he would develop those skills.

“I see. Those are what I’d encourage you to develop moving forward if you’re sincere about becoming a tailor.”

“Sir, I would be happy to work for free if you’d be willing to teach me.”

“It’s not about the money, Radovan. Not really, but I suppose in a way it has to be. It’s time. I’m the only tailor in town and I simply do not have the ability to teach and complete each of my orders. If you had the basic skills, there would be some justification for me to help you develop them, but as it is, if you can’t perform the simple tasks I’d need to assign you to make my workload more manageable, this just isn’t feasible I’m afraid. I’m sorry it’s not the news you were hoping for. But please, do come by when you need to rent a graduation suit. You’ve grown into a fine young man and I’m sure you’ll continue to refine your skills.”

“Sir, how would you recommend learning the skills you’d need me to know to make this feasible? Where should I go to learn this?”

“I trained in Moscow but as far as I know, there isn’t a specific school in town that covers what I’d need a starting apprentice to know. I’m sorry. I’m not sure how to help you.”

“I see. I appreciate your time, sir. Thank you and I’ll see you later this year for my suit!”

“Very good.”

Radovan left the store with a sinking feeling in his stomach and a growing sense of concern for his future. There would be no ability for him to travel to Moscow to train and even if he were to go, he can’t demonstrate the basic skills

any tailor would want in an apprentice. Defeated, he made his way home. Along the way, the railcars passed him with an indifference he almost found mocking.

At home, he explained what happened to his mother when she returned from work at the grocery. To give him something else to focus on, she suggested they attend Andrei's opening performance that night. Unreceptive, Radovan sat at the dining table, removed his shirt, and examined the stitches he'd made.

"Radovan, honey, you agreed that if I taught you, you'd come with me when the theater opened again."

Radovan grabbed his sewing equipment which he had started leaving out on the table. "Tonight isn't good. I have to see if there's anyone that can teach me how to tailor in town." He started to cut into the maker's stitches, eventually removing the entire left sleeve.

"Tonight *is* good because it is opening night. You want to be impressed? Maybe they're good. You'll certainly be impressed if they're terrible. You want something to laugh at to lift your spirits? I promise, if they're anything like the previous troupe... you'll be feeling much better." Mrs. Spiva examined her son's work and realized he had completely disassembled his sleeve. "Son?"

"I can't...!" he smacked the table, knocking his tools to the floor. "I have to learn this! I don't care about Andrei and his god damn show."

"Radovan! You gave me your word. Even though you won't be going into the military, your word is still your bond around here and you owe me for all the hours I've supported you. Now you need to support me. Are we clear?"

"Yes, mother," he sighed.

“Good, now get your things. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

“But...,” Radovan started, looking at the deconstructed sleeve on the table.

“You’ve got no other shirts?”

“No.”

“Grab one of your father’s and let’s go.”

Radovan raced to his parents’ bedroom and grabbed the first shirt with a collar he could find.

The theater was almost entirely full by the time they arrived. A spotlight shone off to the stage. Dark framed pictures hung around on the mostly empty set. Andrei eventually stepped on stage, dressed in a green velvet tuxedo and a slicked combover.

“The Soviet Union has collapsed and we are finally free to explore the value of the world, through science, art, literature.... Each of these informs our sense of identity. As a country that is in the midst of redefining itself, why not consider, for an evening, what it means to be oneself? What is the “I” in identity? For tonight’s performance, please enjoy “Identity Crisis” by Christopher Durang!” The spotlight faded and the lights came up, revealing the same photo of the same unassuming man in each of the frames around the room.

“I’ve read this one! That man has the personalities of like a dozen people inside him and his family goes along with the insanity until his daughter has a mental breakdown,” Mrs. Spiva exclaimed.

Radovan watched the opening minutes with genuine interest but was quickly shown why his mother was so critical of city actors. The material felt clumsy and forced. By the time the daughter had her breakdown, the audience laughed at how unbelievable the actress' emotion seemed. He watched with particular care for their outfits, how they seemed especially ill-fitting, a surprise based on the supposed care shown to the other elements of their performance. Their hair and makeup was the critical stand-out. Radovan wondered how such beautiful people could find themselves dressed so poorly. This question lingered at the forefront of his mind throughout the end of the show and remained there until he and his mother went up to congratulate Andrei and another successful night. As his mother and Andrei were talking, he heard himself say something about the costumes. He was apparently crass, as his mother immediately interjected, explaining how she had been teaching him to sew and he's become obsessed over the last few months.

"Well, if you ever want to get into theater," Andrei said, "we'd be happy to have your help keeping our wonderful actors dressed as well as possible!"

"Could I be paid for my work?" Radovan asked impulsively.

Andrei laughed. "I wouldn't have you do all of that for free. But tell me about what you've done first. Maybe we can find some way to make this happen."

Radovan explained what he had been doing to practice as he had with Vadik. To his surprise, Andrei seemed entirely supportive and hired him to begin work the following day. On the drive home, Mrs. Spiva complimented Radovan for being so mature and taking control of the situation, identifying the opportunity

and leaping at the chance. In a relative daze, Radovan watched the lights of the train pass in their opposite direction.

“Guess who got a job!” Mrs. Spiva announced as the two entered the kitchen.

“Oh! Did things work out with Vadik? That's incredible, son,” Mr. Spiva said, putting down his book beside a half empty beer on the dining table.

“No... it—it wasn't with Vadik, father. I—,” Radovan said, trailing off.

“Your son managed to talk his way into a job at the theater working with Andrei! He'll be taking up the costume department.”

“Costumes? Wait, what happened with Vadik?”

“He said I needed more experience as a tailor that is... I'd need to know the fundamentals before he can teach me because of how busy he gets.”

“I'm sorry, son,” he said, sipping his beer. “I know you've worked hard to get where you are but this job with Andrei... that's exciting too.”

Radovan took a seat at the table. “I don't really know what to expect but... I think it will help me get the training I need to go back to Vadik. I'm supposed to start tomorrow.”

Mr. Spiva smiled and went to the refrigerator for another beer. “Let's celebrate a little then! Just a bit after all, you do still have school in the morning.” He handed his son the beer and sat back down at the table. Mrs. Spiva poured herself some wine and the three drank in merriment.

After school, Radovan arrived at the theater unsure exactly what his responsibilities would be. He knocked on the locked door but no one responded.

Walking around the back of the building, he noticed a door propped open and an older woman smoking a cigarette on a milk crate beside it. Approaching her, Radovan recognized her to be the mother of the daughter that had the mental breakdown from the play.

“Hello, I’m sorry to disturb you, but is Andrei here? I’m supposed to start today.”

“Are you the new usher?” the woman asked, letting out a lung of smoke.

“I’m supposed to work on the costumes for you and the other actors,” he said, pensively.

“Oh!” she said, standing up and flicking her partially finished cigarette into the alley. “You’re Radovan! I heard about you. You apparently made an impression with Andrei last night. Come in, I’m Arina. It’s nice to meet you!” She kicked the milk crate out of the way and opened the door for him.

“I’ve never been on this side of the curtains,” Radovan said, walking down the stairs into a dressing room with large mirrors, lights and actors and actresses wandering around, practicing their lines, stretching, and joking around with one another.

“You didn’t act as a child? I thought most people here did.”

“My parents did. That’s how they and Andrei first met. Andrei and my mother were the two leads in a show together as children.”

“And your father?”

“He originally worked doing lighting and set design, but I think my mother convinced him to get on stage for the first time.”

“That’s very sweet. I met my first husband that very same way,” Arina said, reminiscing.

“Will I be working here?” Radovan asked, looking around at the limited counter space, enough for a few changes of clothes, wigs, and makeup sets.

Arina shook her head. “In the back,” she said, pointing to the narrow hallway that led to a dark wide door. “Costumes are in the back. There’s a workstation, desk, sewing machine—everything really just collecting dust back there.”

The two continued down the hallway into the back area.

“Who did your costumes last night?”

“Andrei. He’s a fabulous director—just overworks himself. We did our best with what we had, but now that you’re here, things should move a lot smoother,” she said, fixing her hair in one of the mirrors. “I laid the costumes from last night for you. Let me know if I can do anything to help,” she said warmly.

“Of course. Should I meet the other actors now or?”

“You should get to work. We’ll be around. Don’t hesitate to grab us for measurements or anything!”

“Thank you,” he said, taking a closer look at his new station. An old but functional sewing machine right beside a large table to disassemble and assemble costumes of all kinds. He opened the wide door to find a multi-floor closet, extremely narrow—wide enough for about two people to stand shoulder to shoulder, but tall enough to go up what seemed like 3 floors. A ladder hung from

a circular pivot joint in the ceiling. To reach the layers of clothing above, Radovan would need to roll the thin ladder around the room to reach anything. At the top of the chimney or sorts, he saw the sun streaming down into the dark space. Deciding to explore, he climbed up the ladder until he reached the top and was amazed to see out across the entire town. In the distance, railway workers were hitching up new cars and yelling to each other indistinguishably. Radovan felt like he had discovered a secret lighthouse, hidden from view—or perhaps only from him and this was what his mother and father loved so much about the theater as children.

Returning from the costume closet, Radovan got to work assessing the costumes, and what would need to be done in preparation for the show that evening. He was not sure how to exactly measure the actors and actresses so he attempted what would give him the greatest degree of safety, he thought, from accidentally destroying each costume. The first night he had barely had enough time to assess what would need to be done in the way of sewing by the time the actors and actresses requested their costumes for the stage. So, he resigned himself to bobby pinning everything in order to make things as form-fitting as possible. The subsequent days he worked through the specifics of how and what adjustments needed to be made and slowly made his way through each article. Andrei seemed happy with the progress, if only because it allowed him more flexibility to focus on the performance itself. Incredibly, the extra freedom Radovan's efforts afforded Andrei was almost immediately felt on the stage. The clunkiness the actors showed prior had mostly dissipated and their confidence

seemed to increase as well, with outfits that supported and encouraged their characters' behaviors on stage. Radovan felt a sense of accomplishment he had never experienced. His parents even attended together again, having heard the positive trajectory of the performers and to support his efforts as much as possible. This further enhanced his obsession with refining his skills. Eventually, he asked his parents if he could skip school to work. Happy that their son was so passionate, they realized the need to explain the importance that a degree school provides in society.

“Even if you go on to be a successful tailor, not completing high school will only work against you,” Mr. Spiva said, pacing around the kitchen. “Vadik attended a fashion institute in Moscow. If you want to become a tailor, please, consider formal schooling. The fastest way to get there is by finishing your studies. Do you understand?”

Radovan sat at the dining table without showing any emotion. “I do understand, father,” he began, “may I propose a compromise?”

“For what purpose?”

“For the purpose of maintaining control over my future,” Radovan said, looking from his mother sitting across from to his father who was now leaning against the refrigerator. “You used my love for you against me when I wanted to join the military—to fight for a cause I truly believed in... and still do. Now you insist that I reject the path that is showing promise for one that may only waste time when I could be gaining practical experience.”

“Honey,” Mrs. Spiva said, “I know working with costumes has offered you many new opportunities to grow, but working on clothing for the theater... that’s not practical experience a serious tailor would recognize.” She reached across the table and took his hand. “The experience you’re looking for—what we want; you, me, and your father—is to learn the formal lessons critical for a life working in fashion. Is it better to dedicate yourself to one option that may, at best, only offer you some of those skills? Or an educational environment dedicated to cultivating precisely the knowledge you’re looking for?”

Radovan squeezed his mother’s hand. “My compromise is not necessarily about what is best for my profession but is what is best for me as your child.” He pulled his hand back. “If you only ever threaten me and restrict my ability to explore my interests in my own way without the possibility for debate or collaboration... when I turn 18, you’ll find I may make radically different choices than what you ever thought advisable. I sincerely understand your actions come from a place of love, but if your intentions are to have me do precisely what you want in every way possible, why are we even speaking like this?”

“Tell us your compromise, son,” Mr. Spiva said, noticing his wife’s distinct lack of response.

“I stay in school and focus on my studies with the intention of applying for university at a fashion institute. At the same time, I continue my work at the theater in the costume department. If, by the fall I have a committed apprenticeship with a respectable tailor, I have your blessing to pursue that in lieu of a fashion degree. That said, if, for whatever reason, my master tailor informs

me that I require a fashion degree to eventually earn a full position with him, I agree to attend university.”

Mrs. Spiva looked at her husband. Radovan shifted his gaze between his parents for some form of reply. The streetlights filled the dark space between them with a blue hue. Gusts whistled through the thinning branches outside. The shadows of rustling leaves fluttered across the room. Radovan looked at his parents and the black spots shifting across their faces and wondered how he looked to them at that moment. Finally, Mrs. Spiva pulled on the drawstring of the light above the dining table, sending the blue and shadows to the edges of the room.

“All right, son. That seems reasonable to us,” Mrs. Spiva said, glancing at her husband for confirmation.

Mr. Spiva nodded and the matter was settled.

Radovan’s revitalized attention in school attracted Ms. Tsyganov who had only become more involved in each student’s university preparation. Curious about his change in behavior, as class was concluding, Ms. Tsyganov asked to speak with. After explaining his agreement with his parents, his teacher seemed pleased. Before leaving, his teacher shared some of the other success stories of those in his grade. When Radovan didn’t hear Ksenia’s name, he asked about the school’s favorite—perhaps she had already graduated, and he simply never heard. When he mentioned Ksenia’s name Ms. Tsyganov became evasive. She complimented Radovan on his improvements and encouraged him to continue

excelling in his studies. Citing considerable grading, she indicated for him to kindly leave.

Intrigued, Radovan searched the school for her but only found his friends in the cafeteria discussing all they were learning in their respective trades. When Radovan asked about her, most of them grew quiet. One friend broke the tension and described the rumor they had all heard; that she had been rejected from every major institution and left school in an abundance of shame and grief. Radovan thought back to previous interactions he'd had with Ksenia—thinking of her always as a truly brilliant but emotionally fragile girl.

That evening, Radovan asked his parents about her at dinner. Mrs. Spiva mentioned that she is friendly with Ksenia's mother, Lucia. When Mr. Spiva worked at the community center, Lucia would often be the one to stop by to receive monthly donations. Last month, however, Ksenia was the one to pick up the package.

"How did she look?" Radovan asked.

Placing her fork down, "She looked tired... like she's been going through difficult times," Mrs. Spiva explained. "But I suppose that family is always going through something."

"Her father and I have worked together... here and there. Kind man. A hard worker. From what I understand, they spend so much on their daughter—support for her natural gifts and all—that they struggle themselves. I suppose I can understand how they'd get to that decision."

"How do you mean?" Radovan asked.

“No one from Ksenia’s family has been to university before.” Mr. Spiva took a sip of water. “When no one has had that proclivity before in your family and then you have a child like that... it makes sense to me. I don’t think I’d fully know what to do either.”

“Radovan, if you're concerned about her, if something’s happened... why don’t I give you the package and you can deliver it yourself—see how she’s doing, maybe give her some encouragement if she’s open to it,” Mrs. Spiva said.

“Tomorrow then... after work at the theater,” Radovan said, excited.

After picking up the box of donations from the community center, Radovan walked to the school, cutting through the graveyard. He stopped at Luka’s grave and considered paying his respects, or at least explaining how things had changed about his plan for the military. Standing at his headstone, Radovan could not find words worth sharing—words worth sharing aloud; words he felt would ever be heard by a hollow grave. He remembered the breathing exercise Mr. Noskov showed him and decided to sit and meditate for a moment. Autumn had changed the scenery—the well-landscaped grass had turned an uninviting brown and light yellow. By the time he finished, the sun had set and the moon-lit cemetery took on the stillness only the night can bestow. Recognizing how late it was getting, he gathered his things and raced along the railway lights to Ksenia’s.

If not for the light in the window, Radovan would have mistaken the house to have been abandoned. As he approached, he saw silhouettes move about inside. Before he could knock, the door opened and a nervously surprised Ksenia stood before him.

