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ESSAYS AND NOVEL EXCERPT

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By

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I met the captain in March, several months before, through a friend of his wife's. We were on a raft and I had managed to catch a rope when it was needed. At the time, the captain worked the paddles, his seat bolted to the frame in the back. I need someone like you, he had said. Are you looking for a job? I told him yes and that he would need to contact my mother. He seemed surprised. I tended to forget incongruences like that. I needed her permission, I had tried to explain, although it was fake permission, a fragile system of sorts, where I couldn't directly ask because she would have to say no, and so I'd indirectly inform, otherwise I would have to disobey.

He forwarded an email:

Sub.: Note to your mom
Dear Mrs. Music,
I'd like to hire your daughter Mirela to work on our salmon fishing boat this coming summer. My family has been running the Namorada for many years but now my son has a new job on dry land. That leaves us shorthanded and I think Mirela would fit right in as a deckhand. I've worked with quite a few women deckhands, the first being my wife who will be out to Naknek yet again this summer.
We use the boat to buy salmon from set-net fishermen at the mouth of the Naknek River and deliver them upriver to the cannery which is only two miles away. So it is very safe and not at all like the TV shows about Alaska.
Here are a few pictures of the boat and my family from the last few years.
Regards,
Bill Wiebe

At twenty-five I am a New Yorker working as a deckhand on a tender boat in Alaska. It is my first season tendering, where I weigh and help transport salmon from the mouth of the Naknek River to the South Trident Docks.

For my parents, I am on a walk, wandering, unserious. Are we rich? They would ask me over the phone. No one will help you when you're old and you don't have money.

My parents had traveled for survival so that anything I did was for leisure. It was hard to enjoy buying a coffee knowing they only ever brew, let alone the waste of rent, gas, groceries when I could be home, helping support our family. I spent years leaving home and bounding back, sleeping on rented mattresses, or in my car, where occasionally, my doors rattled as someone checked the locks in passing. I tried not to sleep by the windows, which could slide open from the outside. Sometimes I dreamt an arm reaching in to grab me. Mostly, I slept well. Come home, my parents would say at the end of every phone call— a black metal door with a sign drilled over it— *Peace, Love and Joy To All Who Enter*.

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The cabin is peculiarly dry. The other deckhand and I sit on the dining bench— chipped leather cushion over faded wood. A bread maker shoved beneath the dining bench, next to the first aid kit and oil diapers. The captain makes us scrambled eggs and toast. Every day we take turns cooking.

Who's turn is it for dinner?

Yours. If you can't think of anything to make, read this, says the captain as he hands me a book from his library. Whoever complains about a meal makes the next one.

The captain is a prudent man. His cheeks and nose are round, flagging, body

waning from the bones, but jaunty as he rushes from the bow to the stern, back again, blue eyes zinging with a bird-like whip. He could be retired, but chooses not to.

I am surprised that he hands me *The Joy of Cooking*. But then, the entire cabin is imprinted by his wife and son, who no longer tender. There is no captain's stateroom—separate quarters from which he can oversee the goings of the day. Instead, we are all crammed into twin berths under the bow. I imagine his family pressed into this crevice—the intrinsic belonging of kin heaped on top of one another.

As I wait for breakfast, I thumb through the rest of the collection. Several shelves fix over the dining table. Thumbtacked tear-outs of politicians' faces underneath. To the right, a photo. Black and white. A younger woman, perhaps forty or fifty years his junior, smiling.

Is that Jane from before? I say.

Could be, he tells me.

I follow the line—literary magazines, newspaper cut-outs, several books on Antarctic adventures where the ship's crew either completely survive or resort to cannibalism. Finally, a guide published in 1997 from the Waterford Press:

The guide's primary purpose is to introduce the reader to common plants and animals... Its secondary purpose is to show how all species in each ecosystem here depend on each other, directly or indirectly, for survival.

You'll have plenty of time to read, he tells me. Especially with this weather.

Instead, we are radioed back to the dock, where we tie up and offload the fish.

The river is sparkling blue, not gray, ten to fifteen degrees warmer than average. The dock crew jumps aboard as they attach the pump scow. Even the bloodied

refrigerated water shines as it splashes back from the convulsing tube at the pump scow, where thousands of pounds of salmon are vacuumed from the fish hole of tender boats and processed on the plant. It is here, before my turn washing off the remaining fish froth from the deck, that I notice the kittiwakes, their black tipped wings and black feet, thrown into the sky, spiraling like confetti. A man on the deck of a passing drifter fishing boat yells into his cell—

You always fucking call me about fucking money. For months, money money money. No I miss youse no how are you. Next time you call me, don't fucking ask me about fucking money.

The man's anger makes me laugh— a terrible, ingrained response— and our boat sways at the soft ripples of his wake. I am not from here. But neither are most of the fisherman. The ones around me are from Washington or Utah. Or if they do live in Alaska, they are white, and compared to the Natives, not from here either. But what everyone is here for, local or not, is the salmon. And by that I don't mean spirituality or harmony with nature. I mean their income.

I imagine the man's daughter or wife on the other end of the line. But I don't know anything. I sense perhaps his feelings are hurt, his irascibility an indication of the pressure he feels to work or provide, the care that he craves. Still, I do not know.

Money, money, money. It always comes back to it.

Our boat is a 47 foot seiner, without a net. Traditionally, it is used to catch the salmon, rather than transport them. But the captain had long since decided his income would not be so variable, so dependent on the season. He contracts a daily rate with a seafood processor. My own daily rate is $150— which, when I divide the hours is not much better

than the twelve an hour just before, in retail. But I look forward to the lump sum at the end of the season— to the options not being tethered to a weekly paycheck affords.

I had been determined to support myself without my family. Mostly, I flailed, unable to cover the costs of rent and food and dental care on my retail wage. The tender job came as a reprieve.

On the boat, I like the fixedness of our routine around the tide. I like not worrying about whether or not I would pay rent, whether I'd be safe sleeping in my van, after renting fell through. I like not deciding if I'll quit retail or ask for a raise, afford a coffee that I would buy, anyway. For a time, I sink into regimen, an escape from the overwhelming buzz of an open life, of infinite paths with its singular question— How will I survive?

As it turns out, the heat-stressed salmon reproduce at record rates. I read very slowly.

***

Back home, black wires string across thin frames of sky. Yellow paint tapers from the curb. And no one takes turns cooking.

I spot my father half an avenue down from our building. His unconcerned walk as he rolls his own tobacco. He has a way of both not giving and yet expecting attention— a stocky 6'3" with a home workout routine in the building's basement. For years, he hung a punching bag in our playroom, which as children we hugged with our bodies as a sort of involved swing set.

Oh, dje si, he says as he approaches. We kiss cheeks.

I'm going to work, I tell him.

Nice, nice.

