

SOMEBODY LOVES ME

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Katya cried each time after she had sex. It was that good. She cried also because she couldn't imagine not sleeping with David, who couldn't imagine leaving his three children. All boys, all precious replicas of their father—strong, handsome, pony eyed, and dimple chinned. It had been five years since Katya first brought David into her bed; it had been twice as long since she felt any interest toward any other man, beyond initial lust followed by the boredom of meals and promises, which always got broken. David made no promises and he could cook the best pasta puttanesca in all of Manhattan. Katya's culinary skills didn't extend past a soft-boiled egg or a baked potato, unlike her mother's; she often told Katya that men might not always need sex, but they had to eat.

Katya stroked David's chest, the soft nest of hairs. Her eyes were wet, and so was his skin, where Katya's cheek touched it.

"Could you please leave your keys?" she asked.

"Why?"

"My half brother is flying over from Armenia. He'll stay with me. He'll need the keys."

"I didn't know you had a half brother."

"I didn't either. Until just recently. He found me on Facebook."

"What does he look like?"

“The opposite of me. Dark and hairy. Huge eyebrows.”

“Are you serious? You’re letting some dark hairy stranger stay here with you? What if he’s lying? What if he’s a rapist? A murderer?” David rose on his elbows, and Katya rose with him.

“He isn’t a rapist,” she said. “He’s a geologist who’s spent half of his life searching for Noah’s Ark.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

“My father did that too—looked for the lost boat. We lived in Moscow, but he worked in Armenia and Turkey for a few years, leading an expedition. They tried to climb Mount Ararat.”

“Successfully?”

“No. But as a result, I have a half brother.”

“Did you check his Facebook page? Any pictures of your father?”

“Not really. Just the kids and Yerevan, his home city.”

“I’d do a paternity test before I allow him to stay here.” David got up and strode into the bathroom. All Katya could see of him now was the white moon of his ass.

The paternity test wasn’t necessary because Katya’s mother attested to the story. Katya was five when it had happened, and her father had been sending money to the woman and visiting her occasionally until he died. Katya wondered if there were any other family secrets she hadn’t been privy to. And if her parents had been lying to her and each other all those years, how did she know there was truth in anything they said or did? Was that why she had so many failed relationships, because deep down, folded into the layers of her subconscious, was the fear of betrayal, abandonment? Could that also be the reason for the absence of a husband? A great love? A feeling so powerful, it would’ve made her want to spend the rest of her life cooking borsch for the one who’d always eat it? At forty-two, Katya equated finding a great love to finding Noah’s Ark. There was never any historical, archeological, or geological evidence to prove the boat’s existence or even the mass flood in Turkey. Now Katya’s half brother was arriving in America to research the findings of yet another expedition sponsored by evangelical Christians, who claimed they’d discovered the remains of the ark

beneath snow and volcanic debris on Mount Ararat. The team insisted they'd spotted seven large wooden compartments buried at thirteen thousand feet above sea level, near the peak. The radiocarbon-dated wood taken from the discovery site—whose location the archeologists kept secret—showed the purported ark was about forty-eight hundred years old, which coincided roughly with the time of the Flood, implied by the Bible.

David smirked when Katya relayed the information over the phone.

“Four thousand years ago the Bible wasn't even written yet,” he said. “All it tells you is that the ark landed somewhere in Urartu, but it was much later that people identified Urartu with Mount Ararat. Besides, the ark would've been prime timber after the flood.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, say you landed on one of those peaks, got off and saw that there were no trees. What do you do? You need a house but have no building materials except for a huge wooden boat?”

“Why couldn't they live on a boat? Why would they want to tear it apart? The very thing that saved them?” Katya felt defensive, as though she was the boat to be used and then destroyed.

“Listen, I can't talk right now. I'm almost home. Tomorrow at sex-ish, your place?” He laughed, his explosive candid laugh, then hung up.