“You’re Radovan, right?”

“I am,” he said, gently smiling. “My mother—she works at the community center and I hadn’t seen you around school. I just wanted to make sure things were okay.”

Ksenia looked at him strangely. After a minute, he realized she was staring at the basket of clothes, food, and toiletries.

“Here! I’m sorry,” he said, handing her the package with a nervousness he found unexpected.

“Thank you,” she said. “You didn’t have to bring this here yourself. We normally get it at the center.”

“I know. I.... There’s a rumor going around, and I was worried about you.”

“I appreciate that, but.... Is the rumor that bad? We hardly know each other.”

“That things didn’t work out with your university applications and....”

The interest in the basket and curiosity at his words disappeared from Ksenia’s face.

“I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t have said that. That was extremely rude of me. Please forgive me.”

“They’re saying I failed the school?” she said. A cruel tone filled her voice.

Astonished to see someone he always thought as timid express such refined rage, Radovan could only nod, not fully meaning his response.

“If I ‘failed’ as they say... the only reason is because I’m a Jew. As far as I’m concerned, the change coming to this country that everyone is so obsessed with isn’t something I’d define as ‘hopeful.’ Thanks for the clothes, Radovan.”

When she closed the door, Radovan felt as though she was closing the door on all of Russia. Unsure how to feel, he wandered along the railway until he found himself at the theater. Trying the front entrance, the doors were locked. Walking around to the back alley, for some reason he expected to see Arina as he turned the corner. Seeing only the same milk crate, he tried the back door, but it was locked as well. Deciding to walk through to the other side of the alley and beyond, he eventually found himself on the other side of the railway. He stood at the edge of the highway, looking out to untilled farmland—overgrown and dying slowly beneath a cloudy sky. Radovan walked home along the highway, the thought of change and snow the only things on his mind. Before crossing the tracks to reach his house, he looked through the kitchen window at his parents sharing a bottle of wine and embracing one another. For some reason he could not define, he felt unwelcome entering and disturbing them. He crossed the tracks and content to let his mind empty, he sat on the steps of his small porch, closed his eyes, and filled his chest with the cold air.

The winter performances at the theater had been record setting. Originally only scheduled until February, the troupe’s local fame had swayed Andrei to renew their contract until summer. Radovan maintained his agreement with his parents and focused equally between his studies and work in the costume department. The spring brought a greater ease in schooling, Radovan’s focus on

graduation assuming the totality of his academic attention. From his final class, he only remembered the time for his one-on-one meeting with Ms. Tsyganov to discuss his plans after graduating later that day. He spent the few hours before the meeting speaking with friends. Walking through the hallways, they shared in the memories fondest to them of their time in school and what they will miss. As they moved through the building, one after the other would step away to attend their own meeting with their teacher, completing the final formality of their responsibilities as students. No one shared the exact time of their meeting and so, at seemingly random periods to Radovan, his friends would step away from the group, expressing their excitement to see each of them again at graduation. When it was his turn, Radovan felt strange hints of anger as he waved to his few remaining friends. Perhaps it was nostalgia, he thought, or the lack of greater memories to have shared with those he will likely see far less of after they graduate.

Ms. Tsyganov smiled at Radovan through the small window of her classroom door, indicating for him to enter. As he did, he noticed the heavy curtains were partially open, letting in a dark orange glow. The air conditioner was running and had blown the uncleaned chalk dust from the green board behind Ms. Tsyganov's desk around the room into a thin haze. His eyes stung as he walked over to sit at the empty chair across from her.

“So, Radovan, how do you feel about graduating?” she asked, interlacing her fingers in her lap.

“Free. A little too free, I suppose,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “The structure of school has been very helpful.”

“Would it surprise you,” she said, leaning in, “if I were to tell you many of your classmates feel the same?”

“It would,” he said, chuckling, “honestly, everyone else always seems to have such a plan for themselves.”

Ms. Tsyganov leaned back in her chair and began playing with her fingers. “They’re looking forward to their service in the military,” she said, lowering her gaze. “A lot of them think it’s there that they’ll learn the critical skills for managing the kind of overwhelming freedom you’re describing.”

Radovan looks past her, to the blurry and faded scribbles on the chalkboard, attempting to make sense of anything he could.

“Radovan, what skills would you have liked to have learned in school that you think might have better prepared you for the freedom you’re beginning to experience?” she asked, looking up from her lap.

His eyes adjusted back to meet hers. “I think it would have been helpful to learn about what you can do when the career you hope to pursue has no clear or direct path.”

“I see. I imagine there will be a rise in students like you with the way this country is moving. New opportunities typically mean greater experimentation. The hardest but perhaps most rewarding kind of experimentation is when it’s your own life. Even when there’s a clear path for you to take... people forget... every attempt to follow the rules is a personal experiment in seeing if you can.” She

smiled to herself. “It’s not always so easy. I’m sure that’s something you and your friends will discover more about when you start your service.”

Radovan feels the sense of suffocating return.

“Have you received your summons yet? Do you know when you’ll start?”

He takes a breath, attempting to calm himself.

“The character reference...,” she began, “if you’d like one from me... I’ve known you for a while now....”

Considering his response, he thought about sharing the lie his parents told to get him exempted but decided Ms. Tsyganov would see through his words instantly. He continued to remain silent, allowing her the chance to continue, despite him sensing her desire to have him interject.

“I’ve known you longer than any other teacher here...,” she continued, examining his response to her words, “I’d probably be the one to best describe you to the recruitment committee.”

Radovan felt a strange combination of emotions as she finished. He felt frightened and concerned that she would reveal him and his parents’ arrangement with the authorities. Simultaneously, he felt excited by the prospect that she would discover what his parents had done, that he would no longer have to maintain a lie due to their actions, and that he wants his parents to experience some consequence for what they had done. An urge to hint, to do anything, everything in his power to give her just enough information to guess, to faintly consider something was irregular about his situation consumed his mind.

“Radovan,” she said, in a soft, vulnerable voice, “if you need me to... I’ll write you a letter and they’ll never take you.”

As she finished her sentence, he felt his eyes burn again before her soft expression became a blur and he closed his eyes. Wiping away the tears, he wasn’t sure if their cause was the cloud of chalk or words. He feared more than ever that she believed in the ladder and questioned how to dissolve the exchange without her asking anymore questions.

“My son is a veteran. He went through it all. The training. The Russo-Afghan War. He was a soft boy. Very much like you.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“He didn’t die. I’m sorry if I made it sound that way,” she said, nervously looking out the window of the door from her seat. “He’s just not the same. Something inside of him changed from what he went through. He keeps a roof over his head... he works... but it seems that all he learned throughout all of that was how to survive. They... the Soviet Union... war... I don’t know. All of it... it took a piece of him, something that you still have. You’ll probably struggle with this idea of freedom if you don’t go. But I’m confident you’ll learn to use it to your advantage after a while.” She smiles at him. “I only wish my son had the chance to discover his own path. So, if you want me to....”

Radovan thought about thanking her. He wanted to reciprocate the kindness, the openness she was showing him. He wanted to tell her everything but felt that if he shared even the slightest aspect of the truth it could jeopardize his parents. He understood his distrust for others derived from his parents and their

actions on this matter specifically, but he would do anything to stay and defend them before anyone else. He stood up and slammed the table, chastising Ms. Tsyganov for even suggesting the prospect and that he is likely to report her to the police for an official investigation. Her sharing this willingness to him, he explained, means she has likely offered it to others as well. Ms. Tsyganov did not attempt to defend herself. She didn't say a word as far as Radovan could remember as he slammed the door behind him and left the school, into the twilight. He walked home along the railway remembering every instance Ms. Tsyganov had supported him over the years. He did not remember arriving at his home or even having fallen asleep the next day.

A week before, he was fitted hastily by Vadik for his suit. The two spoke about how well the theater was going and the ways in which Radovan had improved since they last spoke. The day he graduated, his parents surprised him by agreeing to pay for his passport and an international flight to wherever he'd like to go. After he walked across the stage and received his diploma, he followed his parents to the local government office, where his excitement was seemingly unwelcome. The government employee insisted that he not smile or show any emotion when having his picture taken. Resigning himself to the bureaucracy of the state, he snuffed out the sense of accomplishment and relief he was feeling and followed the order given to him. Afterward, he returned the rental suit without saying a word or appreciating the craftsmanship of its construction.

With the end of school came the opportunity to focus on the theater. The spring saw even greater turnout with the weather and at the start of the final month the troupe was contracted for, Andrei arrived in the dressing room, again wearing his green suede tuxedo. “Everyone, our performance at the end of this month is to be our final and I’d like to include one scene at the end of our already scheduled performance.” Andrei continued to explain a series of comedic exchanges all having to do with different people trying to take credit for the troupe’s success. Andrei would begin, on stage in his typical green outfit, and then one actor after another continue to reveal that they are wearing the same green outfit and that they’ve each secretly been the director at different points—a credit to their stunning abilities as an actor.

The troupe loved the idea and quickly began learning their new lines and movements on the stage. Andrei walked over to Radovan and asked him if it was possible to have eight jackets similar to his own ready in time. The two went into the costume closet and checked their options. Radovan pulled out every piece remotely similar to Andrei’s and laid them out on his worktable.

“It looks like I would have to disassemble a number of pieces and piece them together with some careful stitch work to not have each piece look patchy,” Radovan said, scratching his head. “Is it possible to get a roll of fabric for the outside of each jacket in the color you’d like? That way I can conceal everything and won’t have to destroy so many of our costumes.”

“I can get you that, but you need to assure me that you get this amount of work done by our performance at the end of the month. This would be in addition

to your other responsibilities around here—ensuring each actor’s costume is ready every night.”

“What did you think for the lining? Do you want it green as well?”

“Here, you take it and use it as much as needed for reference.” Andrei found a nearby mannequin and dressed it in his jacket. “I’d like the lining to be as close to the original as possible.”

Radovan inspected the jacket closely. “To get this done the way you’d like, I’d need to use all the materials on the table and have access to enough fabric to construct the exterior of the tuxedos. I’m wondering though, is it possible to rent similar tuxedos just for the night? That would save so much of the work.”

“If it becomes necessary to, we can always do that. But I know you’ve been eager for an opportunity to make your own suits and would like to offer you that chance, as much as I am able to.”

Radovan felt a wave of gratitude move throughout his body, hearing Andrei’s reason. “I’d like to try. But just in case it becomes too much work, or some other complication arises... I would appreciate having the alternative option as a backup.”

Andrei patted Radovan on the back and left to discuss the new scene with his actors.

In order to fully assess the number of materials he had to work with, he began stripping the costumes he had selected from the closet, and others he later found as well. As he did, he felt a sense of regret for having to destroy some of the costumes he had worked so hard on. Doing so, however, only made him more

committed to achieving what he had joined the theater to do. The next morning, he measured each actor with the techniques he had developed himself and in consultation with books from the public library. Later that day, a massive roll of fabric arrived and he began outlining the designs. In a week, he had the templates created and began the manufacturing stage for the base fitting with each actor. The next two weeks Radovan slept at the theater—working throughout the day and late into the evening. His parents delivered him food daily through the back door in the alley, regularly asking when he'll be home. To ease their concerns, he would take them down into his workstation and show him the progress he was making every day. Most days they left with a sense of pride but worried he was pushing himself too far.

“At least remember to sleep well,” Mrs. Spiva said, looking at the nearby couch he had transformed into his sleeping arrangement in the back of his workshop.

Radovan hugged both his parents as they left, assuring them that this is what he wanted and was grateful for their support.

In the final week leading up to the last performance, Radovan concluded the forward fitting for each actor, quickly adjusting any minor areas that needed revision. The order was completed two days before the due date as Radovan had hoped—allowing the actors enough time for a few dress rehearsals to Andrei's absolute satisfaction. The night of the last day, Radovan snuck into the rafters to watch the new scene play out, having been too busy to attend the dress rehearsals. He saw his parents sitting in the front row sitting beside Andrei who had made his

way out into the audience to watch and play his small role in the scene he had written. The audience seemed to love the conclusion and Andrei and the actors received a standing ovation.

Later in the dressing room, after saying goodbye to Arina and the other actors, Andrei approached Radovan and handed him an envelope.

“For everything you’ve done for us and for all I’m sure you’ll do in the future... thank you. I’ve also included the name and address of a master tailor in Moscow... the troupe uses him from time to time... apparently, he’s quite famous. Here’s the number of my cousin, Vera, too. She’s about your age. It helps to have connections in a new city. Give her a call. I’m sure she’ll be happy to meet and give you a lay of the area. I also learned from your father, and I hope you’ll forgive him, but he shared with me that working here was never your intention. I want you to understand that the success this group has achieved was in large part due to you. The actors felt so much more confident on stage, and I had time to focus my energy on supporting them from within my role because of your abilities down here.”

At home later that night, Radovan explained his intentions to travel to Moscow with the money he had made in order to seek out an apprenticeship with the master tailor. His parents were supportive and understood their son’s ambition, but also felt as though they might lose him to the city and he’d never return. Mrs. Spiva recommended returning to Vadik to show him one of the suits he made for the theater. If he accepted him as an apprentice now, he would be

able to stay in town. Radovan agreed to meet with Vadik and to see what he had to say about his process and the likelihood of taking him on as a student.

Radovan arrived at the blue home carrying a dust jacket over his arm.

“Radovan, how have you been?” Vadik asked, shuffling across the room to shake his hand. “I saw your work on stage. A wonderful thing you’ve done for the theater.”

“That is something I actually wanted to discuss with you,” Radovan said, laying the dust jacket out on a nearby table.

“Would you like a consultation? I believe I could spare a few minutes to give you my thoughts,” Vadik said, putting on his glasses.

“I was actually wondering if you would consider this jacket as a resume of sorts,” Radovan said. “I would still like to apprentice with you here if you would allow me.”

Vadik indicated for him to unveil what he had brought. Radovan did so and Vadik spent no more than a few moments looking at it.

“This is very good, Radovan. You seem to have really developed your own style in addition to learning many of the foundations.”

“Would you be willing to accept me now as your student, sir?”

“No. I’m sorry,” Vadik said, removing his glasses.

Confused, Radovan looked at Vadik who began to move back to the other side of the room. “Sir, may I ask why? Is there something missing from my understanding?”

“This piece shows wonderful promise which I’d like to commend you for. However, this is the result of adaptation—excess creativity for the sake of production and efficiency. In theater, I am not surprised this was successful—I even asked Andrei to show it to me after the final performance. I was so impressed with the ways in which you’ve developed that I had to see the products for myself. When I did... Radovan your work is perfect for the stage, but there is a distinct difference between that and what I do here.”

“I see.”

“You have the skills but right now you’re applying them haphazardly on anything you can to get the job done in the time that it needs to be. What would you come up with if you didn’t have to worry about time—more importantly a limitation on materials? Because you’ll always have deadlines, but I won’t make a jacket from inferior products if that’s all I have because my client wants leather, or silk... do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wish you all the luck I can, but until you have the formal training I need in an apprentice, I won’t be able to accept you.”

“I have a high school diploma.”

“Radovan, when you come to me with a college diploma from a fashion institute we can talk. For now, focus on your studies,” Vadik said, and walked into the back room.

After explaining the situation to his parents, Radovan decided it would be best to still travel to Moscow to speak with the master tailor, but to also apply to a

fashion institute while there. Very early in the morning, Radovan left his home, taking a moment to examine the empty garden bed as he closed the door behind him. Walking toward the station, he passed the school and wondered about Ms. Tsyganov and the state of the perennials. Approaching the graveyard and community center, he averted his eyes, instead adjusting his attention to the wheels of his luggage scraping across the pavement. Radovan said a quick goodbye to Raevskii as he boarded the train. Unsure of how long he'd be gone, exhaustion overtook him. He could not be sure how much time had passed by the time he arrived at Kazansky railway station. All that he could think to do was to find his way to the address Andrei had provided him. After spending so much time with city actors, he thought he would be able to ease his way into the busy lifestyle. The high energy of the people seemed relatively as expected, but the way they moved around one another—the way they carried themselves seemed much more refined. After navigating the foreign landscape for a few hours, Radovan finally admitted to himself that he had become thoroughly lost and resigned himself to a nearby pay phone in order to call Andrei's cousin, Vera, for assistance.