Typically, Babo is in the front of our building, leaning against the gate in a paisley button-down shirt and wide-legged jeans. He wears a gold chain with the star and crescent, although we were taught Muslim men are allowed only silver. In the past, he had experimented with long hair, short hair and sideburns which arced into his dimples, and kept simply to oppose our mother. And while I always thought my dad was cliché, I had to admit he had style.

You're home early, I note, having little else to say. I'm in college, working at a restaurant in Midtown that can take an hour and a half commute.

Very slow today. He lights his roll.

Okay, I have to catch my train.

Be safe, he says. We conclude what will be our only conversation of the day—staples of interaction that remind us we are family even as we stretch across the city for work, for school, friends.

Babo is the same country boy that met Mama on a rural road in former Yugoslavia, all jokes and smile. Wag. But now he's in Bay Ridge, a reality he never fully adjusted to, in a city-life he hates.

Upon arriving to the States, Babo worked a string of construction, handyman, doorman, super, and janitor odd-jobs. Within a few years, he injured his spine heavy lifting, being asked to do things he shouldn't have done. He won a settlement and immediately bought land in Plav, Montenegro. From there, he funneled paychecks into building a house that would remain empty, while we continued to live as the superintendents of our Brooklyn walk-up.

Over time, Babo's work ethic troubled Mama. He picked up calls to plumbing emergencies airily, said things like, Don't worry, I'll be right there, only to proceed to kick his feet up on the table. Once, when a toilet broke on a Friday afternoon, Babo had already left his shift. Instead of turning back, he told his boss, Just kick it. I'll be back Monday. The same boss gave him a raise every time he asked for it, as well as paid for all Babo's car repairs. It seemed Babo could do what he wanted. But then, he always did need a new job.

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Wiebe, Jane. "Sub.: things for Naknek." Message to Mirela Music. 19 June 2019. Email.

I should be able to bring those. Do you want big pads too, or just the little panty liners? Just some long-sleeved shirts?

Anything else?

I'm looking forward to meeting you!

***

The captain tells me, the presence of a female lifts the dignity of a boat. When we are docked, he asks me if I need a shower, or if I could use a break. He says, now that I am here, we would empty the bucket after every No. 2.

The captain likes my far-off New York stories, that I am Muslim, and that my family of nine lives in one apartment in Brooklyn. He often stops me mid-sentence—So there you were on Madison Avenue— which I'd remind him, I was not.

You're like Scheherazade from One Thousand Nights, the captain tells me. You keep distracting me with your stories. Can I give you a nickname? What about Zada?

The captain explains to me that there was a king whose wife had been unfaithful. In his anger, the king married a new virgin bride every night only to behead her in the morning. Scheherazade, the daughter of a vizier, volunteered to marry the king. To avoid a similar fate, she told a story for a thousand nights until he fell in love with her. She was Arab, he tells me.

I want to remind him my parents are from the Balkans. Or point out his strange similitude between distracting a man from work and distracting a man from beheading a woman. All the ways I might go about this. Instead, I concede:

Sure, you can call me Zada.

Long ladders softened into fibrous tissue hang from the docks and mottled algae line the wood. The freshwater swells twenty feet at high tide, pouring in and out like a muscular tongue clearing the bowl.

Warehouses and empty shops. Everything chapped and frayed and slightly tilted, as if stiff from shouldering the cold. Between stretches of road are spirals of scrap-metal. An abundance of wind-whipped industry.

For me, the roads only went away or towards the docks. But almost all roads carved the grasses along the coast, as if the town clung to its waterways, backs open to the expansive wilderness. Didn't they know better, I wondered, than to keep their backs to an open door?

***

Bill tells me the main reason he hired me is because he believed I wouldn't get hurt. Girls aren't as dumb as boys, he clarifies. I am also told last season's girls sunbathed on the bridge and I could too, if I wanted. In the Fisherman's Lounge, the weather channel improve their catchlines daily: *Warmest Day on Record!; Eight Days of Eighties; All Time Record Three Times in Five Days.* Set netters stand bare chested under their neoprene waders. Heat emanates from their reddened hide. The captain walks about in his briefs.

Bill has Jacob and I do odd jobs on shore as well as on the boat. After I finish sanding and then staining the second coat of the starboard rail, we are told to move an anchor from the trunk of Bill's town car onto the boat. He wants to drop a new mooring buoy.

Heavy lifting is dangerous, I tell Bill and Jacob. They ignore me.

Both Jacob and I hold the anchor in position as Bill lifts the anchor out of the car with a crane.

Hold it, hold it. Bill slowly moves it to the ground. He begins to lay the anchor onto the ground and all at once the jaws clamp over my hands. I yell in shock— Bill stares at me.

Lift it up! I yell again. Bill lifts the anchor back up with the crane and frees my hands. My fingers are bleeding and swollen, but intact thanks to the half inch gap in the anchor.

Should I put fish slime on it? I ask him. I think because it is natural, there may be healing benefits.

Not unless you want your hands amputated.

Dangling over my head daily is an AV crate of ice, well over a thousand pounds. All around me are several thousands of pounds of aluminum, fiberglass, steel, iron, rope, nets. Boats, cables, hooks. If the crate doesn't fall directly on me, will it instead slide onto me and pin me against the barge, or drag me into the water? I tell myself to stop thinking about all the ways I might die— I've already nicked my hands all over, banged my head against a couple of steel nails. Everything out here is stronger, denser than me.

The other fishermen tell me he's a wacko and a perv, but I assume they say that because he is liberal and they are conservative.

He's always hiring girls, one tells me. Be careful.

How else are girls supposed to get hired? I say.

When I finish taking a shower on the docks, I step out of the women's side to find an entire crew of men just entered. They look at me once and then turn away. I say hello and leave the building. I ask the captain what I should do. What if they had been aggressive?

Want me to guard the door? He says. Would that make you feel better?

Sure, I say. We can try it.

He guards the door the next two showers. I tell him I'm not nervous about it anymore. I lock the doors to the whole building instead.

When we tie down for the night with the new mooring buoy, we wake up to yelling. We are dragging despite being anchored— our boat had headed straight into another as we slept. Bill wakes us all up as he turns the boat on and turns around. He apologizes over

the water, but the men just stare back. There is no excuse— no rough weather, no wind. We simply hadn't done the job right.

The next day, in broad daylight, they pass us on the water. Several muscled men stand on the deck, throwing glass and garbage on our deck, staring at the captain as they do. Bill turns red, but he says nothing. What can he do? He is an older man, aging out of his job, his body. His own crew is hardly threatening.

For the rest of the day Bill curses the men who trashed our deck, stares after where their boat passed ours, concocts half-baked plans of revenge. He is humiliated.

