

SOMEPLACE ELSE

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In my dreams, we're still children, still gallivanting through a birch forest, retelling ghost-stories, hiding and peeing behind a cluster of tall, graceful trees. We laugh and finger the mossy trunks and gather red, pulpy wolf-berries off the bushes, threading them on long straws, then model our creations for each other, like precious necklaces or crowns, raw and fragile. You tear mine while trying to adjust it, and I curse and rip yours off. You throw it away and tell me that when we grow up, you'll become an important someone, with a four-bedroom apartment overlooking the Moskva River, and a black limo with a driver and a mini-bar, and a three-story brick dacha in Yasnaya Polyana, where Tolstoy used to live. You say you'll buy me diamond rings and ruby chokers and emerald bracelets, and I say, shying into the leafy branches, that I have no place to wear them to. And you laugh and say: I'll marry you, and we'll attend Christmas balls at the Kremlin. And I reply, pushing you in the belly: We don't celebrate Christmas in this country, and I don't want to live anywhere else.

I moved to America in 1994, three years before you died and almost five years before my son was born, who looks just like his dad—fair-skinned and light-haired, with a constellation of tiny freckles scattered over his cheeks and snub nose. Lolling on the porch-swing and

rocking my three-year-old son in my arms, I gaze at the mountains, which are like green ogres shielding the town with their hard, mighty chests. The day is warm and tranquil. The early-afternoon sun spreads a golden veil across the lawn and the porch steps, across the roofs and the mountain tops, gilds the trees and the slender steeple of the church up the hill. The rays stretch their caressing fingers and tease my son's cheeks and the fine hairs coiling above his ear. I touch the hairs and feel their impossible softness, their supple texture. I peer into my son's sun-bathed face and think of the roads he has yet to travel and the friends he has yet to make, of his future victories and impending defeats, of the places I will show him and the ones that he will have to discover himself. I think of my home country and the people I've left behind and you, whom he'll never meet.

When I announced that I was going to America to get married for the second time, you were the only one among my friends who didn't pout or yield to sadness or beg me to stay while spooling a cocoon of dire stories about women being sold into sex-slavery and American men hunting for cheap, mute, Russian maids they will starve or beat into submissiveness. Instead, you said: Cool, lady. Will you send me some gum? Melon flavor, if they have it, and a new Elton John tape.

We were twenty-four. I had graduated from Moscow State Linguistic University and had been teaching English in one of Moscow's middle schools. And you were a college dropout who refused to kowtow, to kiss other people's arrogant, privileged asses, as you used to joke. You had a small business already, buying and selling dollars, trading black caviar for Marlboros. *Perestroika*, you said, had made everyone dizzy—too many choices, not enough time. You'd just bought your first car, an old, square Ford Granada that resembled a tank, virtually indestructible. You didn't know how to drive and hired a neighbor, a retired WWII veteran, to take us shopping for vodka and souvenirs, some silly Russian trinkets for me to take abroad. I kept shoving money in your pocket, and you kept shoving it back into my hand, saying: Just don't forget me when you're rich and famous, living in Florida, visiting Disney World every day and dining aboard a million-dollar yacht. And I laughed, asking: A million-dollar yacht? Why so cheap? And why Florida, when I'm going to Virginia? And you shrugged and said: The same shit, just as far.

At nine, we thought that everything was possible, everything was absolute —the world still held its magic, was still ours to explore and savor, to have and to hold. We climbed trees and hid in the hollows of their bellies when it snowed or rained. We marveled at new, unfurling leaves, caught butterflies in pickle jars and watched their fragile wings batter against the glass. We dug up and dissected worms, scrutinizing the severed parts still crawling on the pavement. We bickered, we argued, we dreamed.

During the summer months, my grandparents would let you come with us to our dacha, and you'd be polite, devouring everything that was piled on your plate, complimenting my grandmother's sorrel soup or wild-mushroom ragout. My granddad would repeat his war stories, how he'd lost his three fingers and almost burned to death in a tank pulling his unconscious, wounded friend through the fiery opening. You asked him if you could touch his mangled hand, stretching out your own spindly fingers, feeling the places where his skin had been sewn together, rough and uneven, resembling seams on your socks that had been darned so many times.

That summer, I asked my mother for a bra, even though I still had no breasts, nothing but two caramel-colored nipples starting to bud under my T-shirts. Occasionally, when nobody saw us, you'd push your finger against my nipple and make a beeping sound, as though ringing a doorbell. I'd get mad and hit you in the chest or chase you all the way to the river, flailing my arms in the air, swearing to kill you. But then you'd dive in and stay under the water until I'd get scared and call after you. A trail of bubbles would jettison to the surface and burst under the sun.