The phone rang for a long time before a confused voice answered.

"Hello, this is Radovan Spiva from Raevskii. Is this Vera, Andrei's cousin?"

"This is Vera. What can I do for you, Mr. Spiva?"

"I worked with your cousin at the theater. I just arrived in Moscow and he mentioned I should reach out if I needed any help getting around the city."

Radovan heard an audible sigh break through the static of the line.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Spiva. It isn’t you or your request. I never expected to receive a call from someone like this when I gave out this number.”

Radovan heard yelling in the background of her voice.

“I gave Andrei my work number when I left Raevskii myself hoping for some distance from him.” Yelling builds in the background. “Forgive me, this isn’t your business or problem. Where are you now? How can I help?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble, I arrived a few hours ago and seem to be lost now.”

“It’s...,” she began before covering the receiver and spoke to someone else. “Sorry, tell me where you are, what you see, what streets, and I’ll try to direct you.”

After some time, Vera had explained the path to meet her at her office. To Radovan’s surprise, it was near the state university. He followed her directions and an hour later they met in front of the massive flight of stairs leading up to the towering white and brown building.

“It looks like a hospital, doesn’t it?” Vera asked, waving hello.

Radovan looked up at the clock towers at the peak of either wing. “Thanks for meeting with me,” he said, looking back at her.

She continued to look at the building, unresponsive.

“I-It does... look like a hospital,” he said, attempting to understand her lack of response. “What kinds of sickness do you think it treats?”

She looked down at him and then turned toward the walking path in the direction she came from. "Communism," she said, starting to walk.

"You sound a lot like Andrei," Radovan said, catching up to her.

"Oh really? Maybe one of the few things we have in common then. I came here about a year ago, and well... it would be fair to say it's been one of the best decisions I've made in my life. What did you come here for?"

"To train and to work. That's why I called you. I can't seem to find where I'm going. Andrei gave me this address, but no matter where I look, I can't seem to find the shop or even the street."

"Give it to me," she said, opening her hand.

Radovan pulled out the scrap of paper and handed it to her.

"That's odd," she said, examining the paper.

Radovan noticed her attention waver toward her name written on the bottom of the sheet along with the phone number scribbled below it. Without saying anything, she walked to a pay phone and quickly punched in a number.

"Hi, can you do me a favor...", she began and read off the name and address. "Really? Thanks," she said, and hung up the phone. "So, the business Andrei told you about, the one this master tailor ran... it closed a few years ago."

Radovan felt his stomach drop.

"That said, the one who ran it, he's apparently still in business in a separate location. Want to go check it out?"

"Yes, please. What happened to the old store? Why did it go out of business?"

“My coworker didn’t tell me that part. I guess you can ask him when we get there.”

The two walked toward the train station.

“And what do you do for work, Vera?” Radovan asked, considering all the possibilities for why an apparent master tailor might close his store.

“I work in marketing... specifically anything that has to do with design.”

“So, like art?”

“Not entirely... but yes, a little. Anything that has a creative edge to it; a painting, tapestry, certain kinds of clothing... I am the one to research how best to sell those things.”

“Do you make anything yourself?”

“We don’t really need a technical sense of how to make the things we sell. You could say our job is to interpret the art for the consumer. We show the buyer all the ways in which this scarf or this pair of pants is better than the alternative.”

The two walk down the steps into the subway. “You might find it interesting to know how little people really think about their appearance, how they decorate themselves and their homes... then again, maybe you know about that part already.”

“I know a little,” he said, watching the subway arrive.

“That’s historically speaking, anyway. A lot is changing now since the USSR collapsed. People seem to be paying more attention now in way they never seemed to do before.”

“Is that good for business?”

“It means I don’t have to explain everything for my customers. I don’t have to work as hard to make them interested in something. They’ll typically already have an idea about what they like. At that point, it just becomes a matter of finding what that is within our inventory. That’s a lot easier than starting from no interest at all.”

The train stopped at their station, rattling them among the crowd of passengers.

“When you’re making a suit, or any kind of clothing, for a client specifically... there’s absolutely that interest but there’s also think kind of discovery of not knowing exactly where things will go throughout the process, or what the end result will be,” he said, watching the doors open and the passengers begin to pour out into the terminal.

Vera grabbed his arm and led him out of the train and through the crowd. Once again on the street, she let him go.

“What interested you in getting into marketing?” he asked, getting a grasp of the layout of the buildings around him.

“Now that communism was gone... with the rise of western ideas entering our school and society... I thought capitalism would be the next embrace for Russia.”

“How has it been so far?”

“Here’s the place,” she said, pointing to a shop at the end of the road. “It’s hard to tell this early. There’s an appetite for it. I know that much. But whether it will mature in any significant way is something I’ll hopefully know when I get

my degree. It's up to whatever the country and its people decide to be, honestly. All I can really do I say my piece and wait."

The two stopped outside the building. It was a surprisingly small boutique store with a bright red awning.

"Thanks, Vera. I really appreciate your help. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take you out for some coffee, or lunch? I wouldn't have been able to find this place otherwise."

She squinted her eyes at him before laughing. "Sure! But I think I'll have to be the one to show you where to take me."

"That's very true," he said, smiling. "I'll call you tomorrow then!"

"Wait, here... if you can't reach me at work...", she said, quickly writing down a different number, "reach me here. I'll be less likely to ask you a dozen questions and rant about my cousin if you call me there." She put up a finger. "Less likely. We can chat more about that over lunch," she said, handing the paper to Radovan.

"Thanks again," he said, waving goodbye as she walked back toward the terminal.

When he entered the shop he saw a man, about the same age as Vadik, sitting at a sewing table, hand stitching a brilliant blue lining.

"May I help you, sir?" the man asked, without turning around.

"My name is Radovan Spiva, sir. I have come to apply to be an apprentice tailor."

“You have...? And where are you from, Mr. Spiva?” the man said, putting down his needle and thread.

“Raevskii. About two hours from Ufa.”

“I know where it is. Why have you come so far to see me?”

“I was recommended I apply here.”

“You were? Who told you to do that?”

“I worked at my local theater designing costumes and the director gave me your address.”

“A costume designer? Well, I suppose I do see the fun in that. You could say tailors do the same, in a sense.”

“Sir?”

“While you’re trying to conceal your actor and get her comfortable being someone else, I’m here attempting to bring the woman out from the different faces she wears.” The man laughed. “That said, we do mislead, emphasize and distract the audience from certain unflattering traits some of our customers may exhibit—say, for example, if a man came to me that was a bit heavy set. I’d provide him with the illusion that he was slimmer.” He tapped his long fingernails on the table. “It seems that this may work then. What was the name of the director that sent you my way?”

“Andrei, sir.”

“Oh! Interesting. You don’t happen to know Arina from his most recent troupe, do you?”

“I do, sir. We worked closely together for the last several months.”

“So that’s who you are! I’ve actually heard of you, believe it or not, young man.” The man stood up and walked over to Radovan. “I’m Dima, Arina’s father,” he said, shaking Radovan’s hand. “So, you have some training then?”

“I am mostly self-taught, sir. I do have something for your consideration, however,” Radovan said, unzipping the dust jacket and revealing the same jacket he presented Vadik.

“So, no formal training but you’ve come up with this, then?”

“Yes, sir. My first attempt at a fully original tuxedo design. Unfortunately, due to limited materials the lining needed to be stitched together as a patchwork.”

“I see that,” Dima said, closely inspecting the garment, “but you did incorporate a distinct design accounting for the necessary elements of the article.”

“Correct, sir. Due to limited resources, I’ve often relied on my creativity to construct whatever my director requested of me.”

“How long are you in the city for then, Radovan?” Dima asked, placing the jacket down on the table.

“I hope to submit my application to the local fashion institutes as well so maybe only a few days.”

“Radovan, if I offered you a chance to apprentice... you’ve spent so much time fixing and adjusting but a tailor should know where his materials are sourced from. Do you?”

“No. Not entirely, sir.”

“What inspired you to pursue becoming a sartor?”

“On a trip to Ufa, I watched a spider spin an extremely large web and catch a caterpillar in it.”

“There are two there already... spider and caterpillar’s silk. Raevskii is a farming town, yes?”

Radovan nodded.

“Cotton—all sorts of plants... and sheep’s wool too... not sure if you’d have that there though. It's all what we use to make things such as this,” he said, patting the green tuxedo. The best tailors even grow their own fibers. My master did it and so did I before I unfortunately had to settle for hiring someone else to take up that task now due to my age. My master worked best in cotton and taught me to see the potential of a given harvest from the shadows each plant cast in the field.

Unsure how to respond, Radovan smiled and wondered how such a thing could ever be done.

“*And* if I were to hire you as my apprentice you would be paid enough to live in the city. I would request your full devotion, however. I do not like the idea of attempting to teach while combatting whatever it is you’d be learning in school concurrently. Like you, I’ve developed my own approaches and techniques,” he said, in a slightly obnoxious tone.

“Sir, I would be honored,” Radovan responded before he could think of an alternative reply.

“Fantastic! I have guest accommodations on the second floor. Purely temporary... until you find more long-term living arrangements.”

“Of course. Thank you very much, sir.”

“Up the stairs there and on the right. Do you have family back in Raevskii? If so, I’d contact them so they don’t worry.”

Excited beyond words, Radovan quickly used the phone to call home, informing them of the news.

Months passed and Radovan had become a fine tailor, adapting to the strict yet fair guidance of his master. As time continued to pass, Radovan began assuming greater responsibilities without ever seeing a rise in compensation. Dima was showing signs of aging beyond his ability to perform his work and largely acted as the face of the business—greeting customers and measuring them on occasion. His hands shook too much to be effective with a pair of shears. Faster than he anticipated, Radovan found himself doing many of the tasks he thought would only become available to him once he was assigned a full tailor’s position.

Anytime Radovan mentioned this to Dima over drinks in the evening, he would evade the question and state simply, “Titles are irrelevant. What matters is the work you do.” At the time, Radovan found this comforting. He felt Dima’s explanation to indicate the breakdown of their hierarchical relationship as he continued to refine his approach.

After 3 years, Radovan met a local girl, Vera, and the two got engaged. When deciding what to do with their future, they decided they would open their own shop at the outskirts of the city where they could afford the property rent. By

this point, Radovan had saved most of his money—dedicating almost the entirety of his days to working with Dima. However, by this point, it seemed Dima had little to teach and instead simply assigned him daily tasks with little guidance or care for how they turned out. So long as there was not a drop in revenue, Dima never said anything. One day, however, in the middle of a blizzard, while Vera was on her way to university at the fashion institute, she boarded the bus and met the eyes of eight skinheads in leather jackets with swastikas painted on their arms. They did not say anything and neither did she. For a minute she stared at their faces before stepping off the bus. She watched the yellow headlights disappear into the dense white. Not knowing what to do, she sat in the snow on the side of the road and cried until all emotion left her body. Later, she called Radovan at work and told him what had happened. He raced from the store and met her at a café.

“Radovan, those were evil tears,” she said, cold and unfeeling. “I can’t feel like that again.”

When Radovan attempted to explain why he had left in the middle of the day and cost the shop thousands of dollars in sales, Dima only continued to yell and seemed fully unwilling to see reason. Later that day Radovan resigned, telling Dima that he was going to open his own business. To his shock, Dima claimed that he would destroy Radovan’s reputation if he left, that he felt betrayed by someone he had taught and that he trusted with his life’s work. Radovan thought of his family, his need to support Vera and himself, and decided to stay.

That evening, a friend from Raevskii was in the city and had invited Radovan out for drinks. After explaining what had happened with Vera and the current situation with Dima, his friend shared something unexpected.

“Do you remember Ksenia? She and her family left town.”

“What do you mean? They moved away?”

“They moved out of the country. They left for the United States.”

“Why would... how could they?”

“They were able to prove to the consulate that they felt threatened by the rise of antisemitism. Apparently, someone had sent them letters with swastikas and even drew one on their front door. They took some pictures and sent them off. A few months later they were gone.”

That night, Radovan shared his friend’s story about Ksenia with his fiancée. After a late night of discussion, they agreed to try. While Radovan maintained a low profile at work with Dima, he and Vera would search for signs of antisemitism where they lived. After a few weeks they received a letter in the mail encouraging their support for a new regime attempting to take control of the government. One week later they received a letter threatening them if they did not attend a march in support of the regime change and that the sender would know if they did not attend. Radovan and Vera lived in a large apartment complex in which they knew very few people. The only way the letter could be delivered to them the way it was was from someone within the complex due to the security at the front door and the resident’s key necessary to enter the main building. The two focused their efforts on collecting and sending all documents to the consulate,

including the letters. A month later they finally received word that their application for refugee status had been accepted. The letter indicated that they were allowed 25 kilograms per person and that they must report to the airport within 24 hours. Radovan quickly contacted his parents and informed them of their situation. They agreed to use the funds saved for Radovan's first international trip following his graduation to support their son anyway they could.

Radovan and Vera left their apartment at 4 AM for the airport with one suitcase each. Neither knew what to pack for their new lives and so only brought about 15 kilograms each. They noticed a final letter in their mailbox. Through the thin white paper, they could see the outline of a swastika and left without touching it or even locking their door behind them. Neither had been on a plane before. Vera spoke a little English, but Radovan could only write his name. During the long flight, Radovan practiced introducing himself in English with Vera's help. Their lives had changed so fast, but they felt they would be able to survive it together. They arrived in Boston and were guided into immigration services along with dozens of others who only or mostly spoke their own languages. Double checking they had their legal documents, they were eventually called to have their IDs taken. Passing along their Russian passports, the woman operating the camera pointed to a large stack of toilet paper that someone had drawn a crude smiley face on. Despite the exhaustion, neither Radovan nor Vera could help but smile at that moment.

The two exited the airport and were driven to an apartment in Lynn, Massachusetts where the one-bedroom accommodation had been furnished and stocked with basic food, drink, and toiletries.

“We should have asked for one of the toilet rolls,” Vera said, jokingly.

Their guide gave them a general tour of the area and told them what to expect moving forward. After he had left the two collapsed onto the bed. Vera held Radovan in her arms and shut her eyes.

A few hours later into the night she opened her eyes again and heard Radovan crying. Letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, she eventually saw he was holding something in his hand. “What is it? What’s wrong?” she said, trying to make sense of what had happened.

“We’re happy,” she heard him say. “Look,” he said, showing her their American ID cards with tears falling from his face, “we’re so happy.”

The Distance Between Us

The woman brushes her hair to the side and cradles a half empty glass, before pushing open the rusty screen door. “Are you coming?”

A man shuffles along behind her, out onto the dimly lit porch. She quickly lights a cigarette. Walking over to the arm rail, he studies the green and yellow algae growing on a nearby oak tree. He runs his fingers along the damp bark as she exhales and fills the sky with another cloud.

“Easternmost of the belt and south of Alnitak, the black horse waits to collapse in a mist of crimson into light.”

“Poetries?” she asks over the beat of reggaetón coming from inside.

“Partly. That and a bit of astronomy,” he says, looking back at her partial silhouette. Pasted glitter at the edges of her light brown eyes gleams off of her olive skin.

She walks over to him with an exaggerated sway in her step, her gaze hidden in the hollow space beneath her brow. She leans on the railing. The old paint cracks against her skin. “Why you know about that?” she asks, looking up at the blank horizon.

“When I was young I read all about it. I would go out at night for hours—anything to get away for a while,” he says, adjusting his eyes, to the emerging moon.