Undoubtedly, I am incompetent. But here, in this world, the captain is as well. I see that to the men here, his thin, sinewy eccentricity makes him a reject. To them, he is weak. He wields me like a sword. He brings me— not Jacob— to meetings with Trident where he secures extensions for his contract. When he noticed a set-netter would get out of his skiff to help me with the brailer, he attempted to hire him for odd jobs on land. The pay was cheap.

Will Mirela be there? The set-netter asked.

Oh yes she will.

Before I'd get too upset, the captain helps me reply to my rejection letter from a publishing house. He orates the email and modifies my additions: You're not thankful for being rejected, he tells me. Don't say things like I'd like to have coffee if you're available. Say, I'd like to drop by and introduce myself.

What do you pay Jacob, I ask him, in a flush of boldness. I had already asked

Jacob, but he refused to answer.

The same, said the captain. Thought you had me there, didn't you?

***

For weddings, Babo often parks the car and walks ahead until he reaches the door, where he waits for my sisters and my mother to catch up. When we enter, he stays with us.

In heels, my sisters and I loom over all the women, and some men. An uncle approaches and congratulates my father.

Such beautiful girls!

Babo smiles and hugs two of us with each arm over our shoulders, so that he stands in the middle.

So beautiful, he says, and kisses both our cheeks, turning his own from right to left, like at the end of salat. His smile. He has so much to be proud of. A dutiful wife and pretty, wholesome daughters. I watch. I tally. His kiss foul. My whole body foul in its wake.

***

At low tide, Jane arrives with her son and Costco supplies, including two packs of heavy flow pads, beef jerky and mandarins. We dock the boat and make our way to land. She refuses to enter the boat unless it is a means of transportation to the watchman's house, where she stays, queen bed to herself.

The house's foundation is rotting. The porch post slid off. The sidings are blown off. The floors, caved. We replace rotting panels only to find rotting beams. We dig out the old deck only to find a beehive, which then lures a grizzly. We install a new deck. It lays uneven. Inside, the dust lifts with every sitting. The tufted armchair is disabled, swallows of cotton pus on the backside, frontside, left. The kitchen is white, but with an orange sheen made more orange by the orange chairs. And the captain loves all of it. It has a certain charm, he says.

For dinner, Jane makes salmon curry. She tells Bill she can't stay for long, that her garden needs her. Bill doesn't like that Jane won't tender anymore. He complains to me: Why should she get the money if I'm doing all the work. I assume this just means he loves her. That he is lonely and wants her to stay.

At the kitchen table, the rest of us pull step stools and other suitable things for sitting. The family is reunited and the captain is ecstatic. He writes a list for his son, the Stanford engineer, of things that needed fixin.' The boat's motor on the South Dock, the motorcycle on North. The son dramatizes his boredom but then for hours hollers when the motor revs, curses when it stops. At last, he is unable to fix it. He wipes his hands onto a rag and rubs the rag across his face. Black oil contours his cheeks. He stays silent through dinner, thinking, thinking. When he leaves the table, his parents share the intimacy of his unhappiness while I wash the dishes. Their backs are almost to me, so that they part into an invisible room. All he needs is a new project, they murmur together. The two are nostalgic, a myriad of remembrances shuddering before them, soft smiles on their even softer bodies as they think of their large, slightly balding child. The captain's wife

lets the captain hold her, that once.

After a shower one evening, I ask Jane to braid my hair. We are back on land, where she spends her time filleting salmon for subsistence fishing. The fish swim upriver to spawn, she tells me. In Alaska, the salmon live two years, but now, with the warmer weather, they swim out in half the time, and die twice as fast. Jane sits in the middle of the long sofa. She laughs and says sure like *shore.* We are alone in the living room, curtains open. Outside, the fog pushes back the red rays so that the sun is a flat disc in a gray, flat sky, inserting slowly into the blue, wet tundra.

I sit at her feet on the carpet. She combs my hair. We face the windows, our cheeks glowing against the blood sun. It must be so normal for you with all your sisters, but I've never done this before— I didn't have any sisters or daughters.

Jane's own hair is a cropped bowl cut. Her prettiness is a wild thing— bare and unheeded. It ages as she does— crisping so that the colors flush and then brown, her eyes a searing blue against her tanned skin, hair flashing silver along its edges.

I feel honored, she tells me, still brushing, as if she were at my feet and not I hers. I wonder if she feels what I think is so apparent— my latching on, the girlish need for a woman in this world of men.

The captain walks in and sits on Jane's right. He watches, smiling, as she braids the three parts together.

***

I find him waiting for the R at the subway station. Like I spotted a celebrity in a coffee shop.

This is cool, I say as we enter a cart and sit on orange and yellow plastic seats. I hardly see Babo outside the parameters of our apartment, couldn't picture him swiping his metro to get through the turnstile or peering into the tunnel for the faint refractions of light.

Across from us is a twenty-something year old.

You are very beautiful, Babo tells her. She looks at me.

This is my daughter, he says. I nod in agreement. Yes, I am his daughter. An extension of his ego. A representation of himself. A permeable funnel of his sexuality. Spawn. I wasn't anyone, at all. The woman relaxes and the rest of the ride I try to ignore their conversation.

***

Jane leaves for her garden. The captain flops over to my left and says, I'm bored, tell me a story. I bristle at the expectancy. And his briefs. Again, he walks around, a sagging outline of his balls also flopping. He is barefooted. Salmon flesh flattens against his little toe. A blister.

As I weigh the salmon I notice that the fish have changed. In the beginning they were silvery and blue. Now they have red welts on their backs. The males grew hooked mouths. They've become ugly. The set netters tell me it is because their time is near. Spawning is the final phase of their life. They do it to attract the females. The set netters also remind the captain he has no pants on, their daughters or wives in the skiff. The captain mimes surprise and throws on a pair. It grows harder to defend him, the not so

lovable Eccentric Wise Man.

My reproach increases— Why do you only take pictures of set netters if they're women? What do you do with the photos?

He balks— No I'm not! No I don't! What's wrong with admiring beautiful women? What does objectifying mean? I don't know these words, he tells me. I think it's a language issue.

***

Babo declares we are all moving back to Plav. He's been homesick for years. Says he had never planned on living in America, that it was supposed to be temporary, to help with the finances, start a family. He wants to go back to the mountains. Breathe fresh air.

We need to make our life here, Mama says.

Mama has small eyes, deep-set by fine lashes. She is embarrassed of makeup and making her hair— but not, apparently, of her unadulterated feeling for the man she loves. At eighteen, Mama ran away with Babo, to his family's house, from Gusinje to Plav, some fifteen minutes away by bus. My father's sisters, his mother, even his father, noted my mother's service to the man she loves. Sit, Mama would say, never quite sitting herself, taking care of things that needed to be done, hair up as she felt obscured by the strands— moving, like she did, with a linear, pointed purpose: her family.