Once, you wanted to know if I had hair down *there*, and I said none of your goddamn business, and you said: Cool. Just don't ask me to show mine. You have hair? I asked, ogling your crotch and those scrawny, pitiful legs of yours in black boxers that you'd rolled up a few times so they'd look like Speedos. You started running away from me, snickering, daring me to come after, and I did—through the yard, into the kitchen and into the bedroom, where you jumped on my mother's bed and curled in a ball and covered your red, flushed face with a pillow. I climbed over you. We romped and wrestled and kicked, chortling with laughter: I, yanking your boxers down, exposing your white buttocks, which were like two

small fists clutched together; you, catching my hands and forcing them away, shackling them behind my back with your tenacious boy-fingers.

As we got older, you stopped inviting me to spend time at your place, even though we were neighbors. After school we'd walk to your apartment building first, and you'd crack open the door to your flat, wide enough to tamp your schoolbag through—I had to stand behind you, craning my neck, peering into the somber dimness of your hallway, smelling cigarette smoke and fried fish—and then you'd shut the door abruptly and close your eyes for a moment, as though wishing to forget what you just saw.

We were fifteen when you didn't show up for a movie, a French comedy I'd been dreaming of seeing for a month. I could've resold your ticket—always money, always needed—but I kept waiting by the entrance, beating one snowy boot against the other, trying to get warm, until it got dark and the movie started. I ended up going alone and spent the next hour and a half sweating inside a small, crammed theatre, my dance-bag, scarf, and furry hat tossed on your empty seat. A couple directly in front of me kissed and nibbled on each other while Depardieu swept his long, blond bangs to the side and continued to charm the rest of the crowd from the screen. I didn't laugh once, turning my head and peering along the exit aisles, hoping that you'd slunk in some time ago and failed to find me.

After the movie, I went by your place. At first, nobody answered the door, and I thought maybe you'd gotten sick and gone to bed early. But when I stood there for a while, I heard someone fidgeting in the hallway. I rang again and then knocked, pounded on the door with my fists. Finally, the lock turned, and the hinges squeaked, and the door opened a few centimeters, and I saw your tortured, ghost-like face looming in the dark. Your lips were caked with blood, one of your eyes swollen shut, the other framed in purplish-red. You tried to smile and said: Sorry I missed the movie. And I blinked and asked: What the fuck? Groping inside your shirt pocket, you found a cigarette butt, and straightening it out with your fingers, inserted it in your mouth and flashed a lighter to its charred end.

You let me enter your flat. As I walked down the wan-lit corridor and into your room, stepping over socks, underwear, shirts, and shoes crumpled on the floor among the shards of broken glass and pickles and dried fish carcasses, I felt sick with pity, with all the stench and debris of your life scattered at my feet. I sat on your unkempt bed—a tangle of stained sheets and covers—and stared at the opposite wall, at the poster of Elton John you'd traded your sweater for at one of the "black" markets. I asked: Do you want to go to my place? But you shook your head and said that you'd better start cleaning up since your mother, asleep in the other room, didn't feel well, and your piss-drunk, cocksucking father had finally left for good. I stood up and wrapped my arms around your sharp, pointy shoulders, my fingers traveling up and down the knolls of your spine, crawling through the orange nest of your hair. I tried to kiss you, but you pushed me away, drowning the cigarette butt in the liquid contents of a compote jar. You said: Leave. This is no place for a princess. And I answered, seared by your words: I'm no princess. I have neither a father nor a kingdom to inherit. And then I rushed home, in tears, and threw out the window two Hungarian dolls my mother had bought me a long time ago. They sank in the snow—feet up—their lacy skirts blown against their fake, painted faces.

You dropped out of high school and went to work at a plant. You switched to evening classes and finished your education and became an electrician. We didn't speak for three years. I'd catch a glimpse of you in a bus or in a grocery store, with a bloated mesh bag on your shoulder and a cigarette—always a cigarette—tucked behind your ear or clamped between your lips. You'd smile and wave and rush through the aisle, toward the exit. A few times, I spotted you ambling down the street, hugging Milka, that cheap tramp five years your senior, who had already sucked off half of the neighborhood. Again, you'd wave, puffing on a cigarette, and scuttle away, always in a hurry to get places, to shrink and disappear from my view.

We turned eighteen, entered colleges; I married, and you sent me a gift—a small amber fish wrapped in newspaper and tied with a red string. *For happiness*, your card said. I tore the

card and threw the pieces in the trash, and the fish stared at me with its sad, black-beaded eye.

I called you two years later, in the middle of the night. I asked you if I could come by, if we could talk. You said sure in your dry, raspy voice, the voice that I had begun to forget. When I arrived, you were still in your underwear, your chest and shoulders bearing traces of deep slumber, where creased sheets had imprinted your skin. You filled a teakettle with water and placed it on the stove, a cigarette burning in the corner of your mouth. Your apartment looked preened and redecorated, as though you'd been expecting a royal guest. A *Russkaya Krasavitsa* rug sprawled on the hallway floor, and a new square mirror in a wrought-iron frame hung on the wall. I glanced in it for a moment, and a desperate, mortified stranger stared back at me. Turning away from the stove, you asked: Tea or vodka? Then added, flipping ashes into a chipped saucer on the table: My mother works night shifts now, so she comes home around nine.