She flicks off the ashes and takes another drag. “I do not getting it,” she says, squinting roughly where she imagines his eyes are fixed. “What are you looking? There are too many light pollutions to see anything.”

He chuckles, turning towards her. “A nebula. One close enough you might see it with your own eyes. Do you ever wish you could explore what’s up there?”

“I used to... but there is much experience for me here, things I can taste and touch. Whatever is up there—just is not as interesting as traveling Moroccan desert by camel or cave diving in Bahamas,” she says, looking back at him with a striking glance. Her amber tinged eyes bloom in the pale light.

“Up until recently I was never interested in anything ‘down here’—too chaotic.”

“But that is where the funs are!” she says, shaking her hips and shoulders to the faint music.

“I suppose,” he says in a friendly tone.

She takes a sip from her glass before resting it on the railing. The wind stirs the moon-cast pines into a flurry of black, cutting at the night. “So hey, what you trying to get away from?” she asks, leaning towards him. The rail creaks and the paint crackles between them, like embers of a fire extinguished.

“I am—err—I *was* getting away from family. That was the main thing, anyway,” he says, letting his eyes wander to the shadows of insects decomposing in the porch light.

“Simón tolded me you was adopted, right?” she asks, scratching her nail into the paint.

“Y—”

Cheers and clapping from inside distract the two. Her lips stretch across her face revealing the faint dimples in her cheeks.

“Yeah. Because of that I’ve always felt a special connection with my parents,” he says.

“Did tell you or discover it yourself?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yeah, they did. All my life I’ve known where I came from. You know, people would laugh and say how my parents never wanted me, but what’s so ironic is that *they* did. I can actually say that they not only chose to have a child—but that my parents *chose* to have *me*.” He sighs and smirks back at her.

She takes another sip from her glass, holding the cigarette loosely between her fingers. “I have always wonder what it be like. I have issue with my father. My mother—we don’t talk anymore,” she says, examining the clump of white paint wedged beneath her polished nail.

“Does your relationship with your father have anything to do with why you’re here in the U.S.?”

She bites down hard on the inside of her cheek. “I am here to practice my English,” she says coolly, flicking the glob of paint into the bushes. As it caroms against the bundle of dead branches, she considers his honesty and feels the urge to reciprocate. “It is feeling nice to be away,” she says.

His eyes widen a bit and he inches closer to her. “When my parents found me... I was malnourished, sick and alone. Despite the love and patience they filled our home with—I struggled for years because of the way I was treated in the orphanage. I couldn’t speak—literally. If I tried to write, my hand would seize up and turn into this arthritic mess,” he says, massaging his right hand. “They

thought I had attention issues, but really my brain would focus on everything at once—it was like sensory overload at all times. With a telescope I could pick out what I wanted to focus on. It helped, you know?”

“Traveling... I have opportunity to enriching myself,” she says, picking deeper into the railing, discovering a lavender purple. “I can always find pieces of what I am when I go. Is a chance to learn about different culture and develop my knowledges of the world. I feel like I have made the right decisions and became the healthier because of it.”

“What have you found?”

“That if I am there... I am having change on things surround me.”

He looks down to the scattered puddles, reflecting the vague glow of the moon. “When I was a teenager, and my father realized my condition wasn’t improving at the rate he’d hoped... he decided to take more drastic measures—paying off therapists to say I was psychologically and emotionally disturbed.”

“Carajo,” she says, nearly finishing her drink. “Your father have more intentional than mine.”

He snickers, still staring at the way the light creeps across the water. “The worst part was that it was all done out of love. He thought that if I had these labels preceding me in life that somehow others would give me more of a chance... being someone that was mentally deficient.” He looks down at her fingers.

She moves her hand close to his and offers the last drag from her cigarette. He takes it and rolls the smoldering nub between his fingers.

“It’s almost beautiful how far love can take a person when they feel like it’s their child’s future that’s on the line,” he says, raising the lipstick covered filter to his mouth. He notices the lingering aroma of cherries and fills his lungs with it completely.

“That not sounding love like... no matter reason he giving. Here,” she says, gesturing to her glass with a yellow smile.

He drops the last embers into the cup, releasing the final billow of smoke within.

“From of my father I can travel. He moved on too quickly... I think. He found a family perfectly desperate for to enter. I wondered who needed the other more. If them I could understanding but when it is my father... it was best I go away—see if he would change in time. When he could not—I keep going.” She grinds her nails deeper into the paint until she reaches the moldy wood beneath.

“It’s a bit ironic, you think?”

“The things I am traveling from are not changing.”

“Look up there. A bit of time in the dark—even in the city you’ll see the stars start to come out. Of course, it will never be the same... but if you have just enough you can find what you’re looking for,” he says, pointing to Alnilam. “It was this idea of giving things enough time for you to understand them that helped me eventually make it out of the negative place I’d been in for so long. I found a way to reimagine myself and no longer live entirely in response to other people.” Gazing back at her, he notices her eyes fixed on the range of colors trapped

beneath her cracked and faded nails. The wind bellows between them, slamming the screen door against its frame.

“That is what I am doing. I feel happy with the things I learned from the places I go to. I can go any parts in the world and it is feeling like home. Why return to a place that will be always the same? There’s so much of me to find. I don’t want to waste my time.”

His eyes lower to the exposed rot beneath her fingers.

“Do you want to go back in?” she asks, pushing off the railing, white flakes stuck to her forearms.

“Yeah. All right,” he says, breathing out the muggy air, looking back at the settling trees and advancing clouds.

What We Keep

Dear 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 green eyes, he looked me over from the lace of my shoes, up the creases of my pants, to the folds of my lapels. The sole photo in the room hung on the wall between us. Mr. Gustell and an especially tall woman I took to be his wife 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 manila 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 onto 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 manila 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 discernible.

“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. This time, no part of my view was obstructed. 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... the director of the orphanage... 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 manila 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. Brooks,

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.

Moonflower

“It is certainly busy,” he says, laughing as he rounds the final turn and parks. “People tend to focus on themselves here. After a few weeks, you’ll stop noticing how crazy it gets.”

“And where Hyde Park?”

“Just down that way, miss. Past them corner shops. You see the trees, yeah?”

She nods and hands the driver a fold of bills, staring at the rustling leaves beyond the iron fence.

“It’s about closed now though. You’d be better off going tomorrow. Not safe for a young woman at night, you know?” He scratches his chin, expecting some sort of response. “Opens at five,” he eventually continues, counting the money. “You visiting family?”

“Yes, friend of family’s living in city here.”

“Wonderful community. Especially now. People travel from all over in the summer. You might want to head to Tottenham. Nice Russian community there. Little Russia they call it.”

She shakes her head and opens the door. “Never being. Always wanting travel here in the city to see Kensington flowers,” she says, stepping out onto the sidewalk of Queen’s Gardens.

“Goodnight to ya,” he says, turning to face her, “Thanks for the generous tip!”

Shutting the door, she throws her backpack over her narrow shoulders.

The yellow taxi light flickers on. She sighs and breathes in the humid air, holding it in, letting it settle into her core. Undoing her bun in the streetlight, she watches the lumbering vehicle sputter down the road. Sharp laughter attracts her attention to a man dining outside the adjacent hotel. Seated across from him are a woman and child. In the dim glow of the iron sconces, she thinks of her father as the silhouette of the man swirls his glass of red wine, strewing glimmering petals of light across the figures before him. The woman reaches out and raises her glass to his. It's only when the child starts to giggle at the clink that she realizes her attention has shifted to the woman whose makeup-polished cheeks seem to sparkle. Turning away, she lets out the burning air from her lungs and starts counting the numbers of each apartment.

She walks beside the Residents' Garden, dividing the center of the street. Illuminated by the bright streetlamps, she admires the preserved Portland stone Victorian façade and is reminded of her new house in Boston. Her father bought it because it could never be torn down. *It's history that's allowed this house to stand for so long*, he told her, justifying his sudden decision for them to move after the death of his wife. *If creating our history here is no longer an option, we'll buy someone else's and make our life there*, he said, ending the conversation. She wanted to explain to him how everything he was saying was just a part of the grieving process but stayed silent because she could hardly process the feelings herself. Looking in through the double height windows of a gut renovated mansion apartment, she asks herself when purchasing someone else's home makes

it your own. Stopping at the bottom of a black and white checkered staircase, she retrieves a letter from her pocket and reads:

Sasha,

I am overjoyed to hear about your trip to come visit me. With how sudden your request, this was all I had available. You will find it as central a location as you had requested. Unfortunately, it is sweltering this time of year and unlike in the States, many have not yet discovered the invention of air conditioning. I would have liked to have you stay at the hotel, but we have been booked through September. I have opened the windows for you in preparation for your arrival. I will send a car to fetch you for dinner the day after you settle. It has been too long!

—Uncle Sergey

Folding the letter, she returns it to her pocket and takes out a key. Looking up at the ornamental engravings of the portico—the chiseled grooves and drilled textures—she stares at the shadows hiding within their recesses. She questions if her time here in London will feel like the beginning of her own history or an extension of the one adopted by her father. With how impulsively she decided to leave, she imagines that she will experience the same discomfort as when she first entered their house in Boston. Walking along the red brick walls adorned with antique paintings of the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock, she glanced at the

portraits of strangers on porcelain dishes and continued into the living room of gilded furniture. The entirety of the home's contents appeared to have been meticulously accumulated throughout the lives of those whose place they had entered. She envied how naturally her father stepped directly into the office and began transferring his assets from Sochi to Massachusetts.

Despite the limited time, she insisted on bringing as much as she could to the U.S. The movers carefully stacked the corners of her bedroom with color coded boxes. She worried that with the full bookcase of titles she didn't recognize, due to their English names she figured, that her dresser would equally contain the clothing of the previous owner. Opening the first drawer, she felt relief at the empty wooden space, but noted a strange odor she hoped wasn't mold. She removed her home key from Russia and opened the first couple boxes, slicing at the tape with the dull metal. Laying out each piece of clothing she owned on her bed, she took a few steps and felt the warped floorboards bend beneath her weight. If she wasn't careful, she realized she could easily pierce her feet on the nails that seemed to be rising up the more she walked. Despite this detail, she continued to explore the room. She noticed the faded brown curtains shared the same smell as the dresser. Concerned her outfits would take on the musty fragrance, she immediately took down the curtains and stuffed them into the empty boxes.

Pacing around the stacks, she thought about what she could do—she hadn't brought her own drapes and resented the thought of losing any more sleep to jetlag. Despite her intrigue in the home, sleep was all her body could affix itself

to. Turning to her bed and the piles of outfits she had an idea. She picked up each pile and brought them to the old desk by the window. Climbing on it, she hung each item from the drapery rod. Where a shirt or pair of pants didn't reach the desired length, she layered the items on top of one another, the hook of the hanger strung through a belt loop or jacket pocket. Dresses were ideal; however, she didn't own many. She used the few she did in the middle so she could pull them to either side of the window and peek out to watch strangers pass by. She could not fully define it, but the people she saw seemed to exude a friendliness unfamiliar to her; one she only remembered experiencing with her mother and Sergey. Laying down in the hard bed she tucked her knees into her chest and held them tight, remembering the warmth she always felt in their presence. In the window, she watched the sun stream through veins of light, passing through the thinly woven garments. As the memories settled, she thought how wonderful it might be to immerse herself in a culture whose people carried such fondness. Intrigued by what lay beyond her new home, and curious what her window looked like from the street, she left her room, mindful to not step on an exposed nail as she moved to the front door.

Moving through the house, her father called from his office, asking where she was heading.

“Ya sobirayus' progulyat'sya po kvartalu.”

“Minutochka,” she hears him say over the phone, opening his office door.

“English, Sasha. Please. Americans won't respect you if don't learn to speak as they do.” He tapped the phone against the side of his neck. “You have an

opportunity here.... I learned English in schools—it wasn't until I started doing business internationally that I had to chance to really practice speaking with natives.” He paused a moment before continuing. “Even still, I cannot remove my accent.” His eyes looked strained but sincere. “Perhaps you may never be able to lose it either. But please, consider us being here a new beginning.”

Her expression hardened.

“Anyway,” he said, “did you already unpack everything?”

Noticing her heightening animosity, she controlled herself. “Most of it.”

“In that case, why don't you take care of my stuff as well while I figure this mess out,” he said, shaking the phone.

She lowered her gaze to the warped floorboards and followed their winding patterns to the master bedroom at the other side of the home. On the way, she looked in through the cracked door of her room and felt an urge to run at the sight of the chaos of the life she had begun to force onto another's. She closed the door and continued down the hall. Her father's door had a brass handle with a lion's visage engraved into it. She found it comedic how accurate these strangers' tastes were to her father's. *What exactly could he have known about this place before he bought it?* She heard herself laugh as she opened the door at regardless of how distinct her father thinks himself to be, there are people on the other side of the world that believe just as strongly as he does, made up of precisely the same stuff. Somehow, this revelation made her feel a little less alone as she entered her father's room.

It was full, like her own, with the possessions of others. Two boxes in the center of the room were all that sat apart from the uniformed quiet of the space. The blinds were open. The sun reflected off the brickwork of the adjacent home, filling the room with a yellow that seemed to be absorbed by the floral wallpaper. She walked to the center of the room and started to open the cardboard. The thought of investigating each part of the house as a relative extension of her father entertained her as she tore at the tape unsuccessfully. Feeling her old key again, she chose not to risk damaging it, opting instead to rip the cardboard itself. In spite of the abundance the previous homeowners had left behind, they had decided to remove every piece of cutlery as far as she could discern.

Carefully folded suits filled each box. Concluding her father would not be as amused as her to have his window filled with clothing, she instead selected to begin her pseudo investigation of her father's doppelgänger with the closet. An assortment of dust jackets hung empty, as if waiting for her. Smiling to herself at the ongoing similarities, she paused after filling the last sleeve, taking notice of the remaining suits that would have to go unguarded. She kicked the empty box toward the door and started with the second. Beneath the first two suits, wrapped in one of her mother's scarves, she found a grey oval stone. She remembered first discovering it as a child in her mother's art studio. Her mother had always been resistant about sharing the story behind keeping it but told her it was from the shore of the Black Sea and that she had carried it with her since she was a child. Having forgotten about it in the chaos of her mother's death, she picked up the scarf, hanging it in the deepest part of the closet, and placed the stone in her

pocket. Unconcerned with the remaining suits, she walked out of her father's room, down the hallway, past him still on the phone, and out the front door.

Racing down the street and around the corner to the back alleyway which divided the block for residential parking, she traced the outside of the buildings and their dark windows until she found hers. She stared at the tapestry of clothing which shined against the red brickwork in the early evening sun and felt the possible beginnings of a new life. Placing her hands in her pockets, she gripped her old key and mother's stone continuing down the alleyway, turning at the end toward the common.

Feeling nervous about exploring the city alone, she clutched the stone, and pulled up a map of Boston on her phone. The smooth texture against her fingers and the mild waves of its gradient calmed her mind and made her long for the ocean's shore. Inspecting where she could go, she decided on the Seaport and made her way across the common. She watched college students sunbathing, couples playing fetch with their dogs, and middle-aged men arguing amidst a pick-up game of baseball. Curious to see the way American's argued, she sat on the bleachers behind a chain-link fence. One man spoke so quickly she could not understand his meaning. He waved his hands and was kicking the pitcher's mound, throwing up clouds of reddish-brown dust. Another spoke slowly to the fast talking man, with a rough voice, calm but stern. The first man's tone stopped instantly, slowly rising in speed again, before the other man interjected, stopping him mid-sentence. Understanding only the broad sentiments, and fewer of the rules of the game, she found the cadence of the two, the first man, in particular,

wholly fascinating. The way the first man's emotions affected the speed and delivery of his words entranced her—sounding like improvisational tapdancing, she could only comprehend the man's meaning when he maintained a steady pace. However, even then, she struggled to decode their accents. Emotion in native English, she determined, was as much the draw of a viewer's attention as it was the hindrance to those observing. She could make sense of the second man's slow speech, but felt no sense of intrigue, despite the urgency of the situation. It was only after the second man concluded his final remark that she took any real interest in him at all, and that was only due to the sound his face made hitting the first man's fist.