I regret it, she would tell us, a few years later, as she sat folding laundry and we matched socks. I should have just asked my dad. He was very open for that. I shouldn't have run away.

You didn't listen, we chastised her. Her running away had confused me. As if all

her listening were an act.

The lesson, she told us, is to always ask permission.

Mama mostly disagreed with Babo. She had wanted to buy an apartment that went up for sale with Babo's settlement money. But he chose to buy land in Montenegro. She had tried starting a small business selling dresses, and he joked about its failure for months. Whereas Babo was a victim of the workforce, Mama had enthusiasm for its potential.

We're not moving, Mama says to Babo. We are teens now, still about her feet. I walk in and out of their conversation.

We're staying here, she tells him. Stop with that talk.

You're telling me what to do? You?

Babo punches Mama in the face. My sisters scream. I rush in from somewhere—

Mama moans, her hand over her face. She nearly blacks out— her motions slowing to a sharp stillness. We stare at her, the whole room quiet.

Mama stands up in an instant and flips the stone-top coffee table, a deep howl surging from her belly to her mouth. Babo stares at her. We are all in shock.

Get out! I order him with the same authority I've acquired over my siblings in our self-governed evenings.

Babo turns around. His size shrinks in the hall. He slips into the basement of the building.

My older sister and I call a taxi. We leave the next oldest in charge of the kids. Make them not scared, I tell her as I go.

My older sister and I wait for Mama at the hospital, where they tell her she's fine and here's social services. Mama doesn't want to press charges. The social services lady looks at my sister and I.

You know, your girls are watching everything, she says. This will really affect them.

I laugh at the obviousness of the remark. I've been watching for years. Nothing could affect me when it didn't even surprise me, I wanted to say.

Her love for him—

The next day, Mama doesn't wear sunglasses or make-up, despite the purple lump on her temple. She waits for her carpool outside the building. She is to go to work.

Why should I be ashamed? She says. He did it.

I didn't understand— the verve of her.

***

The captain's turn to tell a story. A Tolstoy novel, he says, but can't remember the title. It goes: an old, powerful man rapes a young girl. The young girl, helpless against his title, never reports the crime. Years pass and she no longer sees him. During this time, the old man falls into poverty and alcoholism. At one point, the two cross paths. She finds him in this wretched state and offers him solace. Later, the old man returns to riches, and remembering the kindness of the woman he raped, saves her life.

What's the moral of the story? I ask once he finishes. He turns to me and laughs.

No, I suppose there isn't one, is there?

Finally, the season is over. The nineteen-year-old leaves first and I help carry his bags to the dock. We shake hands. I want to tell you something, he says. Remember when we went to the Fisherman Lounge and everyone was so quiet when you walked in? After you left, they started talking about the things they would do to you. It was bad. Be careful.

Of course they said those things, I tell him, like he is a child and I am an adult.

When they all fly out, I tell the captain, I'll sleep on the boat if you sleep in the house. He says, Don't worry, I'm not going to jump into bed with you.

My last day, I am cleaning up wood scraps from the yard and organizing them according to size while the captain cuts more wood and throws them to me. For days, he finds useless projects for us to complete, agitated when there is nothing left to do, when he has no right to a productive day. I wonder at his agitation— as if a spare moment flushes him into time's end.

Install a plank here, pull a line there. For a while we move iron beams from a barge with heavy machinery. The cannery is strewn with abandoned forklifts and excavators. None of us are licensed to use any of it. None of it is necessary. The captain still has no idea what he will do after season, how to make use of the winter. I urge him to journal his feelings. Instead, he talks to me about his sex life. That he might go to Thailand and get himself a sweetie. Or adopt a Chinese daughter.

For days it goes like so: he gets too close, stares into my eyes, a heavy sigh. Zada, he calls me. And yet, on my last day, when he tells me— I haven't paid you yet— I still follow him to the shed that he waves me over to, where he points his finger at me and tells me, touch it.

For a while, I stare at his finger, attached to his hand and then his arm. It is just a finger. One version, plain, pale, the veins of a withering, sad man, the other: twisted and scaly, a desperate virility. I'm figuring out all the ways he might mean this, but couldn't really be sure, needing, ridiculously, to be wrong.

Why? I laugh, my hand midair, unsure—

To make a deal.

I tap my finger onto the tip of his. The pretense breaks.

He goes on to say what was always in him to say— that I need a sugar daddy, and he had a proposal. Says he had been a pure man for 30 years and— No, he is not joking, it is not a prank. I should hear him out. If anything, I should take it as a compliment.

***

Hi Mirela,

I was just talking to him when I got your text. My main reaction is just incredulousness that he would be so STUPID. Unbelievably stupid. I'd like to see you, and I suppose we have to talk about it some. But I don't want it to be the only thing. Maybe a good walk? There are low tides mid-day, if that would work for you one of the days you're here.

Jane.

***

Mirella,

I've been hesitant about writing you, but Jane knows about this contact and assures me

that I owe you an apology.

Bill

***

Jane stands before me in the hallway of her single story home, which connects to the beach of the small Alaskan fishing town through a steep trail anchored by a rope. We are several hundred miles away from Naknek, from the breeding waters of the sockeye. Her father sits in the dining table, making earrings which he later freely gives away. Her own parents had a one sided marriage: her mother had to take up her father's hobbies as her own, go where he went, do what he wanted. Jane gives me a pair made of a sort of long, marbled stone. We walk on the beach, pick raspberries from her garden, until finally, we enter the blue family house which, as I pass the photos and curious trinkets, take on a temporary, mythical quality, as can maybe be expected from the slant of a home wrecker. We are in the interim of a crisis, the captain sulking away on the boat in Naknek, me, brazen in his home town, and Jane, offering gelato.

I love my life, she tells me.

***

My father eventually swore off beating my mother, but he just couldn't stop cheating. Mostly, we ignore all the evidence. It takes him a while to learn he can change the saved names on his phone. Through all this, Babo buys Mama flowers. He leaves her a bouquet on Women's Day. He buys her jewelry for every birthday.

We are in college. Babo declares he will go to Plav. Mama argues for weeks over his idea. Tells him we need to save money, why does he need to go to Plav twice in the

same year? Why couldn't he wait a few months more, when we are all going to Montenegro as a family? Are we rich? she asks. Did you find a job? Babo has been out of work for months.

Why should I do shit work, he says, when unemployment pays the same? Better to relax. My whole life, work work work. I'm tired.

No Babo, get a job, I chime in. Their talks always on display. In the kitchen. In the car.

It's better for you. You'll have structure. You'll feel better about yourself. Every dollar counts.

He says nothing. On Valentine's, a few weeks later, Babo buys Mama roses and leaves a note. We crowd around her as she smiles at the shoot of color. She opens the note.

Nulje, odo za Plav.