The first time Katya had heard him use that word—“sex-ish”—was at a friend's party, celebrating the Russian Old New Year. David was the only married man there and the only America-born citizen, other than the Spokane guy who refused to call himself either American Indian or Native American. David got into a fight with him over the whole race issue and the dissemination of the indigenous population justified as Manifest Destiny. David refused to apologize for something his ancestors did or did not do. He insisted that he'd never discriminated against Indians, Asians, or blacks, whose music he worshipped, and that as a white middle-class male he was tired of feeling guilty or having to hush his tongue so as not to sound racist. The Spokane guy, who was tall and square and didn't drink alcohol, punched David in the face, twice, then left the party. Katya ended up holding a pack of ice to David's nose, as well as wiping his blood from the floor.

“I can't see you tomorrow,” she said after a pause. “I have to pick up my half brother from JFK.”

“How long is he staying?”

“Two weeks.”

“Jesus.”

At the airport, Katya stood in the crowd of greeters, wishing she'd made a cardboard sign: GEVORK SUKIASYAN—HALF BROTHER. Perhaps it would've relieved the initial tension, coaxed a smile out of both of them. It would've made it easier not to lose her half sibling in a hurricane of people. She spotted him at once, though. Tall, wiry, with a crown of grayish hair, like a snow-capped mountain peak. His cart overflowed with luggage. On top, Katya noticed a long narrow tube one might use to transport a painting. He waved at her but was not smiling. He looked nothing like her or her father, but appeared older, his face haggard from a ten-hour flight and perhaps dehydration.

She offered him a bottle of water. “Instead of flowers,” she said in Russian.

“You don't like flowers?” he asked, also in Russian, but with a thick, sticky accent.

“Oh, I do. Not that I get many. Maybe on my birthday or Valentine's.”

“Your boyfriend doesn't bring you flowers just because you're beautiful?” he asked, then added, “Forgive me, Katya-*jan*, if I misuse your language—I get very little practice. But please take my mistakes for kisses. Many, many kisses.”

Katya considered his words. Her mother, whose experience with Armenians was limited to buying fruit from them at Moscow markets, had warned Katya that Armenians were “honey-tongued” people—they could talk you into buying things you didn't need and doing things you didn't want. And as the genocide survivors, they were also proud and fierce. They slept with swords under their pillows.

“David brings flowers,” Katya finally said. “He does.”

“David? Like King David? The one who killed Goliath and had an affair with Bathsheba?”

“That one.”

“Well, I'd be happy to meet him. I'll tell him that he should bring you flowers every day. For—*Whoever has you is happy. Whoever finds you never feels sorry for the one who has lost you.* ”

Katya didn't know whether to laugh or feel puzzled. “You're a poet too?”

“Not me. Sayat-Nova. An eighteenth-century Armenian troubadour. He wrote songs, simple songs, but also very beautiful.”

Katya nodded. David would dislike Gevork, just as he disliked poets because he couldn't believe that a man would chose to spend his life seeking lofty words to express himself. To him, a poet was an incorrigible narcissist with a propensity for pain and self-pity. A poet dealt with reality the way children dealt with toys—they played with them, and then they got bored by them, and then they whined for attention. David was a financial analyst; his reality was never boring or whiny. He got the job done and was rewarded with money. The more he worked, the more he got paid, the less he complained. The better off was his family. It was a rather uncomplicated order of things, had it not been for Katya, who was a bonus, an extra tier, he couldn't bring himself to give up.

In a cab, they were mostly quiet, and Katya let her half brother absorb the American culture, or rather New York City. He marveled at the jagged skyline of the buildings, the harpsichord bridges, humongous billboards alive with advertisements and snippets of Broadway shows. Crowds. Junk stores. Street vendors. She watched his face tighten and then relax as his eyes trailed after hordes of tourists snapping pictures of themselves, clouds, and the weekday traffic; a huddle of homeless people slept under frayed blankets. It was the middle of April, one week before Easter Sunday. The weather warm, benevolent, the trees drawing their budded limbs toward the sun.