Rushing away from the eruption of violence, she sprinted back past the sunbathers and toward the pack of dogs leaping after balls and frisbees. She noticed a concerned expression fill the faces of the dog owners as they turned toward her. Catching her breath, she waved to them and tried to smile, but realized her lips were shaking.

"Hey, is everything all right?" an older woman asked, yanking her dog away from the others.

Continuing to wave and trying to force a reassuring smile, she looked at her phone for an alternative route.

"Miss, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

She saw the other dog owners beginning to take notice of their developing exchange.

“I am fine,” she said as clearly as possible. Looking around for the direction her map indicated, she thanked the woman and walked east toward the carousel in the distance.

She touched her lips as she walked along the asphalt spotted with potholes. Her mind jumped to the way she and her father spoke, scanning for similarities between their Russian and English selves. Unable to define a clear division of the two, her attention rested on the approaching dismantled merry-go-round. The bodies of the horses had been removed from their poles yet chained up and locked to the metal base of the ride. A tired looking young man adjusted wires at the nearby electrical panel. Who she assumed to be his boss sat in a small mobile office space up the hill, occasionally glancing at his employee’s progress.

She stopped at the carousel to double-check she was going in the right direction when the young man looked up at her.

“Are you lost?” he asked, with greater energy than she could have expected.

Deciding it quicker than searching for the right words, she showed him the destination on her phone.

He moved closer, slowly—like a man double his age whose knees had lost their strength—and looked at where she was headed. “Bit of a walk. Would be faster to take the T.”

She gave him a confused look.

He scratched the back of his neck and readjusted himself to where she was looking. “Head in that direction. Should be able to cut right across the green,” he said, in what sounded to her like a whimper.

“Fix? It dead?” she asked, gesturing to the carousel.

He took a deep breath. She recoiled in her mind, believing she had bothered him too much and in front of his boss. Upset and embarrassed, she prepared for him to send her off.

He walked over and picked up one of the horses from the ground chucking, “Just resting up for tomorrow,” he said, moving its head like a puppet. “Kids ride these guys to death...,” he began, placing the horse back on the ground, “but that’s why we’re—,” he looked over at the office where his boss had gone missing and then back to her, “why *I’m* here,” he said, with a quick laugh.

Walking over to him, she knelt and pet the horse’s mane. “Hoping you bringing it life.”

Surprised, he nods as she stands back up and carries on across the grass.

Holding the stone in one hand, she follows the map to the Evelyn Moakley Bridge. By the time she started to cross the bridge, the sun had begun to set. Running the rest of the way, she took a sharp left at the end and cut through a busy parking lot. In the shadow of the off ramp, in a one floor, bright red building, happy looking families cracked crab claws and slurped butter.

She continued along, passing through a large brick archway and saw the docks. Searching for a way down, she found a small ramp behind an office building that dipped below the wraparound walking path. A bundle of rotting

posts tied together with wax rope propped up the end of the pier. She saw that in the other direction, the walkway extended for the next several blocks. Watching the buoys crash against the wake of speedboats in the distance, she sat on one of the posts and put away her phone. The sun had set. Lingered pools of light clung to the water's edge, dissipating into the harbor. Running her fingers across her mother's stone, she noticed how the blinking lights of the arriving and departing flights from the nearby airport looked no different at a glance from the sailing markers flashing in the water. She closed her eyes and listened to the waves break against the dock and concrete wall behind her. As if all at once, she felt the full weight of her body's exhaustion from the funeral planning to the sleepless day of travel to the U.S. The water rushing in and out of the seaweed sounded to her like the ocean was breathing and all she desired in that moment was to find her part of it the way her mother had seemingly done. She thought of throwing the stone—if by doing so she could somehow relieve herself of a fraction of the weight of the life her mother had left behind but decided to do so would only make her feel more alone. Feeling around in her other pocket, she felt the sharp teeth of her old home's key, and realized she hadn't yet asked her father for a new one. She decided that that is what she would do next, just as soon as she filled her lungs with enough salt to remind her of home.

Looking now at the glossy black door with a silver knob in its center at the top of the stairway, she finds herself comforted by the echoes of the South End stoop. Still, her feet feel too heavy to lift. Blood pumps against the lining of her

tennis shoes, tied too tight. All she can hear is the sound of her heart, filling the quiet of the moment. A sharp pain pinches her stomach, and she realizes she hasn't eaten since the evening before she left Boston.

She gladly strolls back toward the bodega, leaving her thoughts of what awaits behind. Approaching, she sees a group of Middle Eastern men in tailored suits. Leaning against a black Mercedes and sitting on milk crates, they smoke in the pale light of the store. The men's uniforms and demeanor resemble those of the private security guards her father and his political partners shared back in Russia. She listens to the way their tongues twist their words, like the way her father lied to her that his success as a businessman had severely compromised their safety and that the government was turning its back on them, threatened by his mounting influence, as bouquets and letters of condolence from the state filled their home. She feels strangled by her past and worries that the men have been sent to follow her because of her father's defection. Briefly, regret for disappearing overtakes her concern.

Attempting to clear her mind of her father and the consequences of his actions, one of the men, with strong, pronounced shoulders and long wavy hair tied up in a knot, attracts her attention. Based on the minor furrows of his brow, she assumes him to be no older than his early thirties. She admires the casual seriousness of how he stands with one leg crossed at the shin of the other, the slight arch of his back, and his constantly shifting brown eyes emphasizing his attentiveness to the others that are speaking. Flushed and sticky with sweat, she focuses on the sidewalk as she passes by. Her feet weightless now, graceful even,

she thinks, as she selects a sandwich from the refrigerator and leaves without their noticing.

She rounds the corner onto her street, grips her sandwich, and climbs the stairs, opening the heavy wooden door with the key in her other hand. At the first of several large mirrors in the foyer, she brushes her long black hair out of her face and presses the puffy bags below her blue eyes, searching for any sign of looseness. She reminds herself that she still has time to figure out what she wants to do with her life—that her father’s rash decision is her opportunity to finally envision something of her own. Alerted by headlights flashing through the transom window, she gathers herself and rushes up the stained green carpet to the second-floor landing. The smell of fresh paint fills her nose. Dried, cracked plaster snaps beneath her step. Collapsed, water damaged drywall, bulging from the curvature of the stairwell attracts her attention as she moves along and enters the darkness of her new room.

Catching her breath, she laughs instinctually, and hopes her embarrassment might ease her paranoia. Loose panes of glass rattle against a gust of wind as loud, angry voices guide her into the studio. Turning on the light, for a moment the room seems empty. A dark wood floor and tall open windows are all she can discern. Her eyes struggle to adjust to the brightness of the room. Slowly, the contours of the whitewashed furniture and blank walls define themselves. A large bed fills the center of the room. Silk curtains flit in the breeze. She shuts off the light and allows her vision to recover. She reasons that Uncle Sergey must be preparing to sell the property and wants a minimalist style for potential buyers.

Following the moonlight to the windows, she drops her backpack on one of the two dining chairs and unwraps her meal in the other. She watches her shadow on the walls, distorting the space into one less threatening. Her thoughts travel back to her first night in America, where in a room with family-tree wallpaper, in a bed she was told to have been hand-built from felling the yard of oaks, under a quilt stitched at each corner with an image, detailing the story of the house's construction, she felt more at home than the nothingness around her.

She removes a weathered postcard she received from Uncle Sergey announcing his UK citizenship five years prior. Flipping it over to an image of the Italian Garden, she runs her finger along the lily pads spotted with white flowers floating in the water. She smooths out the upright flakes of white ink until the reflective pool regains its shimmer. Daydreaming of tomorrow, she imagines hearing the high-pitched ringing of cicadas, the overcast skies breaking into an early morning blue, and rain pouring in the distance, filling the wind with the freshness of life. Contemplating if cicadas are in season, or if London even has them, she's distracted by the scent of someone grilling outside.

Directly across from her, seagulls huddle on crumbled black brick balconies, and rusted fire escapes. She leans out of the concrete windowsill and looks down to the alley. The ground level is separated from the street by the many walls of the complex and is subdivided into private courtyards. Beneath a large red umbrella, almost directly below her, a family enjoys their steak dinner by candlelight. Looking back to the bread in her other hand, she takes a cold bite.

Glancing up several floors, she hears people yelling in an unfamiliar language. Between them, bright linens, dresses, and rugs hang on laundry lines suspended in the open air. At the top floor, someone knocks the smoldering embers from their pipe. She watches the ash fall past the clotheslines and burn out before reaching the ground. The yelling persists. She leans back in. Disgusted by the tenement and bittered by her false hope of a luxury location, she debates whether money really changes a person or just their outward behavior. Disquieted by the emptiness of her room, she reluctantly listens to the voices of the alley with the nesting gulls. As if in response to her unease, the family downstairs turns on the radio and fills the alley with song. She finishes eating to the sound of a saxophone wailing above static as someone twists the dial.

Suddenly overcome by the exhaustion of her journey, she fills a glass of water in the sink, feeling the cool tile against her feet and closes the blinds to undress. As she lies down in bed, placing the postcard on her nightstand, she wonders if Uncle Sergey might have a floor unit available if she asks nicely. The gentle warmth of the room eases her to sleep. In her dreams, she sees the well-dressed Middle Eastern man with wavy hair walking through a graveyard. Beyond the mausoleums and tombstones, a crowd forms around a burial plot. The Middle Eastern man greets her father, consoling him, offering him his sympathies for his loss. The two move into the crowd where several undercover police arrest her father but allow him to stay and say his farewells in handcuffs. Her father cries as the casket is lowered. Back at her Boston home, she's dismissed the idea of attending her mother's funeral. Instead, she frantically fills her backpack with

whatever spare clothes she can find and leaves for the airport with a ticket for London.

She wakes up panting. Her sheets are damp with sweat. Rushing for her glass, she chugs its contents, partly choking, forgetting to breathe. Her senses returning, she takes a cold shower, letting her mind go blank as the water rushes over her. Drying her hair in a towel, she quickly changes into a tank top and shorts. She tosses the towel into the hamper. Laying out her remaining clothes, she reasons she only has enough for a few more days. She reads the digital clock on the oven and realizes she slept in later than expected. Attributing it to her sense of time resetting, she slips on her shoes, and pockets the postcard, intent on making the most of the afternoon. Just before she leaves, she remembers that unlike in Russia, she doesn't have a maid to clean up after her, and so walks to the hamper, fetches the towel and hangs it in the bathroom on her way out.

Through the iron fence across the road, she sees cyclists and joggers pass each other in the park. Waiting to cross, a cloud of exhaust stings her eyes as a bus pulls off into its station beside her. Wiping away the tears, she takes advantage of the lull of traffic to skip between bumpers and through the gate, abandoning the incessant honking behind her. The walking paths are crowded with tour groups. A French speaking guide points to a section of grass occupied by picnickers and begins to describe something she can only understand to be important by how much the woman waves her hands. The intensity of the woman's face reminds her of her father's when she pressed him on his unconvincing reason for leaving Russia. She asked him why *he* couldn't just be

the one to leave—she even proposed visiting him once he settled and she had time to grieve—but he only kept repeating that it was time for them to go and that *Blood is all that matters now... family must stay together to survive.*

Everything seemed uncertain. All her friends had married and begun families or followed their career across the country. The few she tried to keep in contact with felt distant and uninterested in her life. She wanted to relate to them and their ambitions, but she believed she had no way to express these desires to them in a way they could understand and so never tried. Still, it did not seem right to her to leave the country the day after her mother's funeral.

If her father had continued with his flimsy claims of business opportunities in the same indifferent tone he spoke of all things work-related she would never have agreed. But it was the way his body bent, and his voice shivered when he said: *Now is the time to escape this cursed country* that convinced her. His pleading to move to the US—it could have been anywhere in that moment—communicated something no carefully deliberated rhetoric could ever produce. She hated that while she concerned herself with what casket to select, and who to invite to her mother's funeral, her father was busy making travel arrangements. Like her father, she wanted change—dramatic enough to regain the control she felt grief had stolen away. And so, the day before the burial, she agreed to leave her home in Russia.

She continues along past the tour groups until she hears the splashing of the fountains. Pushing past other travelers, she peers between the wall of shoulders surrounding the reflecting pool to see a fog of insects buzzing just

above the water's surface. The lily pads rise and fall in the ripples from children casting stones to the embarrassment of their parents. A mother tugs her son away for trying to hit a small bird washing itself. Filling their space before anyone else had the opportunity, she holds up the idyllic scene in the postcard to the chaotic masses on all sides and feels a tightness in her chest. While attempting to match the edges of the pool exactly, someone bumps into her, knocking the card from her hand. Landing on the text from Uncle Sergey, the image floats on the water. She falls to her knees to retrieve it, scraping her skin on the sharp rocks. Reaching for the card, she sees a water bug crawling toward the edge of a lily pad. Her fingertip grazes the postcard and a sense of desperation swells within her. Leaning out further over the water, she stares as the bug takes a step onto the pool and glides across its surface. The ink begins to fade. She stretches herself further, considering jumping in after it. She wishes she was as weightless as the insect striding into the center of the pool. Her cheeks burn. Her desperation peaks. Thoughts of failure and her father flood her mind. Her breathing hastens. She sees her mother in her reflection. Closing her eyes, she continues to reach and eventually feels the postcard between her fingers. Pulling back, she hears the soggy paper drip and knows it's real. She stands up, keeping her eyes closed. Wiping it dry with her shirt, she presses the cool postcard against her burning skin. She opens her eyes with tears and turns around intent to scream at the one that hit her only to find people running in every direction, oblivious. In that instant she realizes what it must be like to be a water bug; to walk without a footprint, to leave behind only a ripple—an echo of something that once was.

Holding the postcard tight against her chest, she crouches over and screams into herself, disturbing only the couple taking photos beside her. After a moment, they adjust to focus their lens on the stone fountain. Looking down at the damp piece of paper in her hands she walks through the crowd and enters a nearby café.

The cashier's eyes buzzed between Sasha and the growing line extending out from the shade of the awning into the sun behind her. Searching the menu for a familiar name, she realizes she should have packed a tin of Zavarka tea and wonders if anything in London could compare to its smokiness. Impatient, the cashier signals for her to order or step aside. With an impulsive jerk of her arm, she points to one of the words written on the wall. The cashier nods and sets her jittery eyes on the next customer. A moment later the barista, who seemed to be scrambling to meet the growing list of orders, hands her her drink with an indifferent "Thank you for coming."

She finds an empty seat by the door. Placing the postcard on a napkin to dry, she wraps her hands around the ceramic cup, letting it warm her fingers. Savoring its bitterness, she pats the postcard and reads the letter from Uncle Sergey, hoping it remained intact:

Sasha,

Hap— 18th—

I'm so —ud of the — you've become. I remember — you

— born my sis— — — worr— — — — complications

— — — pre— b—th — — proved — — — — — a fighter! I

*wish I could be — in-person, but I prom— y— I will — it
 u— to you! If this card is any indication... I FINALLY DID
 IT! Your U— S— is finally a —!!! I'm not sure the ne—
 time I will be in Russia but the — is — — in London!
 — lo— Un— —*

She dries a tear with the napkin and then continues to pat the postcard on both sides, paying no mind to the distorted image on the back. She places the napkin and postcard down and notices herself relaxing from the heat. Her eyes glance around the café while she stirs a splash of milk into the nearly full cup. She passes over a young couple holding hands in the corner, the middle-aged man dressed in black leaning on the wall beside by the counter, the barista working tirelessly between orders, eventually resting on a young girl racing through the crowd outside. The metal spoon clinks against the porcelain as she sets it on her plate.

“Davaj, Pap, Posh’li!” the young girl screams, waving behind her.