While he is in Montenegro, Babo texts my sister, asking her to help him with a resume. He types her an email that she did not help make. Babo can send emails. As for creating accounts, that was new.

My sister looks up Babo's email and finds his secret Facebook account. She tries name and number combinations that she made for him in the past and logs in on the second try. She reads all his messages. She calls us into our parents' bedroom. We read his messages together.

We learn he is in Montenegro with his girlfriend, who may have been the same woman from years before, that he's declared his love to, over and over, as well as the other women in his inbox, who rang in age and composition. One in her early twenties.

We show Mama our findings. So are you going to leave him this time? We press. Mama just stares. For the next few weeks, she loses weight. I have no sympathy. I just keep asking.

I'll help you with rent, I promise. I'll never go out late again. I'll work full time and go to school full time. You don't have to anything.

For weeks I try to convince Mama to divorce him. We go so far as throwing a suitcase of Babo's clothes onto the gate of his brother's apartment building.

A woman doesn't behave like this, my uncle insults my mother.

Babo's sisters call Mama from Montenegro, asking her to forgive him. Babo stays quiet in our house in Plav, where he threatened moving our family back to, time and time again. He can keep the house, we tell Mama.

The first night of his return flight, Mama lets him into their bedroom. After a while, I could hear her laugh. It was over.

The next day, after Mama goes to work, Babo walks into the living room where we sit watching television. Without looking at him, we all stand up and leave the room.

It is as if some spell has been lifted and all the taboo of disobedience suspended. Any other day, our behavior would have warranted clean slaps from him. But somehow, with his transgression so big that even Mama's siblings rally her for a divorce, the same relatives who have told us for years to watch our business, we now feel buoyed in our anger.

Weeks progress into months of silent treatment. At first he complains to Mama, who tells us to talk to him. He gives us an approximation of appropriate time before demanding his routine of coffee and dinner made. In those moments, when we are most threatened for a beating, we break our silence to say, I don't make coffee for cheaters. Go tell your girlfriend. You're not my dad. Finally, he looks past us, himself, silent-treating the silent-treaters, waiting for an apology. Instead, I write him a letter saying how he hurt my feelings for all those years. He tears it in front of me. Says, You want to say I'm shit because you're shit.

Soon, Mama is pregnant with her seventh child. Despite her IUD and 42 years, she is ripe for child-bearing. Babo is delighted. Says he loves children and falling asleep to the sound of us being together. I do the calculations.

How could you sleep with him right away? I accuse her, on a Wednesday, as we are pulling out trash bags from the bin and replacing them with fresh rolls.

Her mouth stays closed but her jaws loosen. I have crossed a line.

I hope you get an abortion, I tell her.

She thought she was on menopause since her own mother had it in her forties. She wouldn't tell me that she had considered abortion, but that she was too far along. Instead, she says, That's forbidden.

For the first time, the ebbing resentment I feel towards Mama becomes a searing reality. I can't excuse her martyrdom. She is weak. I don't believe, anymore, that she dealt with all this to keep the family together. No. Instead, she is desperate. Unable to value herself outside her marriage.

I make Mama's life as difficult as possible. I refuse to contribute to the house in any way. I exploit her for a place to sleep and food to eat. In fact, I eat breakfast and leave my food and plate for her to clean up. I leave without informing anyone where I am going. I ignore her calls and texts. One day, Babo is so angry with all the dishes in the sink that he takes them out one by one and smashes them onto the kitchen floor. I leave it for Mama to clean up. When she comes home past midnight, after her janitorial shift, I join her in the kitchen as she stares at the ensemble of split edges. Your husband did that, I tell her.

Babo never had consequences and now I hold Mama responsible for it. He wreaks havoc and the stability of our family is anchored to his mood. He never apologizes and instead demands apologies from us. Slowly, my siblings succumb. My older sister is the first to break the silent treatment.

You're such a daddy's girl, I tell her.

Whatever. I'm not gonna waste my time being mad when Mama clearly isn't.

The pregnancy represents a new reality: we will still be a family, like it or not. Silence is replaced with a mix of sympathy and guilt for my father: He feels bad, you could tell; Imagine you grew up in his shoes?

I stay silent. I want Babo to know that I could hate him and I wouldn't regret it, as he often told me I would, should he die.

Over time, we find ways to interact with one another while still ignoring. Tell your daughter, he says to Mama as she washes the dishes and the two of us sit across one another at the kitchen table, to clean up. Tell your husband, I say back, that he's a cheater. Remember? He cheated on you, Mama.

Mama says nothing. I say it out loud, at every opportunity, because the moment he came home, Mama never mentions it again. At one point, Babo starts to jokingly deny he ever left for Montenegro in the first place. No one laughs. But somehow, the more he says it, and the bigger Mama's belly grows, the more a fog-like amnesia spreads over my family. To pretend nothing happened was the way we resolved things.

***

My siblings felt I could get away with anything when it came to Babo. He found a way to accept my anger as a reflection of himself: You feel a lot, like me. Babo often told me he wished I were a son. If ever a sibling were to report me to Babo, Babo sympathized with my rage. I would stare impassively as my actions were outlined in detail. Babo would tell me to sit and said-sibling would leave. In the silence, he would tell me, It's okay. I wouldn't look at him or answer, but after a while, the tears start. He let me cry next to

him. I was never punished.

He saw, I'm sure, what he so often felt himself, a constriction that narrowed until all that was left was a single note of rage, where the last thing I cared about was what would happen to my body. My anger wasn't explosive so much as it was concentrated. I hated that I was so much like him.

***

Despite my silence, I regularly cry over Babo's feelings. Over time, I feel guilty for making him feel worse about himself. But I don't know how to forgive someone who won't say I'm sorry.

In the beginning, when we ignored him, he acted like it was nothing, stoically making his own plate of food, but within ten minutes of his favorite show, as he sat hunched over his plate in the living room, he retreated into the basement. Later, when the basement itself became too much, he stayed in the living room, alone for hours, staring at the screen, with an emptiness that imbued me from the hallway.

When our sister is born, I feel no joy. I am underwhelmed. One sister is in the delivery room with Mama, Babo on his way from his new job. The rest of us are in the waiting room, partitioned with a glass wall in a long, sterile hallway.

***

Mama says she forgives him, but that she would never forget. I don't know what that means, but thought I would, too. Babo and I start talking. Our indirect conversations lead to indirect passing plates and bread. When I ask Mama if she knows where an extra cap is, Babo throws it at my feet as he passes. Mama laughs. I laugh, too.

The baby is several months old. All our typical family arguments subside as we take delight in her small developments, often crowding around her, clapping. I text Babo,

Babi, want to go for coffee? We never hang out.

Of course :) I call u later.

I ask my older sister to join because I still don't want to spend time with him alone and since she is older, I don't have to know what I am doing. She agrees and we wait. Close to midnight, he calls.

Are you ready?