Katya remembered how she first arrived in the city, on a student visa, staying with some friends, who had won green cards. How fascinated she was by every little nugget of information. America—the land of the happy, of the fortunate, of the free. She hardly thought that now; there was less freedom here than if she were to live in a tribe, someplace undiscovered. But when Gorbachev took power back in 1985 and the Soviet Union collapsed, Katya and her friends found themselves at the altar of change and desire—to see the world, to make a fortune, to own a villa on the Mediterranean. Some succeeded; others drowned in liquor and debt. A few built empires. They controlled international oil markets, gas, ore, coal. Real estate. Katya became an accountant. She worked for an insurance company that offered decent benefits and paid just enough for her to send a little money to her mother. A year after Katya had met David, he'd insisted she give up her Brooklyn apartment for the one midtown, ten minutes away from his office.

Gevork didn't let Katya touch his luggage. He said it was embarrassing for an Armenian man to watch a woman lift a suitcase. So she held the door open while he carried in his bags. They filled the entire living room, where her half brother would be sleeping on the couch. Katya apologized.

He touched her hands. "Katya-*jan*," he said. "Please don't worry. I'm grateful that I found you and that you allowed me to visit. I can stay on the floor by your bed, if I have to, and guard your sleep."

Again, Katya felt pleasantly disconcerted by his words. He seemed to have come from a different world, a different century, one that idolized women, worshipped their hair and eyes and skin. She offered to feed him—smoked salmon and eggs—but he refused.

"First, I unpack. Then I take a shower, and then I go and buy groceries. You show me where. Then I cook."

Katya nodded. It was lovely to think that someone could take charge of her life, if only for a few hours.

After he stripped off his shoes and set them by the door, next to hers, Gevork opened one of the suitcases. It was like a magician's hat from which he began extracting various unexpected objects. The mountain of gifts on her couch grew higher and higher. There were dolls, a male and a female, in national costumes; coasters with pictures of ancient churches; sets of embroidered linen tablecloths; hand-painted wooden napkin rings showing the characters from Armenian fairy tales; warriors with swords and women in long, flowing dresses. They had tiny waists and thick black braids, their faces almost unnatural in their perfection. With pride, Gevork produced decorative hammered-silver plates and a bugle he hung from the kitchen light so that it cast a sickle shadow on the table.

Unfolding a bright silk kerchief, he draped it over Katya's head.

"Do I look like your women?" she asked.

"Yes. Just as beautiful." He handed her a bottle of red wine made from pomegranates. Katya, of course, couldn't read the label, but the picture of the fruit was exquisite.

"Also for you," he said and presented her with a pair of velour slippers with curved toes.

The slippers were adorned with beads and sequins, stitched with golden threads. “I didn’t know your size, so I took the liberty of guessing.” He placed them before Katya and she stuffed her feet inside. The slippers were comfortable, if a bit large.

He passed her a few books: poetry by Ovanes Tumanian, *hairens* by Nahapet Kuchak, and songs by Sayat-Nova, all translated into Russian.

“So you can read them,” he said.

“Thank you,” Katya said. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I wanted to.”

“All I have for you is a nesting doll.” She got up and went to the bedroom and took from the bookshelf the only thing she’d brought from Russia. It was a medium-sized dull-blue five-piece set. Scratched but not chipped.

“It’s my childhood toy.”

“Ah, but that’s where your stories come from.”

“Stories?”

“Yes. Stories inside stories inside stories. One life folded into another.”

Katya had never thought of nesting-dolls as storytellers. As a child she filled their empty bellies with candy, cookies, and her mother’s jewelry. As a teenager, she hid cigarettes there, condoms, and porn playing cards. Now one of the dolls contained the wallet-sized picture of David’s family, which Katya retrieved before presenting the entire set to her half brother.