She looks down to the colors mixing together then back up to see an older man chasing his daughter with a gleeful expression, keeping pace so as to not lose sight, but never fast enough to catch and spoil their fun. She brings the tea to her cracked lips, breathes in its aroma and lets out a fog of steam. Gazing around the café from the rim of her cup, she sees the man leaning by the counter grinning at the display of parenting outside. He looks like the manager, she thinks. His outfit appears deliberately distinct and professional. She watches the way his face crinkles and softens beneath his thin greying beard until he turns and meets her

eyes. He nods as she gives a light smile and turns away. His observation of the scene and of the whole café makes her feel he could maybe even be the owner.

Taking a sip, she continues to dry her postcard, rereading Uncle Sergey's letter, trying to remember the feeling it gave her. After some time, she memorizes every line, but struggles to relive the same sensation when she repeats the words in a whisper. She thinks it must be because it was written in his hand and fears what would have happened to the emotion if all the words had been washed away. No longer interested in anything outside, and desperate to think of something else, she flips the card over and examines what remains of the image.

The water of the reflecting pool has spilled down the center of the postcard, blurring the scene. Swirls of green from the freshly mowed lawn and lily pads spin together with the dripping blue. She presses her thumb into the congealing mess of teal and thinks of her swimming pool that always had too much chlorine back home in Russia. Her mother spent her days swimming laps, saying she never felt more at peace than when she was floating, her ears just below the surface. Sasha worried about damaging her hair and sat on the edge, soaking her feet. Her mother always laughed at this, proudly styling the green tinge her blonde hair developed whenever they went out. When she was young, Sasha told her that it looked like she was wearing seaweed on her head. She regretted saying this now and removed her thumb. She follows the tempest of colors into the pattern of her fingerprint with her eyes. After a moment, she wipes her hand clean on the napkin, takes a final sip of her tea, and stands up with the postcard.

Moving toward the front desk, she hopes Uncle Sergey will be able to tell her more about what makes London so special when she sees him. Realizing the line to order has only continued to grow, she approaches the middle-aged man in black. “I would like to paying,” she says to him, hoping her assumption about his being the manager is correct.

Chuckling, “So would I,” he says, tapping his fingers against his thigh to an imperceptible melody. “You think they’d care much if I came back later?”

Surprised by his answer, she waits a moment before shaking her head.

He grasps his fingers in his other hand.

Softening his tone, “I’m sorry. It was a joke.” He pushes himself off the wall with his back. “I didn’t mean to confuse you,” he says, raising an open hand to her and resting the other on his chest.

“I understanding. I am rush too,” she says.

Noticing the postcard, “It’s lovely, especially now in the summer,” he says, pointing to the paper with the hand that was resting over his heart. “Are you here on vacation?” he asks, smiling.

“Visiting family friend if ever server arrive,” she says, peering through the horde of customers. “You’re from here?”

“Yeah. Never traveled much except the States.”

She nods, “From there. I America. Yes,” she heard herself say, unsure exactly where she felt at home, yet settling into her utter rejection of London.

His thin eyebrows rise. Before he can respond, the barista arrives to settle their bills. The man signals for her to go first as the barista looks on for one of

them to pay. The two walk outside keeping pace with one another. In the distance, a fresh crowd gathers around the Italian garden.

“Forgive me... I wouldn’t have guessed you were from the states. What part are you from?” he asks.

“My English...,” she says, raising her hand and covering her mouth.

He puts his hands up to indicate for her to stop, that he is sorry, and she has nothing to defend.

“No. My... my father say to me,” she says, lowering her hand and gesturing to the two of them. “My father say to me to practice for this.” She lowers her hands. She considers his question as the indistinct colors of her surroundings slowly recede from their blur back into to their forms, like a mirage dissipates as one approaches the banality of reality. Still unsure of the accuracy of her previous response: *America*, her fingers caress the congealing ink of the postcard, and she is reminded of the permanence of change. “Moved recent to Boston, Massachusetts. Not long from Russia,” she says, with a slight waver in her voice, thinking of her mother.

“Oh,” he says. “I’ve only ever passed through on a layover. It was dark when we landed but I got a glimpse of the skyline.”

As her eyes adjust, she focuses upon the tranquility of his voice—peaceful and undisturbed by the clamor of others passing by.

“Do you traveling much?”

He snorts. “No. I... I like to know what to expect where I’m at. It’s a matter of familiarity.”

“If you going to new place you can learn to expect, yes?”

“I don’t think I’m a huge fan of change is what it’s really about.”

She points to the buildings under construction beside the park. “Changing always.”

He laughs. “If it’s gradual...,” he pauses, “if it is slow, I can expect it.”

“I not liking change sudden too,” she says, softly. “If not you too, where in states going?”

“Florida.”

She felt his tone change somehow. It maintained its calm but felt slower, less engaged. Facing him, she squinted, attempting to discern his expression and make sense of her confusion. However, by the time her vision returned whatever oddity afflicted him had vanished. “Why?”

He thinks for a moment before pointing at the sky. “It’s sunny today—good bit of luck, honestly for England.” He slows his pace. “After too long in the clouds you... you start to feel it in your skin,” he says, rubbing his arm. “Your body senses it’s been disconnected somehow from the world. London,” he says points to people walking by them, “it’s great at reminding you that there are people and places far away from us. But just because they’re here and see can see and interact with folks from there... this place has a way of keeping you separate.”

“The sun?” she asks, matching his pace.

He smiles at her. “A necessary change,” he says, returning to his original stride. “And then you soak it in and realize that you’ve been without it so long that you can’t handle it,” he says with a laugh.

She looks at him confused.

“Red,” he says, pointing to the pale skin on his hand. “Forget to live—.”

“Burning you then,” she says, laughing along.

“Exactly!”

“Then... are you knowing shopping street?” she asks. “Need dressing for tonight.”

“Right! It’s...,” he catches himself. “You’ve not been here before, have you?”

She offers a slight smile.

“I’m heading there now,” he says, scratching his stubble. “I can show you.”

“Thank you.”

As he leads the way, she thinks back to the Middle Eastern man and finds herself surprised by the comfort she now feels of being surrounded by people as she follows the confident gait of the man beside her.

“What about the garden? Did you see it?” he asks, slowing down, matching her pace as they pass by.

She laughs and shows him what remains of the image on the postcard.

“Better imagining.”

He looks at the picture and smirks. “I’m William by the way.”

“Sasha. I am Sasha,” she says as clearly as possible.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. Why shopping important now, William?”

He places his hands in his pocket. “My daughter’s birthday is coming up soon and she’s been so great. I really want to surprise her this year with something special,” he says, with an infectious glow.

“How old is she being now?”

“Sixteen,” he says, as they step onto a bridle path.

“But you looking not too old?”

“That’s very kind of you to say. I’m... well I’m old enough—let’s say that. My wife and I got together when we were 20. Had Jenny a few years later and that’s about it.”

“What like living here?”

“Besides the shit weather?” He stops. “I shouldn’t really say that. It has its charm. I don’t suppose it’s much different than any other city,” he says, thinking a moment. “Why do you ask?”

“Maybe I moving here. Uncle Sergey... family friend... he help me. But... from your telling... I’m not confidence.”

“I hope what I’ve said didn’t dissuade you,” he says, concerned. If you’re going for the location though... I can’t say that’s what matters most—to me at least. It’s the connections and it sounds like you already have that covered with your uncle.”

“How you knowing place not mattering if you don’t travel much?”

“Good question. From the times that I’ve had to—it’s been enough times now—I’ve been to some beautiful places by myself and felt nothing. At the same time... the happiest moments I’ve had have been with my daughter. I never mattered where we were. Last trip... we were sitting in the living room playing cards. Her mom was in the kitchen making dinner. We were just talking. *She* was talking. I—you get my point,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets.

“What’s got you moving out here for? Work? A relationship?”

“Those maybe making better sense. New starting... I’m hope.”

“What are you, 26, 27? What kind of a new start could you want?”

She points to the post card, “Better imagining.”

He turns to look at her brown eyes watering behind her long black hair.

“Listen, yeah, I get it,” he says, scratching his head. “When I didn’t have anything, I did the same as you. My family...,” he begins, just as the crack of a riding crop sounds from behind them. The two turn to see a line of horses with riders that she believes could not be more than eleven years old. Led by an overly enthusiastic instructor demanding his students keep their form.

Sasha and William push off to either side of the path, Sasha into the open field where the lush grass extends into the distance, and William into the brush of dark leaves and ivy separating the park from the busy street. As the final horse gallops past them Sasha watches the tiny body of a child in a bright blue helmet bounce up and down with every trot.

“Best to be mindful of that around here,” William said, stepping back into the middle of the trail.

“Loshadi!” she says, rushing back to William’s side.

William looks back at her and tilts his head to one side.

After a moment she clarifies herself to him, “Hor-ses,” she announces with deliberation, signaling down the path ahead of them.

A sense of clarity washes over William’s face and he smiles back at her, turning forward once again. “Losh-adi,” yes?

“Yes,” she says, beginning to walk again, admiring the hoof prints left in the golden dirt. “You ever riding?”

“No,” he said, walking beside her. “Work is about all I do at this point.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a banker. I advise people how to invest.”

“Like Uncle Sergey then. How he coming to London.”

“Oh, his job brought him out here? From Boston too?”

“He coming from Russia years before,” she says. “Not anymore liking government. He invest in hotel and gaining faster citizenship.”

“I see,” he says, stoically.

Sensing a strange unease she asks, “For your workings...,” she considers her words, “you have to believing in the stock?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “There’s a lot of research and experience that goes into making that decision.”

“So, workings for you is meaning finding?”

“Close! It would be more accurate to say I am finding value in things.”

“What difference is? I apologize. My English....”

He doesn't respond. They walk along the path looking through the rows of trees and vines and branches woven through the iron fence. In his silence she wonders if she offended him or if her lack of fluency had made her meaning incomprehensible.

"Capital," he eventually said, looking ahead. For a moment, the silence returned. "Money," he clarified, turning to face her, again with one hand open and the other on his chest.

This time, however, she saw his gesture not as a gesture for understanding but as a defense, as if he were preparing for her to strike him for his answer.

"It's not what I'd like it to be," he said, "but that's the only one I know. I've tried to take some time off now that I'm at the stage in my career... but I can't—I feel sick if I do. Some part of me... I'm sure it's not even my job that tells me that—it only encourages me and gives me every excuse to work and forget about anything else." He stops to catch his breath. "I think you should do what you're doing... I'd do it too if I could."

They walk quietly along the edge of Hyde Park until they reach Oxford Street. William takes a few steps ahead of Sasha.

"So, they have everything you need here, think you'll be all right?" he asks, moving toward the crowd.

"Which is good for dressing you think? Not much timing to choose. Meeting Uncle Sergey soon," she asks, with a slight waver in her voice.

William's face softens. "Here," he says, waving for her to continue following him, "they should have something in your size."

William clears the way for Sasha through the street. After a few blocks they arrive at a department store.

Climbing the stairs to the women's section, "What your daughter liking?"

"Something bright, colorful—outfits that make you look a little longer than you normally would. Last time," he thinks, examining the options on the racks, "I got her something like this," he says, indicating to a frilly, long sundress.

"She young woman, maybe somethings like this," she says, pulling out a muted blue Culotte style. "Good for formal and more casual dating trips. Many uses of occasion was what I remembering from my teenager years."

William's face crumples, attempting to express for the first time, Sasha thinks, his feelings on the inevitability of his daughter dating. He picks up two in the style she pointed to, and searches for a third. Inspired by her recommendation, Sasha browses for something of her own.

"What your daughter wanting be?" she asks, picking out a black pencil skirt and blouse.

He continues, sifting through the various outfits undeterred. "Maybe something with pockets? Dressed don't usually have pockets," he mumbles to himself.

"I will changing," she says, disappearing into the fitting room. As she slips on the dress, she thinks to herself how wonderful it would be if they could become friends. Stepping out from behind the drapes to examine herself in the

mirror she notices her cheeks are red and imagines this to be a sign that London does have things to offer her.

She returns to find him grabbing various sizes and throwing them into a pile.

“She’s growing a lot so I thought I’d make sure I got some options,” he says, noticing her curiosity. “You’re leaving in that?”

“Meetings with Uncle Sergey. Also, she can always returning them if not. More chance for you two together shopping,” she says, signaling that she is ready to leave.

He smiles, his eyes jumping to the door. He struggles to carry everything, so she decides to help. They move toward the register. Sasha smirks watching William struggle to hold onto the array of clothing.

Noticing her look, “You came here but didn’t bring a dress?”

“It was sudden decision.”

“What about your family?”

She shakes her head as they take a step forward in line. “I have Uncle Sergey.”

“Are you staying with him at the hotel while you’re here?”

“He giving me places to stay while I decide.”

They take another step forward. William approaches the counter and sets his pile down to the satisfied look of the clerk. Slowly, they scan each item.

Looking up between folding each item, “You’re a very lucky girl to have such a generous father,” the clerk says.

Sasha and William give each other a look before politely correcting them. William points to a form on the wall. The clerk passes it to him with a pen. He quickly fills out the details and hands it back.

“What’s that?”

“I’m just having them sent to Jenny. It’s easier and they can wrap them up all fitting for the occasion.”

“My father doing that too. I think better in person—even with bad wrappings,” she says, checking out at the adjacent counter.

“I’ll bring some chocolate or cake on the day. I’ll write a card too!”

Sasha smiles in approval.

“I should going now,” she says, stopping by the exit. “Here,” she says, pulling out a piece of paper and writes down her address, “come by later and we talking more. My phone not set up here yet.”

He takes the paper.

“Friend is rare in new place. Changings not always bad.”

She notices a small smile forming at the edges of his lips. As she does, the clerk that checked him out rushes over, waving to William.

“Sir, I apologize, you left before I could say so, can you clarify for me where you’d like this sent?”

Turning away from Sasha, in a slight whisper, barely audible above the sound of the shoppers in the background, “Florida,” William says, leaning into the man, urging him away.

By the time William turned around Sasha was gone.

Sasha pushes through the crowd until she reaches a nearby bus station. She looks at the sign indicating the various destinations and pulls out her phone. Looking at the time, she realizes it is much later than she expected and swipes through her phone for her map of the area. Seeing how long it would take to walk back and unsure as to which way the next bus might take her, she feels a tightness in her chest. If she can't make it back in time for Uncle Sergey's driver, he is likely to take that as an insult. She remembers Uncle Sergey to be a generous man but never the kind to be disrespected. He was very similar to her father in that respect, she thought. She sits on the metal bench and watches a line of busses approach. As they move closer, the tightness in her chest increases. Why couldn't William be honest? Did he even have a daughter? He seemed so sincere, she figured, that someone important must live in Florida. It didn't make any sense. She looks at her phone again, clicking on the alternative routes back to her apartment when the screen begins to blur, and she feels hot tears drip onto her thighs. She sniffles and dries her eyes as discreetly as she can. She stands up, her eyes still watering, and walks away from the distorted faces glancing in her direction. Doublechecking her wallet for her things, she waves down a taxi.

Slamming the door, she tells the driver the address and disappears into her phone. The woman nods, recognizing the situation, and starts the faire meter. Sasha felt the eyes of the driver on her through the rearview mirror along the way. They drive silently. Sasha stares at the map and their creeping progress along

Hyde Park toward Queen's Gardens. She feels the car come to a stop and hands the woman the crumpled number of bills and change left over from purchasing her dress.

"Thank you," she says, "I hope you get over 'em quick. Relationships are always messy."

Sasha thinks to correct her but lets the matter go. She enters the bedroom, leaving the lights off. A man from the floor unit is screaming on the phone in his backyard. Undressing, she lays out her outfit on the bed and steps into the bathroom to take a shower. The hot water relaxes her sore feet. Drying her hair, she styles it like her mother, wavy thick strands flowing in every direction. She slips into her dress again and leaves the apartment and the voice still shouting from below. She walks down the stairs and waits for her car beneath the portico.