I watched you set two teacups on the table. I said: I left my husband, then took a drag from your cigarette and poured vodka into a cup instead of a shot glass. Why? you asked, I thought he was a famous lawyer who made gobs of money. He is, I answered, But he also can't keep his dick down, fucks everything that moves. You laughed, spurting smoke through your nostrils, and I took an angry gulp of vodka out of the cup. Fuck you, I said, puckering, lighting another cigarette, Fucking asshole. You're all the same—lawyers, electricians—all fucking pathetic.

The teakettle whistled and steamed the window. You stubbed your cigarette out and turned off the stove, moving the kettle to another burner, all signs of laughter erased from your face. I dumped more vodka in my mouth. You suggested eating some food the way I gobbled the vodka, then opened your refrigerator and produced a tall jar of black caviar. I asked where you got the caviar and who paid for it. And you replied that you knew people who went places and took things. Legally? I asked. But you said it made no difference—everyone aimed to survive. I said: You can get hurt. And you just shrugged, staring out the window, into the fading blackness, at the rickety trees scraping their gnarled branches against the glass.

We drank, we ate black caviar with soup spoons, reminiscing, guffawing at everything we did when we were children: hid each other's slippers and socks, poured salt in food, clipped off hair at night, played *Doctor-and-Patient* while sneaking sly peeks at each other's privates.

Finally, we staggered to the bathroom, where we both tried to piss: I, sitting on the commode; you, leaning over the sink. You looked at me, and I looked at you and was gripped with seismic laughter, toppled on the floor. Lowering to your knees, you brought your face closer to mine, and we touched and sniffed and nuzzled like two stray cats. We crawled to your room and slumped on the bed, without bothering to undress any further. I squinted and felt as if I was on a raft, floating and bobbing on waves, carousing down the river. I tried to roll over and kiss you, but the room began to expand, and the furniture swayed. Elton John undulated and made faces from the wall. I gazed up—the ceiling resembled a storm cloud that kept sinking lower and lower until I closed my eyes and dissolved into it.

When you married, a year later, I sent you a toy boat—*For your first child*, my card said. I was finishing my degree, and you were building your family together with your business. I called as often as I could, but your wife always said you weren't home, always hanging up before I could ask anything else. I began teaching English, and you began buying and bleaching cheap jeans, sewing American labels between belt loops. Then the U.S.S.R fell apart, and the economic crises gutted the country; the dollar rocketed, the ruble sank. You dumped the labels and stopped counterfeiting jeans, switching to foreign currency: buying a little, selling a little, investing the profit. You forgot my birthday, and I spurned your anniversary and the upcoming Christmas Russia had just begun celebrating.

You divorced the year I remarried, just a few months after I'd left for America. At the airport, you had stood among my relatives, behind a clear-plastic partition—the shoddy medium separating my past from my future, the world I knew from the one I was about to discover. Coming closer to the partition, you pressed your palm against it. You raised another hand to the mop of your clown-red hair and pointed your finger at your temple, like a pistol, and shuddered, committing an imaginary suicide, sliding down the plastic. I laughed

and hoisted the carryon to my shoulder and sauntered toward the exit, the amber fish hidden in my pocket.

The next time I'd come home, you would not be there, would not squeeze me in your arms, blowing smoke into my hair, coughing, asking: What's up, lady? Where did you get the jeans?

I hadn't called but a few times, and you called none. I complained about American food, the paucity of people and theatres, the lack of friends. And you said: Chill out—not like you can't hop on the plane and come back. Need a ticket? No, I did not. I told you that we were trying to conceive and something wasn't working. His sperm is too old or my eggs are too stubborn, I joked. And you said that babies gave you indigestion and uncontrollable shits. To you, they were nothing but a pain in one's sweet, puckered ass, permanent hemorrhoids. I laughed, and you swore with your heart and your balls that it was true.

You were killed execution-style: shot twice in the heart, once in the head when you got out of your Mercedes late one night and were approaching your new apartment building on Razin Street, your hair like a heap of autumn leaves burning in the dark. I imagine you stall and look at a strange car parked on the curb not far from where you're standing, at the hard barrel of a gun pointing out of its window. You smile a weary, surprised smile and press your boyish hands to your chest, where the first bullet hit, where you pressed my head when I told you that I was leaving the country, leaving my family, my friends, you. Another shot is fired, and you falter and raise your chin and spread your arms wide as though embracing the inevitable, as though inviting everyone—good or bad—to join the party, to gaze at the stars. A sigh escapes your lips, and you fall, fall, crashing to the ground, in the puddles of rain and twigs and cigarette butts.

I still call your mother on your birthday, still send her new Elton John CDs, still listen to the sound of a teakettle whistling in the kitchen. She restores the memories and recounts your childhood escapades, and I grow older, older than you.