“Shall we open the wine?” she asked.

“I don’t drink, Katya-*jan*. I’m a recovering alcoholic. Or, as I was taught to say—I’m an alcoholic. Always.” His smile was so sweet and so naïve that Katya thought he was lying.

She had to work the next day, and Gevork had to meet the director of the Center of Origins and a member of the Noah’s Ark Ministries International team. Katya was late, so she snuck out of the apartment while Gevork was still asleep, his head under the covers. She didn’t have time to eat breakfast but grabbed coffee at the nearest Starbucks, where they were always

out of soy milk. David called just as she finished the last sip and threw the cup into the trash before entering the office building.

“So how is he?” he asked.

“Fine. A bit outdated but generous.”

“Is he good-looking?”

“Why?”

“Is he really your brother? Did he show you any papers?”

“What papers?”

“I don’t know. A birth certificate? I mean, how do you know who this guy really is?”

“How do you know who anyone really is? How do I know who you really are?”

“What do you mean? I work. I pay your rent. I haven’t given you an STD. What else is there to know?” He laughed.

“I want more.”

“How much more?”

“I want flowers.”

“Like in a pot?”

“Like in a vase.”

“Today?”

“Always.”

“Your wish is being processed,” he said in a robotic voice, imitating a computer. “It’ll take approximately one business day.”

Katya stepped inside the elevator and hung up. She remembered how David used to make her feel—bright and weightless, achy with desire. And then, terrified, when she thought she’d gotten pregnant and he thought she should abort. Katya had never wanted children, but at that moment she actually did. It turned out to be a false alarm, but her pain was real. It seemed that she bled forever that month. David bought her a ring, a narrow bend of diamonds. He said, “As soon as my youngest one is off to college, we’ll do it. Tie the knot.”

“That’s in ten years,” she said.

“I can wait. You?”

When he disappeared into the shower that evening, Katya picked up his wallet from the nightstand. She found the most recent pictures of the boys and their mother, Rose. The

name filled her with longing and also guilt. Staring at the genial, comely face in a cloud of brown hair, Katya was struck with the following realizations: David would never divorce his wife; Katya would never have his child; her mother should've left her father instead of pleasing him in any unfathomable way so he wouldn't leave her first. Katya hid the photo in the nesting doll. She didn't say a word to David.

All day at work, while processing medical claims, Katya thought about her half-brother, the product of forbidden love or lust or negligence, or all of the above. He seemed odd and sad and kind. She thought how he'd chopped meat last night on her kitchen table, preparing *kyufta*, with garlic and Armenian spices. Her apartment still smelled of them in the morning. She'd drunk the whole bottle of the pomegranate wine and confessed to her lousy cooking skills, and he told her that it wasn't really a woman's place, the kitchen: knives and fire, cast-iron skillets. After they ate, he brought out his *duduk*, a long wooden flute Katya mistook for a Native pipe, like one she'd once encountered at an exhibit. She didn't know how to play the flute but stuck it in her mouth anyway. She felt loose, aroused, and ashamed. She fell asleep soon after. Gevork must've stayed up for hours because in the morning her kitchen showed no traces of their late night's feast except for the tulips overlapping in a vase. His shoes, large like boats, rested on the doormat. She slipped David's keys into them.

When Katya returned from work, she found both David and Gevork in her kitchen. Both barefoot, they wore her Russian aprons, with roosters, samovars, and Kremlin stars. They looked ridiculously homey, though nothing alike. David was shorter, heavier, yet more youthful with his gelled spiky bangs and that devilish dimple in his chin. Gevork had his squall of curls brushed all the way back, baring his formidable eyebrows and the deep mournful lines across his forehead. His face sprouted a beard that grew over his cheeks and neck like moss over a tree.

"I wanted to meet him, so I left early," David mouthed into her ear.

Katya felt something between discomfort and confusion.