Yes.

Wait in front of building.

Babo pulls up in our family car. We get in, and he drives us to a bar.

When we enter, the room is packed with mostly men, increments of jaws, tear troughs and brows lighting up in alternating blue and purple hues. Everyone is smoking. The haze extends over the room like a stratus cloud. In this light, the men look bloated, but younger. I feel a surge of sympathy— their strained recklessness in the wake of work. Isko!

A throng of men from Plav-Gusinjne shout Babo's name as he goes down the middle, slapping their backs and kissing their cheeks. He is immediately handed beer. Suddenly, he is a celebrity on his movie set. I had never seen Babo so… not in trouble.

No, no, he says, first my girls!

He hands us each a glass as if he is a modern man and makes room for us at the table. I sip slowly.

Jesu lji ovo tvoje djevojke?

Jesu.

Beautiful family! Bravo!

The men, either related by blood, or related by association to someone with blood, compliment us. Some we recognize from the basement, others, not at all. They tell us all sorts of stories about how Babo helped them when they first arrived, either through a job or housing. They are loud and try to be funny. Like a family gathering, but without the wives. My nerves ease as I decide the situation is harmless, that I don't need to feel bad about Babo spending his time here, or his bringing us.

As they drink, they become more animated, and eventually Babo, too, glazes into pretty pink eyes, a line cast that we wouldn't be able to retrieve. A woman finds her way to his right and he begins bumping arms with her. Within minutes, he leaves us and they hang out in a different part of the room. My sister and I don't say much to one another, but we seem to have the same thoughts. We walk over to Babo, his arm over the woman.

Babo, I say, we're tired. Let's go home.

Here, take the keys, he says, reaching into his pockets.

But what about you? My sister says.

I'll take the taxi.

Babo, you'll just waste money, come home.

Ne brini. He slaps the car keys into the eldest's hand.

See you, he says, and we kiss cheeks Goodbye.

***

On a humid morning in August, I knock on my parents' bedroom door and enter without waiting. On the bed, both Mama and Babo eye me groggily from under the t-shirts wrapped over their head, which they were taught by their parents to keep out the cold at night.

I'm leaving now, I say. My flight is in two hours and my ride to JFK out front. Leaving where? Mama says. I consistently mentioned leaving New York for the past year, and bought my ticket months ahead of time. Yet my parents stare at me, not moving even as I kiss their cheeks. Later they claim that it was a total surprise, completely unexpected. But now, they say nothing. They sit still as I lightly hug them.

Okay, bye, I say. I shut the door. I lift my only luggage— a backpack— and wave to my sisters and brother as I walk out the front door. There is so much outside this overrated city. I stand in the front of the building.

I recall watching her wait for her carpool under the pin oak, the modest crane of a

passerby’s neck as she stood there, resolutely. She brushed back a slight of hair. Of course she felt their stares. Of course she didn’t know what to do.

For months, that turn into years, my family would ask, When are you coming home? I don’t know, I would say.

My ride pulled up. I had places to see.

***

Mirela… my counselor calls it a time of fertility, to really look at things. It seems great to seize this time when he is so humbled, and while it's very clear to him that he could lose me… I imagine you there at your parents' apartment... I hope it goes well for you Mirela, whatever you do next. I'll be curious, and would love to hear sometimes. You have a very warm place in my heart.

Love, Jane

***

We have just arrived upon this earth. How long will we stay?

That American Game

by Mirela Musić

"Each conscience seeks the death of the other"

Hegel

I

I've always been severed from any genuine feeling in romance. *How embarrassing*, I'd think, when witnessing the effects: an aunt who shuffled away her checks to her lover via Western Union, a sister who tried to convince a polyamorous hipster she was the one, a friend who mourned her breakup by dousing herself in menstrual blood saved in a jar for an ocean ritual. Was it not obvious, I wondered, that the 22-year-old boy who soaked his entrees in hot sauce would not commit to the 30-year-old woman? How shallow they must be, I thought, to think any of that was love, or at the least, respectable. How embarrassing— their desire.

I was exhaustively jaded. My stance was not much different from the existentialist feminists of the 80s— love was doomed within the caprice of patriarchy so that the only honorable choice, I thought, was to suffer in indignant loneliness. At least there I knew I didn't fall for anything. I recall, faintly, making such a choice as a teen— *I'd rather be*

alone than let a guy trick me— trick being the hook, here, for the more sinister question underneath my teenage heartache: Can men love? Loving someone, I thought, would require recognizing their humanity. At fifteen, I felt privy to the intrinsic exploitation of women in their desire for romance. Or at least, women in my life simply kept forgetting the answer: no, men can't. Nothing seemed more humiliating than to find out you weren't a person to the person you loved, after all.

And in that way— I also type cast myself: *needs convincing*. At both fifteen and then twenty-five, I couldn't fathom that I had made it very difficult for myself to get laid and enjoy it. There's a question then, in the forgetting: at what point was it necessary? I couldn't think my way through an orgasm. Remembering, constantly, the ways in which my gender was exploited historically— the rinse of power in sex itself— didn't allow simple pleasure in the moment. Then, at twenty-five, in the balcony of a bar in a small beach town on the coast of Mexico— I was put to the test.

Despite my fourth wave feminism, application-style dating, and abject support for divorce and non-monogamy, my desire for romance— in its most conventional sense— prevailed. I found pleasure in classic scripts, both on screen and paper, for falling in love. The romantic construct, Sprecher and Metts tell us in their 1989 "Romantic Beliefs Scale" is held by four themes: *Love Finds a Way, One and Only, Idealization,* and *Love at First Sight.*

It was February. Torrents of rain blew across the sky for several days. I sat on the balcony of a bar as water threaded underneath an eave, embalmed in the scent of mint and basil. I no longer noticed the mugginess of my clothes or spirals of my hair. I was

determined to ignore all disruptions. I was there for the reason anyone is on vacation: to forget.

A rose peddler approached me. *No, gracias,* I told him. But he pointed across the street. On the balcony of another bar, an opaque man waved. I took the rose and dangled it over the rail, unsure. A couple of minutes later, the man approached. Ned was 6'8, had thick, slightly graying hair and eleven years my senior. He had the robustness of a slightly aged frat boy, yet the gaiety of a young Labrador whose limbs it had not yet mastered. Ned's own dog— who he had taken on vacation with him— was the opposite: a mixed breed, small and timid. Ned and I had introduced ourselves twice over. At first, we were simply Americans.

I saw you walking earlier today and had to say something, he said. *Where are you from?*

Brooklyn. And you?

Portland.

Oregon?

Yes, But I'm Serbian at heart.

Oh, Kako si? I said, as if to impress him with my language skills. Then, a rush of recognition.

I'm Bosniak at heart.