Exactly when Uncle Sergey claimed, a Bentley pulls up and a chauffeur dressed in a three-piece suit steps out and opens the rear door for her with a smile. She nods to the man and enters the car. He shuts the door for her and says something, holding his earpiece before he gets in himself.

Turning the look at her, "Miss Sasha, how it is you are doing?" he asks in a heavy Russian accent.

"My mozhem govorit' po russki," she says.

He turns around and puts the car in drive. "Sergey not like that much," he says, pulling away from the apartment. "For work with him cannot speaking Russian." Waving his hand, "*Get another job! Get back to Russia if you want to speaking the dog's tongue!*" he repeats in his best English accent.

“Ya nikomu ne skazhu,” she says, softly.

He shakes his head and raises the partition. She scratches her nail into the leather arm rest and closes her eyes.

They quickly arrive at the hotel. The bright lights of the grand entry shine through the tinted windows. She takes a breath as the man walks around the back to open her door. She keeps her eyes shut and runs her finger along the damp edges of the postcard in her purse. Breathing in the rich leather she exhales sharply and opens her eyes as the door swings open and people on the street peer in over the chauffeur’s shoulder to look at her.

Sergey greets her at the top of the steps of the entry. He wears a white double-breasted suit, a white shirt with a maroon tie with white polka dots and a matching handkerchief hanging from his breast pocket. “Sasha, my dear,” he says with a practiced Posh accent, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and squeezing tightly. “My dear, it is so wonderful to see you. Please, this way,” he says indicating for them to enter as he releases her.

“Losing weight you have, Uncle,” she says jovially, attempting to match his energy.

He grabs the flab of fat hanging below his belt. “The work here keeps me busy! Keeps me fit!” he says, shaking the loose skin at her with a rough laugh.

The two enter the hotel. Sergey leads them into the connected restaurant just beyond the lobby where families and businessmen wait in line for the receptionist guided by stanchions. The restaurant is mostly empty. Sergey stops at

a family sized round table in the center of the room. He pulls a chair out for Sasha and then takes a seat himself.

“So, tell me, how are you liking London?” he asks, smiling.

Glancing between the menu and the unnatural whiteness of his teeth, “It is much different than I expect.”

Waving over the waiter, “Oh?” he says with an exasperated tone. He points to something on the menu and looks back to her. “What did you expect?”

“I going to Italian Garden in postcard you send,” she takes it out from her purse and place it on the table.

“For you, miss?” the waiter asks.

She points to a dish, the waiter writes something in his pad, collects the menus and leaves. Sergey picks up the postcard and examines what is left of the image, then flips it over and tries to read what he had written years ago.

“The people is crazy here,” she says, waving her hands. “Even at the apartment! Yelling all the time. Leaning out of windows. It’s disgusting with the birds, and the clothing hanging in the wind. The place not different than back home in Russia or even America.” Momentary, hearing what she just said, she thinks of what William said about what makes a place special. She notices the change in his expression and places her hands in her lap, pausing briefly before continuing. “Is floor unit available? Location is perfection. Really. But people are problems.”

Sergey rubs his cleanly shaved chin and places the postcard on the table.

“How long do you expect to be staying here?”

She furrows her brow, looks down at the dining cloth then away, across the room to the hostess standing at the check-in podium.

“How is your father doing?”

She sucks in her cheeks and bites the inside of her bottom lip.

“I’m sorry for not attending the funeral.”

Her eyes pass across the room back to him.

Tapping his chin with his finger pensively, “I couldn’t, you understand. There was no option to.” He stares at his reflection in her vacant black eyes. “When I became a citizen here the people in Russia felt... offended—even more so when I started saying all I have been about them. I have to keep something of a connection for all of this to be as it is,” he says, indicating to the hotel. “Business. Purely. They wouldn’t let me back now.” He taps the table with the tip of his finger. “Evgenia—.”

“Missing her.” She wipes away a forming tear.

He reaches out across the table. She slowly takes his hand. His thick fingers are cold and softly squeeze her own until they start to sweat. “My sister loved you so much. It is good to be with family at times like this. Thank you for being here. But your father... he needs you more.”

She takes her hand back, drying her palm on her napkin.

“He’s grieving just the same as you are. Take a little time to clear your head and then go back.”

“Not like that,” she says, “there not family there now.”

“Family is always there for you.”

“They why you leaving us? You go away and mother is alone.”

“I did not leave you or my sister. I don’t appreciate you saying what happened like that. I told you, Sasha,” he says, clearing his throat, “business was here. I was not free there.”

“If not freedom, why mother can’t come with you?” she asks. “You knowing my father... what he doing to her and did nothing. I’m sorry. It just not clear.” She adjusts herself in her seat. “If you not leaving why no Russian? Why citizenship?”

“For ourselves... it is sometimes important that we do what makes sense to us. It does not always have to be clear to others.”

“Make clearer then!”

“In Russia... I would never be free to say what I want, to be and do what I want. The government controls everything there. There’s a limit even now. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was worse... much worse. But it’s only changed and now... I’m concerned it’s leading to something much darker.” He takes a sip of water. “I had an opportunity to make a new start—to finally express myself as I am here. I am sorry that my sister never had that opportunity. I’m sorry that I could not give that to her. You’re father.... Sasha, why do you ask me about freedom?”

She looks at him confused.

“Why do you criticize me about my choice to pursue freedom when you’re here pretending to be doing the same?”

“I *am* pursuing freedom!”

“Your freedom extends as far as your father agrees to fund it...!”

“Is it then wrong to be distancing myself from a man who did abuse my mother?”

“Why didn’t you leave earlier?” he says, looking around the room. “Why didn’t you and my sister leave him when she was still alive?”

Sasha stared at him unsure how to answer.

“Because you are a child, and my sister was weak. I am here because I saw an opportunity and took it.”

“Yes, and I do that now too,” she says. “I still with my father’s money, you said, yes?”

He looks her in the eyes.

“Yes. I do what I can do with resources limited,” she says, looking back at him. “Same as you. Hating Russian but keeping contact for business—for *freedom*. We are the same. We both are running. Difference between is that my destination is real free. Not kind like you... not like settle or compromise,” she says, getting up from the table.

“It doesn’t matter where you go, Sasha,” he says, standing up, pushing the table away from himself. “Mne zhal’.”

Sasha continues out of the hotel and onto the street. She walks back to her apartment, allowing her mind to settle into the possibilities of what awaits her next. Knowing she has no alternative family members to reach out to, she wonders if there is any possibility for reconciliation with Uncle Sergey or if he will demand she leave the apartment and if so, how soon?

Finally returning to the familiarity of her neighborhood, she approaches the bodega and is disappointed the Middle Eastern man are not there again. Looking through the glass, she decides to enter and leaves with a bottle of champagne, intent on forgetting the day's events.

Sasha returned from the Seaport to her new townhouse in Beacon Hill late in the night. A light rain on the way back coated on the cracked asphalt and cobblestone paths. The headlights from the passing cars made the streets shimmer as they passed her moving up the stairs to her front door. Through the thin drapes, she could see her father sitting in the living room. She considered how odd it was that he was not working or out with colleagues as she reached for the doorknob. Surprised to find it locked, she waited for her father to react from the living room. Staring at him, he seemed utterly undisturbed. She pulled on the door harder, expecting the rattling to startle him from his seeming relaxation. Despite her efforts, he never responded. She resigned herself to the brass knocker and after only the first hit, she saw him rise from the couch and open the door.

"I not expect you to find here so late," she said, entering the foyer.

"You remembered your English," her father said, walking back into the living room.

"Not seeming worth another fighting," she said, removing her shoes and walking over to him.

“It was my hope you would also consider moving here an opportunity for change,” he said, leaning into the sofa cushions and crossing one leg over the other.

“Do you thinking would be able to giving me a house key?”

He sighs. “I understand the language is challenging and I want you to know how happy I am that you’re trying. Are you tired? Where did you go? You should get some rest. I’ll have a key for you tomorrow—there’s still a lot that needs to be done,” he said, tapping his leg. “We’re off to a good start though. I’m happy you’re starting to feel like this can be your home.”

“Just needing to get in.”

“Well, I plan on working from home from now on so... I can always just let you if that’s your concern.”

The two looked at one another across the room. He seemed to have made himself entirely at home since she’d left earlier.

“Of course, you can have your own key,” he said. “I’m just concerned we won’t see each other much if I do. I know you’re going through a lot right now and my being here is just a way to show you that you’re not alone.” He sighed. “Your mother’s death showed me just how valuable the time you have with those you love is. I don’t want us to feel like strangers living under the same roof, okay?”

“Yes, father.”

“Things are going to be different now, Sasha. Your mother’s death also revealed to me exactly how important it is that we communicate transparently. I

you're overwhelmed, if you need some space... let me know. That goes for me too! I'll do my best to be honest and answer any questions you have if you're ever confused about anything. I hope that by doing this... it will also help you practice your English."

Sasha reached into her pocket and removed the stone she found inside her mother's scarf. "Tell me here about it," she said, handing him the smooth rock.

He rolled the stone in his hands and between his fingers. "Your mother's?"

She nodded.

"I think she'd like you to have that scarf you found it in. I-I'll keep this one, if you don't mind. It...", he began, leaning forward toward her, "at one time, ancient Greeks called the Black Sea 'Pontos Axeinos...' the 'Hostile Sea.' Historians claim that's due to its storminess and distinct lack of islands. After colonizing the coastline, however, the ancient Greeks adjusted the name to 'Pontos Exueinos...' the 'Hospitable Sea.' Your mother and I met fishing on the water as children. Her grandfather was a fisherman and well she was quite talented all the same. The sky was clear. Only a slight breeze. Nothing like the ancient Greeks described. The tides though were what brought us together. I was unexperienced and terrified. I fought against it until I was couldn't lift my oars. She knew to let go. To let the tides take her where they were because she knew there was nothing that she could do to stop them. I fought and she gave in and we somehow ended up in the same place in the middle of the sea. The ancient Greeks claimed the Black Sea was hostile due to its lack of islands... but I can't tell you

what seeing her out there meant.... We found a shoreline in each other that moment. She saved my life and I... spent the rest of her life attempting to make it up to her. This,” he shook the stone in his hand, “this is the first thing I touched when we finally reached land. There were rescue ships and search parties called—but whatever I saw before had been lost, I think. Because, when I got back to land, I had been given a new life and I knew exactly who that was owed to. Now... it has been an accident that brought us together—one I would not wish to exchange for anything—and an accident that has separated us—one I would give my life to revert.”

“Thank you, father,” she said, noticing the tears forming in his eyes. “Can I to being with you honest?”

He nodded.

“Mother, her dying not an accident. Not really.”

Her father blinked away the fog in his eyes. “Sasha. It was. The doctors did the autopsy. She had a seizure right before the crash. Witnesses came forward too. I’m sorry. It *was* an accident.”

“No!”

“I understand you want your mother’s death to have some great justification. I really understand that. I want that more than anyone...! But sadly... things happen to good people.”

“You happen...!”

“What do you mean?”

“Mother driving because of you.”

“Sasha, your mother was unwell. She was struggling psychologically. She took that car. We’ve discussed this.”

“Unwell of *you*! Unwell from *you*!”

“Sasha—.”

“She driving away because scared. You hurting her. I saw her. I saw pain.”

“I never hurt my wife! I gave her everything...”

“Loney. You put her alone and I watch. When hurting... money, gift, trip. Where did go you?” she asked, walking up to him. “I missing my mother. But not missing much as she did you.”

He stared at her, infuriated.

“I missing my mother... because you,” she said, glaring back at him. “My mother dying is because you give too much and are too little...!” She didn’t wait for a response. She could see all he wanted to say in his face as she walked to her bedroom and closed the door.

The next morning when he went to check on her, she was gone. Her bed was made and the key to their old home lay on the windowsill, glimmering in the sun.

Arriving at Queen’s Gardens, she sees William sitting on the black and white checkered steps outside of her apartment building. She is surprised by his presence before recalling that she gave him her address before she left. Ignoring the prospect of engaging with him, she walks past him and turns away from the

buildings, toward the gate into the Residents' Gardens. Retrieving her key, she fiddles with the lock until it opens. She takes a seat at one of the iron tables beside a mossy stone birdbath.

"I'd like to apologize," William says, through the dense foliage surrounding the garden.

"I not wanting to see you. Do from there. Be louder. Needing something to toasting to," she says, popping the cork off her bottle.

"Here," he says, offering her a flower through the leaves.

She takes a sip from the bottle before leaning in to smell it. "It is fake?" she asks, before grabbing it from his hand to inspect it. "It is fake! You brining plastic flower for giving sorry?"

"It's from my daughter. Please... let me in and I'll explain. I would like you to understand."

She heard a vulnerability in his voice unfamiliar and fragile. "Fine. No drinking then. Just you talking," she says, walking over to the gate to let him in.

"Thank you," he says, his eyes soft and kind.

"Speaking now then," she says, signaling for him to start.

"Can I show you what I mean about the flower?" he asks, opening his hand to her.

"Giving sorry gift then taking back not good beginnings," she said, taking another sip and handing him the flower back.

He twirls it in his hand. "My daughter made it for me the last time I saw her. That was about four years ago. I—it is her sixteenth birthday soon and those

dressess were for her. My wife and I got divorced when Jenny was eleven. My work... my wife felt I was more focused on the well-being of others. She was right...! I justified what I was doing by showing her just how much money my care for others could provide *us*. It wasn't about the money. My daughter—.”

Sasha offers him the bottle. He grabs it and takes a gulp. Sasha stares at the moon through the cracks in the canopy. Before continuing, William takes another sip and hands the bottle back to Sasha. For a moment, the two listen to the sounds of passing cars and dinner guests at the nearby hotel restaurant. Sasha feels strangely at ease; so close yet disconnected from the world around her. Her eyes lower to William who reminds her that she still has a place in this world.

“My daughter,” he continues, “well, she got really into gardening as a child. When her mother and I were still together, we had a place...,” he looks around, “a little like this. Jenny would grow seeds of everything we could find at the florist. When her mother and I separated... it wasn't easy for Jenny but her mother told me she only became more committed to her gardening in Florida. My wife she—she has family there and we thought that if I wasn't going to be in the picture, not much anyway, that it would be best for the two of them to have that kind of support.” He pauses and scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah, that.... Jenny started taking some classes and now I think she's even teaching a bit too. The... the last time I was there—four years ago—I spent as much time as I could with Jenny. She started growing these... her favorite,” he said, gentle running his fingers through its petals. “It's a moonflower.” He breathes in the warm air. “She taught me how to grow it, how to care for it... everything—I had no idea. Before I

left, I asked if she'd give me some seeds to grow it—or if I could order online if customs wouldn't let me bring it in. She looked at me—about as sad as she did the year before when her mother and I told her we were getting a divorce—and explained to me that no matter how much I tried... the climate here—the conditions—are too unsuitable for this to grow,” he says, twirling the flower between his fingers again.

The glow of headlights passes down the street, along hedge of leaves and brush.

“The day I left,” he continued, “she gave me this and said... that even though this is plastic... I still made this, right here, for you, daddy. You can take this to London with you and if the customs people yell at you for it, I'll yell at them even louder. This is one that can survive anywhere. Just for you.”

Sasha takes a long swig from the bottle. “I not wanting it. Why would you try to giving me it?”

“Because I couldn't try to change—to accept the change that needed to happen for my family. I love this flower because it represents my daughter. But it also represents why I can't be with her now. If I give up trying to change everything around me and allow myself to adjust to the way the world really is... I don't know—I *can't* know—but maybe, I'll have a greater chance of being in my daughter's life more than I am now. I want to give you this flower because if you take it I know I'll cancel that order and go to Florida myself and take Jenny out to wherever she wants to for her birthday. So please... take it from me,” he says, offering her the flower again.