The apartment was pungent with smells, and she lifted the lid off a pot simmering on the stove. The aroma made her dizzy.

“Lamb *kchuch*,” Gevork said. “With beans, tomatoes, sweet peppers, onions, potatoes, and eggplant.”

“I brought wine and made your favorite mozzarella salad,” David said. “Oh, and flowers.”

Katya acknowledged a bundle of red roses in an ice bucket. She only had one vase, where Gevork’s mauve tulips bloomed their hearts out.

“Your brother speaks good English,” David said.

“Thanks,” Gevork answered. “Dinner is almost ready, Katya-*jan*.”

“I’m opening wine. I need to leave in an hour,” David said.

Katya didn’t protest.

The food was delicious, the wine too. She sat between the two men and listened to David talk about his job as though the nation’s financial security depended on how he advised his clients to invest their money.

“One tiny mistake can cost the company millions of dollars,” he said.

“The pressure must be unbearable,” Gevork said.

“Like lifting an iceberg. If I drop it, we’re all fucked.”

“Not all. You’re fucked. Your clients too,” Katya said. Her head swayed from all the wine and lack of sleep. “Gevork, on the other hand, will be up on Mount Ararat, chipping away at the ice cap. Your fuck doesn’t affect his expeditions.”

“Not unless I have clients who pay for them.”

“Evangelical Christians?” she asked.

“No. But I have a few Turkish investors. Someone owns that mountain.”

“They stole it from us,” Gevork said. He got up to scoop some more meat onto his plate. The sauce was red and chunky; it dripped onto the floor. Before Katya could wipe it up, her half-brother soaked the spot with a napkin.

“I bet the Turks don’t think that,” David said.

“Doesn’t matter what they think. They did it to us, to my land, my people.” Gevork picked up his water and drained the glass.

“How do you know?” David pressed. “You weren’t alive back then, so you can’t know for sure. People make up shit all the time—that doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Some still deny the Holocaust,” Gevork said. “Did Jews make it up too?”

“That’s different.”

“How’s it different?” Katya asked. She thought about that time at the party, when she’d first met David, and how he’d refused to admit the genocide of Indians. He’d argued and argued, with such verve, until the Spokane guy smashed his face.

“There are records,” David said. “And you can tour the camps. What can we tour—”

“Der Zor. Walk the desert,” Gevork said. “Step on the bones. Hear them crack under your disbelieving feet.” His face grew tense, and for a moment, Katya recognized her father, the passion with which he defended the existence of Noah’s Ark and his need to climb the mountain again and again.

“I don’t have to walk in any desert. Don’t get mad. All I’m saying is that if people still doubt the existence of Noah’s Ark, the very thing that saved humanity from total darkness, then why not allow reasonable doubt about other things?”

The tension in Gevork’s face changed to anger. His lip jerked, so he bit on it. He stood up and untied the apron, folding it over the chair.

“I’ll see you outside,” he told David. “*Katya-jan*, forgive us for ruining your dinner. We’ll continue our conversation upon my return.”

“Your return?” David got up too. His napkin fell to the floor.

“Yes. I think you should leave, David,” Gevork said.

“I’m not going anywhere. This is my apartment. You can pack up your damn things, your gifts, this ridiculous horn”—he yanked the bugle off the light—“and go back to where you came from. You’ve caused enough trouble. The nerve you got, coming here, telling her you’re her brother, making her feel like shit about her father.”

Katya knew she should contradict David, should say something to defend herself and her half-sibling, but what could she say? Even as a little girl she’d suspected that her father had cheated on her mother, who’d always waited for him to return home, putting on her best clothes, makeup. Her food, her dishes had gotten so elaborate, as though she wanted to prove her worth. It was never about love, but servitude and a plea—for him to stay home, to stop traveling, stop searching for the ghost of the holy vessel.

Katya felt sick, ashamed too.