Oh, he said. We reappraised one another. The genocide, its subsequent rape camps, and Balkan ethnic feuds starting from 1453— when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans after a 53-day siege— settled between us like the dust it was.

I see us more as Yugoslavian, he said, after a long pause. *Maybe one day I'll have a Yugo cafe with Tito's picture on the wall.*

I laughed. Ned had deftly made an offering: in using the generalized identity of Yugoslavia as it was before the war— we could forget. It was enticing to think that if Tito were, after all, a feminist, then perhaps under the umbrella of Yugoslavia, I could enjoy myself. I gave Ned my number— three nights later, he told me he loved me.

Girl, Ned told me, *You broke me with your look.*

Ned told me lots of things: his dog had been featured on several commercials; he owned two businesses; founded an international nonprofit dedicated to orphanages; purchased a home recently on the Willamette River; traveled downtown often by boat; worked two hours a day and explored different countries three months out of the year. For any Portlander in their mid thirties, these would be the milestones of a self-centered bachelor, but for a Balkan with strong family values, it was nesting, and our union— a deliberate forgetting of the genocidal past for the sake of the future—The American Dream.

This story depends on whether you believe a) Ned finds his soulmate; b) Ned overlooks soulmate's flaws; c) Ned falls in love instantaneously; or more pointedly, d) Ned's love can overcome all obstacles.

II

When I was ten my parents flew me overseas for plastic surgery. They would fix my ears; flatten them. I would have it easier, later, they said, when I would marry. My ears stuck out, and a Monroe dotted my face. They weren't sure, yet, how I would grow into it.

Besides, they assured me, my natural ears had been perfect, but as a baby I slept all wrong: the soft cartilage bent as I turned and I'd sleep on the flap of my ear. Mama told me she had tried everything to get me to not fold my ears: even crazy glue. But the damage had been done and now we were to cut the flap away. They emphasized that if I had been born that way, it would have been different. Instead, my ears, sticking out like thumbs, were a sign of their negligence. So it went: my parents asked me if I wanted the surgery. I said yes.

I wasn't a particularly prim ten year old. That summer, I had finished the fourth grade and spent my time taking the subway between South Brooklyn and the Upper East Side. I only knew the R train— get on on Bay Ridge Ave, and off on Lexington, twenty-eight stops later, and vice versa. Eventually, I'd learn to transfer to the N. I always had company: Amina, my younger sister, and cousins to greet us in the city.

Fourth grade had been embarrassing. I was switched into honors because of a story I wrote. I spent the year shoving elbows with my desk-mate, a boy named Talal who was right-handed while I was left. He made fun of my mole and I told him he was ugly. My grades suffered. I had been in ESL before that, playing CLUE and Candyland during lunch period. Suddenly, school became serious. I was relieved to get out.

In Manhattan, we behaved badly. We were all between eight and ten years old. My cousins knew the subway better than my sister and I did. We'd all duck under the turnstiles and go the the movie theaters, where we ran past the ticket desk, watching at least three movies back-to-back. On the sidewalk, we'd dribble our basketball in circles around adults. Once, a doorman on break offered me a dollar if I could get the ball from

him. After chasing him to no avail, I grabbed hold of his legs. He dropped the ball and I ran after it. I chanted sore loser until he slapped the bill into my palm and I left.

On our walks we'd empty out various church pantry baskets meant for the homeless into our blue drawstring sport-packs. At parks, we fought other children. I even bit the hand of a woman in a ponytail and rectangular sunglasses. I had fought two of her students on a school trip. The woman grabbed hold of me and began dragging me to the police. A class of middle schoolers had entrapped me by a yellow tube slide, where they formed a wall of bodies to block me from entering. In turn, I slapped one girl and then two jumped me. I couldn't believe I was in trouble.

Dumb bitch! I yelled at the woman after I bit her. She released her grip and stared at her hand, the imprint of my small teeth studded between her thumb and wrist. I ran.

Back home, I watched over my sister, Elma, who was several weeks old. Her birth had forced my brother, Ibrahim, out of his crib and into our room. She was the sixth child to join our family. My parents wedged Ibrahim's new twin bed alongside our two bunks, so that there were five of us in one bedroom.

At the time, my father had left New York for several weeks. In Montenegro, my paternal grandfather was dying. Babo had left New York to help his brother, Abedin, caretake my grandfather. Babo and Abedin slept by their father, turning him from his left side to right. Sores had developed on my grandfather's body from the relentless pressure of his skin against the sofa bed. Babo helped lift his father from room to room, bathed him. One day, Babo told me, You're going to wash my ass.

While Babo was in Montenegro, Mama's parents stayed with us in Bay Ridge to help her balance the super work, her house cleaning job, five children and the newborn. They slept on a floor mat in the living room, which Mama kept folded under our bunks when unused. I remember watching Mama from my top bunk as she sat on the floor, midday, stitching by hand a beige paisley cover onto the floor mat. Beside her was a sewing box, her needles lodged into a plush tomato pincushion.

Why are you doing that? I asked. There was no zipper. The paisley was more or less permanent.

To make it nice.

I watched as she measured and cut the fabric, whip-stitching the edges so that the velvet blend was tugged and tight. She ran her hand over it.

You like it?

In Brooklyn, I was surrounded by my mother's family. Though both my parents were from the same town in Montenegro, Babo's family had mostly remained in Plav, while Mama's had moved to New York.

I had been in Plav twice before, when I was four and seven-years-old. With each visit, I plunged myself into my grandfather's life. He was a cripple, having fallen off a roof while building a cabin. Most of my memories of my youth in Plav are implanted. I was told I'd sit with Babostari on his sofa-bed for hours, talking. I'd wait for him to fall asleep before going out to play. I'd return once he was awake. A few memories remain my own: the outline of a flower he sketched in slow, deliberate strokes, always four petals, two leaves; being told to adjust the casement window so that he could watch the reflections from his sofa bed. I see everything, Babostari had told me. Together, we

would watch the hunting dog pull at his leash and then lay in the sun, his body a soft billow as he breathed. We'd watch strings of chickens and their chicks shift from the left corner of the window to the right, refractions of light, moving, living, within the wooden frame of a single pane glass.

He'd tell where his grandfather was shot, or the hill his father died on. He'd tell me of war as I traced the curve of his hand, sunk unnaturally between his knuckles and his wrist, from the explosion of a powder rifle. The metacarpal bones mended into the shape of a bowl. I'd stare at his hand, often turning it over in my own. He let me stare, smoking his cigarettes as he did. He told me, in the simple way of enormity, life was very hard.

My grandfather was the generation before migrations— the last link of an era unfiltered by disappearances into the western world.

A few days after his fortieth birthday, Babo returned. In July, Mama and I left with Ibrahim, four years old at the time, for Montenegro. Elma, two months old by this time, stayed home. Elma would learn to sleep on Babo's belly, or seek milk from his chest. We switched turns into the fatherland.