“I can not be able to taking it. But...,” she thinks for a moment, “maybe we can planting it.” She takes the flower from him and takes a final sip from the champagne before placing the flower in the bottle and sets the two at the center of the table between them. “I scared much of changings too. My mother died from seizure my father create...”

“What do you think happened?” he asks, inspecting the flower’s vase.

“My life my mother always trap by father. I always trap too. My mother free once... before. I think she wanted freedom when she try to run—when she try to drive away... no knew where but I think she just want free again. The feelings of that. Maybe too much. Maybe trap too long. If... me always trap by father. Can do anything but leaving him. I wonder why mother did this. I want to know what freedom she felt. Here, I’m to see what next.”

“I’m sorry. How did your meeting with your uncle go?” he asks, gently.

“Not staying.”

“In London?”

“Queen’s Gardens.”

“Will you stay in the UK?”

“I have to letting change accept. It has to being.”

“What about your father?”

“One day maybe I see again him. Now it needs be me that is alone to see what becomes. Why you coming here?”

“I saw a chance to make a choice I should have made a long time ago.”

She smiles at him in the growing dark beneath the canopy.

“When you will going then?” She can no longer see him but feels him smiling back at her.

“Soon. And you?”

“Soon,” she says, reaching her hand out across the table.

The Pretender

Shit. His glass was empty. He looked up from the bar top to the hockey game playing on the large television in front of him. Slowly, his eyes made their way to the bartender at the end of the counter. He looked to be about 40, but had the jowls of a much older man. His weathered expression seemed to confirm this. However, his smooth skin gave the impression of someone in their late 20s. Waving to attract the bartender's attention, he realized the man's tired face was fixed on the young man, about college age, in front of him.

"Chris, please understand. I-I always thought of you as an older brother. I've been coming here ever since... ever since," he repeated, drunkenly attempting to maintain a collected tone, "ever since I started in undergrad. An—and you didn't kick me out even when you knew I was too young. Why? Because we're both children of divorce, man...!"

"What are you bringing this up for? The matter is... no one respects you anymore, Tom. You chose not to defend your girl and that's it. Why do you even come around here anymore? You're not changing anything."

"That is completely untrue...! There was nothing to defend. I never even saw it happen. What are you talking about?"

"You didn't see it? You didn't see her walk away in tears after she was groped?"

"No. Because she wasn't. She started crying in the bathroom. I know because I was there."

“And somehow you didn’t see him grab her when he was right in front of you?”

“No and I wasn’t looking for it because I never expected someone I considered family to do that shit. He invited me to his 40th, man. I met his mother!”

“I know. I was there.”

“That’s not my point.”

“Do you even have a point?”

“Yes. It’s that it fucking hurts to be betrayed like that.”

“So why didn’t you do anything about it?”

“I did. I stepped in and checked with Tia as soon as I saw something was wrong. I separated her from James and came to you—the staff—to report what had happened. What else would you want?”

“You didn’t stand up for her. You’re her boyfriend. You have to protect her.”

“From what? There was no threat. There was nothing happening. James was blackout, barely standing up in the other room. He wasn’t doing anything at that point. Would you have wanted me to go over and stomp him out on the dance floor?”

“No. Like I said that night... you should have taken him out back where there weren’t any cameras and beat the shit out of him.”

“Why would I do that? The incident was over?”

“Did Tia feel that way? Did she want to kick his ass?”

Tom took a sip from his beer. “Yes. In the moment she did and she would have if I hadn’t explained to her how much I love the people here and how walking into this bar feels like walking into your own living room. She wanted to slap the shit out of him but didn’t because she knew my feelings for him. I never introduced anyone special to you all and the one time I do... the very first fucking time... fuck, man!”

“And when that happened... what did you do? Nothing.”

“I did do something! I got her out of the situation. I reported it, like I said, and we left the bar and you and the other staff dealt with him. It is my job to help her through what she experienced as her boyfriend. It’s your job as the staff to deal with employees that sexually assault customers! And by the way, afterward, Tia told me how happy she was that I *didn’t* swing on James.”

“Are you not mad that this happened, Tom? Do you feel any fucking need to do something about it?”

“I did and still do feel something, Chris. I feel disappointed. I feel upset at myself for thinking James was someone he wasn’t. Despite that, sucker punching him after the fact won’t solve that. What would it do, seriously? I’d swing on him. He’s totally defenseless. A guy who can barely stand up, let alone explain himself to me in that moment. I do that... I go to jail, Chris. Are you seriously saying that I should escalate to physical violence when the situation was already being handled and we were on our way out the door?”

“Tom, you’re not a man. We’re disappointed in *you*.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Am I not a man because I didn’t act impulsively and irrationally?”

“No. You’re not a man because instead of kicking the shit out of James when you went back to see him alone... you fucking hugged him. Yeah, we all saw it. It’s on film.”

“Do you actually want me to explain why I did that or have you already made up your mind? I can’t tell what you’re asking with that tone?”

Chris poured himself some water and leaned against the icemaker.

“I hugged him because he profusely apologized. He was crying and he claimed it to be a genuine mistake. I didn’t see it. Tia was in shock. All I had to go off of was her and what James was mumbling. Before I made any major judgements, I wanted to put a pause on shit so I could speak to Tia more when she collected herself and also with James to get a bigger picture. I hugged him because to me, I still thought of him as family. I still wanted to see if things could be made right.”

“I don’t care who you are... you do that shit to my girl... we’re not family, we’re not anything anymore.”

“That’s perfectly fine. I’m not telling you how to deal with shit yourself. I’m just trying to explain how I go about dealing with things myself.”

“So, does going about things your way include only ever talking about doing something about the situation to people or actually doing something? You come in here every week and say you’re going to report what happened to the

owner and the one time you finally do something... you ask for the recording of the night from the fucking bouncer? What rational person does that?"

"Okay, first of all, the bouncer came to me and said he had access to the cameras. So, that right there is complete bullshit. I only asked him about it after he surprisingly mentioned to me that he could show me them. So then... like any *rational* person... I asked him if I could get them, and I was surprised to hear him tell me that I'd never get them. Also, Chris, so we're on the same page, it's not up to me to do something about it. I'm not the victim here. The reason I was asking all those questions week after week? Huh? It was to get as much information as I could and pass that along to her so she can make her own decision about if and or how she wants to move forward. It isn't my place to go over her head. I'm not the one who should be making the call about what to do. That's her."

"So why the bouncer then?"

"Because she asked me to move forward with reporting it all. For fuck's sake! You're so focused on being a man, do you even consider the fucking victim?"

"I remember doing a lot more than you that night in defense of the victim."

He looked down at his drink, realizing he would not be receiving the bartender's attention anytime soon. He watched the remaining ice cubes melt before sipping the water from his glass. The two's discussion reminded him of his Russian heritage; expressing loyalty even when you disagreed with the issue but society demanded your participation—or so he was told by those that had served,

conscripted by the military. Looking at his empty glass, he felt relieved to have been adopted—to only know of his country through books, news, and the people he’s spoken with. If he was in a similar situation—one in which he was expected to act against his own judgment—he wondered how he would respond. To be part of a whole—part of the community—he would have to sacrifice himself, if only in part, to be accepted, he thought. He never felt Russian, but everything he’s done since being adopted by American parents and being raised in Boston, Massachusetts, never aided him in feeling a sense of identity with the U.S.

Because of this, he spent much of his life attempting to connect with Russian immigrants in the area but was rejected due to the way he was raised. He could not speak the language and knew only a limited amount about the culture. The first time he attempted to integrate himself into the local Russian community he was 14. He decided to attend a Russian folk music festival over a weekend in the Summer. While attempting to introduce himself in the little Russian he knew, an elderly couple passed by. The husband spat at his feet and called him “samozvanets.” When he looked back at the people he was speaking with in blank confusion, they explained to him that “samozvanets” means an imposter, a pretender, and that many feel that he is American and has no place attending Russian gatherings like this—least of all if he consistently introduces himself as being Russian.

Spinning the glass in his hand, he questioned if he even knew what it meant to be Russian, or even American for that matter. The idea of being one or the other, or even some mixture, only confused him. While he desired to better

understand his heritage, any concept he had of being American was distant at best. The greatest claim he heard against him being Russian was his lack of a childhood in his birth country. However, his childhood in the U.S. equally failed to instill any understanding of traditional American values. Instead of playing with other children, focusing on school or committing to a particular sport or hobby, he was focused on overcoming the physical and psychological symptoms of the orphanage.

He thought about how concerned and well-meaning his parents were—how they sent him to countless specialists to attend to each of even the most remote aspects that could be attributed to the malnutrition and lack of basic medicine he experienced in Russia. Thankfully, his immediate physical symptom, a critical loss of hearing due to chronic infection, was addressed without lasting damage. Regardless of this, due to a lack of study in the field of severe isolation in children, as he matured, he faced unexpected challenges such as having to re-learn to control his basic senses. The effects of the orphanage were so pervasive, and his private tutoring so encompassing, that as he struggled to navigate the educational system, he never knew if his difficulties in class were a sign of his natural limitations or his isolation.

His parents thought it would be helpful to attend annual events in which children adopted through the same organization would meet and share about their lives in the U.S. All he can remember about the events is the way the parents compared their children to see which of them “exhibited the most promise.” He understood this just to mean which children showed the least significant

symptoms. When he was a teenager, he remembered speaking with a parent of a friend and them sharing with him, between drinks, that when they went to pick up their daughter she was in such poor health that the representative from the orphanage offered to exchange her for a “better one.” In 2012, Russia made it illegal for individuals from the U.S. to adopt from their country due to the high rate of fatalities. He knew now that that reason was only because of the lack of research in the field. While he never thought of his parents as being fully “his,” he owed his life to their generosity, and he loved them for that.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

He broke away from his thoughts and turned to see the smiling face of a young woman with long dark hair. Her question, however, made him stutter for a moment. He considered for a moment which name to share—which would be more accurate? Normally, he would choose his adoptive name, but due to his recent thoughts on identity, he considered introducing himself with his birth name. From what he had been told by his parents, his birth mother gave him up at birth, but when the doctor asked her for a name, she supposedly lied—giving him a first, but a likely false surname. He chuckled to himself, realizing that the most authentic thing he owns, his name, is shrouded in lies.

She looked at him confused. “Well, I’m Brooke. Nice to meet you...?”

“Raphael,” he finally said, deciding neither name had any truth behind it and so his legal option would be best.

“You know, Raphael...,” she said, spinning her straw in her drink, “I think you’re pretty cute.”

Perhaps it had to do with where his head was at, but he did not know how to respond. Waiting for some set of words to come to him, all he could think was how much he wished she had said anything else about him. Even beginning with an insult would have been preferable. All her comment did was remind him of the sole reason he was adopted—the primary reason all those he knew that had been adopted alongside him—his physical looks. “If I’m traveling across the world for a baby... I want the best one they have!” he remembered overhearing a parent say at one of the annual adoption gatherings.

Barely mindful of Brooke, he thanked her and turned back to the hockey game. It was only when the sound of the game cut out and Latin music started playing over the speakers that his attention returned to the bar. Looking around the room, Brooke had disappeared. To his left, Tom and Chris continued their dispute. On his right, a beautiful woman stood between two handsome men. The woman wore high heels, leather pants, and a loose blouse. The men wore freshly shined dress shoes and tight-fitting suits. The three of them stood out from the stained work boots and sweatshirts standing around them. The music swelled and Raphael watched as the three of their bodies began to move in sync.

The shorter of the two men led the woman to begin. The two spun, as if entirely careless of those around them, yet did so with precise movements in order to sway with the music in each other's arms and not disturb the groups of onlookers gazing up from their half-empty drinks. The taller man watched from a nearby tabletop, before moving across the room to the jukebox. The shorter man and the woman laughed in harmony. Raphael focused on their feet. Their shoes

stuck to the cocktail veneer coating the old wood floors, yet their movements seemed unencumbered. The tall man allowed the first song to conclude before switching the song and stepping in, replacing his short competition. The crowd continued to grow and the lapse between trading off between partners diminished. Raphael couldn't determine if the two men's goal was to impress the woman or each other. Before a winner could be decided the kitchen bell rang and Chris excused himself from the debate with Tom to bring him his dinner.

"You even eat his food. The hell is the matter with you?" Chris said, dropping the plastic tray of fried chicken wings in front of Tom on the counter.

"It's as much your food as it is his," Tom said, taking a bite. "You both work here."

"Maybe that'd be the case if he didn't also make the fucking menu."

"Like that makes a difference," Tom said, waving across the counter.

Chris reached over and handed him the ketchup.

"It still needs to be approved by the owner. You could make a drink but I'm not gonna know to order it until I see it listed as an option. And who makes that happen? The owner." Tom said, squirting the bottle onto his plate.

Raphael listened and wondered about what the stranger said. He took a moment and looked at one of the menus lying on the counter and realized that each item was a combination of multiple different styles and cuisines. Running his eyes down the list, he considered again what it meant to be Russian and deliberated about the role a country's food plays in determining its uniqueness. Some of the most popular Russian dishes; Blini, Borscht, and Pirozhki—each has

only vague Russian origins despite their wide-spread popularity. Reaching the bottom of the menu, Raphael questioned if Russia had a singular culinary offering that made it unique—or if like himself, his birth country's identity was, if only in part, an imitation of others.

If what Russians treasure most as a sign of identification is not their food but instead their genetics as a sign of their heritage, he thought, he struggled to imagine how they would react when he told them that he is the first person in his genetic history to leave eastern Europe—that those who would challenge him purely on the merits of his genetic purity would find him to be more Russian than those who called him an imposter. He laughed to himself, realizing the irony of how his Slavic roots were manifesting; slaves in ancient times and again today—by those he looked to for acceptance and guidance.

Was there some way to connect with his heritage and at the same time free himself from it? He looked around the bar, to the fight continuing to his left and the beautiful, however overly competitive, dancing to his right. On the television, the game had ended and a news program played with the subtitles filling the bottom of the screen in black and white. He thought to ask the bartender to change the channel before a segment began about the ongoing war in Ukraine. What did it mean to be Russian? he asked himself again. Does it mean invading a sibling country for the purpose of unprovoked conquest? Does it mean killing innocent citizens? Does it mean standing up against an authoritarian power? Does it mean risking your life? Does it mean abstaining from engagement? Or does it mean embracing that you are really American, and your only responsibility is to

continue funding the violence without ever getting involved? He looked at his empty glass and spun it between his thumbs.

He watched the lights sparkle and change inside the glass as he rotated it. In that moment he felt nothing for the aggressors, the victims, or the countries at stake. What it meant to be anything to Raphael only seemed to indicate something geographical—something equally near and a world away simultaneously. He looked at the dancers, at the woman, and studied her apparent indifference. She kept pace, she even smiled and presented herself to be engaged, but to Raphael, she could not be further from the men she was handed off to. Raphael allowed himself to consider, for an instant, if all he wanted—throughout all his attempts to share in the Russian community—was to be recognized. The thought left his mind as quickly as it had entered it. What would change? he asked himself.

“What you’re not getting, Chris—and I keep trying to tell you—everything I’m doing here is for my girlfriend, for Tia... for the victim...!”

Raphael no longer cared what happened between the bartender and the customer. He had sobered up and desperately wanted another drink. He waved at the two but neither seemed to notice or care to delay their argument. He wished Brooke would come back and speak to him. He wished the dancers would mistakenly bump into him, or that a stranger would spill their drink in his lap. A loneliness opened up within him that he would fill with anything, but he could not find the strength to speak—to define the feeling even as an unintelligible groan others might acknowledge. Knowing that the bartender would cash him out regardless, he stood up and walked out of the bar—away from the argument,

away from the dancing—but as the warm summer air stuck to his skin, he felt an odd kinship with Tia and the unknown woman. Walking along a line of yellow taxis, he asked himself why he felt that way. After giving the driver directions home, he decided it had something to do with voice. He would figure out the rest tomorrow on his way back to the bar.