“I want you to leave,” she finally said. “Both of you.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry. It was wrong of me,” David said. “Let’s talk. Please.”

“No. I can’t. I can’t do this anymore.” She grabbed her purse and jacket, scurrying out of the apartment.

It was still daylight. A finger of red cut the sky in half. People crowded the street. A woman with three dogs. A boy on a scooter. Men in business suits, who looked so much like David. Still in her sequined velour slippers with curved toes, she sauntered past a pretzel stand, a grocery market, and a furniture store, where a few pieces in a shop window resembled futuristic vessels, so bare in their minimalist constructions. A man played sax, a full-throated, wobbly sound that swelled in the trees. The song was Gershwin’s “Somebody Loves Me,” and Katya paused to listen. The piece, the melody stirred her. She remembered how, when she’d first met David, he took her to New York’s most popular jazz clubs—Dizzy’s, Birdland, Mezzrow, Blue Note, Village Vanguard. He introduced her to jazz, which, he insisted, was the only music this country really owned. It had been born here, from blood and sweat and tears. He spoke about jazz the way he spoke about his children, with awe and tenderness. The way he never spoke of anything else.

Katya dropped a few dollars into the musician’s jar and crossed the road, then weaved between the buildings onto a quieter street. The evening breeze made her button her jacket. She raised the collar and brushed her hair behind her ears. David had always laughed at how small they looked, how helpless. He was trying to call her; the phone in her hand vibrated with texts. She ignored them, stepping inside a café, where couples nestled on couches or behind shaky stained tables. She ordered a lemon bar and a cup of coffee, which she refilled twice.

When she emerged, it was already dark, streetlights casting crooked shadows.

She discovered her half brother, his suitcases, the duffel bag, and the *duduk* carrier on the steps of her apartment. He was smoking a cigarette. She sat next to him, and he offered her one too. They watched the cars rush by, drivers’ fists on horns. The shrill of sirens.

“Your keys,” Gevork said. “David left before me.” The chain dangled on his finger. “Forgive me for intruding on your life, Katya-*jan*, and making a mess of it.”

“It’s my mess.” She blew out the smoke, and for a moment it mingled with his.

“I’ve always wanted to meet you. I even came to Moscow once but didn’t dare to ring the doorbell.”

“Where will you go?” she asked.

“A hotel.”

“Stay a night. We’ll look for something tomorrow.”

“I can’t. I have to visit my children. Spring break.”

Katya stared at his face, a juxtaposition of innocence and pain.

“My ex-wife remarried an American,” he said. “I haven’t seen my girls for seven years. I couldn’t afford to travel.”

“Why did you let her take the children all the way across the globe?”

“I lost my parental rights.”

“Because of the drinking?”

“That too.” He sucked in the smoke, then let it all out. “I hurt them, *Katya-jan*. My wife. My children. I didn’t know how to love them. They were always together, and I was always alone.”

“What about your mother?”

“She lives in Gyumri. Never married. Sews a lot. Yours?”

“Still in Moscow. Cooks all the time. Puts onions in everything.”

He snubbed out his cigarette, and so did Katya.

“Let me know when you find it,” she said, getting up.

“What?”

“The ark. The great ship. The thing that brings people together. It has to be true, right? For us to be here?”

“Or we could’ve dreamed it. And nothing is true, but we want it to be.” He hefted his suitcases and the rest.

From the apartment window, Katya watched her half brother get into a taxicab. His spindly figure folded nearly in half. She imagined him driving around the city for hours in search of a cheap room, finding one somewhere far away, in Brooklyn or Queens. She imagined him meeting his children, who would be tall and dark and wiry, just like their father. She imagined him playing the *duduk* for them, as he’d done for her, a simple song filled with mountains and pomegranates and desert dust. She imagined them dancing, too, weaving circles, swaying, tossing their arms in the air. And then she imagined none of it, just a cab and a road, nowhere—for miles and miles—a curve, a bump, a stretch.