III

There is hardly a massacre that its survivors will forget. Another year of note: 1912. The Balkan League— Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro— began its rinse of the Ottomans. In the southern Dinaric Alps, the Muslim Albanians and Bosniaks of Plav-Gusinje were offered a chance to convert to Orthodox Christianity or be condemned

to execution. An Islamic leader at that time issued a fatwa which cleansed the townspeople of their sin in converting. In the midst of this, personal dramas ensued— a man who willingly converted and took a position as Major in the Montenegrin army then condemned his own cousins to death in court. Families changed their names or left. My great uncle says of his own grandfather:

> *Mazo was old and he didn't want to run away. He was sitting in front of the house when the priest and an army unit came to spray the holy water on the house and land… When they reached our house Mazo said, E Polje Polje, you are not going to turn anything to Christianity here my Polje. The soldiers grabbed him, roughed him up a little. Amongst them was a Montenegrin from Gusinje whom Mazo once saved a daughter from being kidnapped by the Albanians. He calmed the situation by saying to let the old man go for he is old and doesn't know any better. They all left without completing their job on our land.*

Perhaps it is not so subtle— my great uncle's pride in a land that remained pure of Christian water. The religious contention between what were otherwise similar people was a matter of honor— to believe and to stand by that belief.

Plav-Gusinje is part of a region called the Sandžak, whose indigenous Bosniak population adopted a Slavic dialect over a millennium prior. After Montenegro officially occupied Plav-Gusinje, freedom of religion was reinstated. Personal grievances against the Ottomans had been exercised; it was time for peace. A few years after, the founding of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Also— my grandfather's birth year, which he noted so optimistically:

> *I was born on November 8th, 1918, that is, on Mitrovdan itself, on Mula Jaho's porch in Babino Polje, in the age of the most dangerous disease— cholera— when many houses were left empty due to the great death of people… Because of [this], when I was born my mother asked, where will you go my son when everything is dying.*

My grandfather had been imprisoned for murder. Babostari 's first wife and and children died— from tuberculosis, my mother told me, rather than cholera— followed by what my family calls his *political* imprisonment, where he was routinely tortured for three years, and a crippling back injury, years after that. Life, indeed, was hard. Throughout his years, he kept record of what went on in the the valley. In 2006, two years after his death, his book *Plav- Gusinje Zaljedila Tuga* was published in a small press in Prikepolje, Montenegro. One thousand copies were printed and then stored. Hardly any sold. Perhaps the unpopularity was due to the title, indicating *grief* and *sadness* in a jug of yellow letters. The cover page further fanned the notion in its italicized *blood of our heads*. In part, the lamentation comes on too strong. But also— the audience— the children of Plav-Gusinje— had by then immigrated to the United States, Switzerland, Germany. For many, there was no point in looking back.

At ten years old, I spent my summer in Plav-Gusinje avoiding my grandfather as he orated the last bits of his book to his son, who sat by him with a typewriter. Babostari was prolonging life itself for his final act— remembering. A few weeks after the book's completion, his body was wrapped in a thin white sheet and buried under the fertile soil that our family had lived on for several thousand years.

I often held the book as I grew older— its light blue and green hardcover split across the middle where roofs like pebbles surrounded the town lake. I'd flip through entire sections of transcribed southeastern song and poetry, unable to read. I'd land on the photos: an intricately carved gusle with a broad rider mounted on his horse at the top of the handle; men in white turbans and traditional white pants with black seams; men marching in uniform; men lined up across a swath of snow. I felt so close to his living knowledge, but then there was the untranslatable.

My grandfather wrote his own poetry but mostly gathered the collective memories of our valley's people. One such poem was tagged: S*ung around 1650. Collected and arranged in 1969 by Ibro Musić, Plav.* His book, more than anything, was a collection of the native history— as repeated between the locals for generations— a rare physicalization of the thoughts and memories of peasant farmers in a mostly undocumented land whose stories remained unseen in the greater powers of its time. At his worst, Babostari was obsessed with the past.

There were lists, too. Lists of names that spanned several pages: names, date of birth, death and causality— often indicated with a question mark for those that went missing. After a list of several hundred names my grandfather wrote: *I noted this information, with great bitterness and sadness, because every poor death hurt me*.

Oh well! I wanted to say as a teen, not just to my grandfather's notes, but to all my family. My lack of generosity was in part due to the repetition. In Brooklyn, almost every weekend from when I was twelve to seventeen, my siblings and I slept at our uncle's, where we had regular lectures on our family history. During the day we played kickball in Prospect Park, and in the evening, sat quietly as we listened to the aftermath

of the Congress of Berlin, when parts of the Sandžak were dealt to the new state of Montenegro in 1878.

The response of our clan leaders in their own 1878 congress was unanimous, my uncle told me. '*Let the Ottomans give Istanbul to Montenegro if they want, Gusinje and Plav are not theirs to give.'*

Battles ensued on the River Lim, which both my maternal and paternal lines have detailed accounts, but of which I found a simple rendition in the Oxford Press: *Plav and Gusinje thus escaped transfer to Montenegro until the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913*.

I understood *escaped transfer* as a more sanitized, public approach to my family's historical reality, similar to the way *political imprisonment* was my family's private redaction.

Escaped transfer, for example, doesn't appreciate that my ancestors tried their hand against the wishes of world empires. That an indigenous population attempted sovereignty. Instead, it implies a peaceful, almost inevitable turnover in power. Considering that Plav-Gusinje switched from hearths to stoves in the 1940s, it leaves out how underdeveloped the villagers were in the 1870s. It also leaves out the role of faith in this decision. True or not, the conviction in their beliefs, and their sense of honor in relation to it, propelled the people of Plav-Gusinje into subversion. Thus, in this mostly undocumented and remote part of Europe, a village achieved the unbelievable. Plav-Gusinje gained their independence for thirty-four years. Montenegro was instead given Ulcinj and land near Podgorica. To be a True Believer, was to live in a realm of the improbable— the extraordinary.

But I hardly appreciated the history myself. I had listened to inspiring, self-made stories since grade school, even if it did mostly apply to capitalism. And I found it hard to keep up with the dates, despite being routinely quizzed. And even if I may have been impressed by my obscure warrior-farmer ancestors, I also fully understood the deeper purpose of this talk: Don't date outside our people. My mood darted between a deep need to express my loyalty to my family and faith and a flat apathy for their expectations. I was a believer, too, although my uncle had been allowed to date whoever upon his arrival to the States. My sexuality, however, was bolted to the granite mountains of my ancestors where they bled from their heads.

I recall blushing as a junior in high school as I waited for my seventh period history class to start and a boy I liked walked by. *What's the point,* I thought. *It's not like I could ever kiss him*. After that, I finished the school year without looking up at him again. I didn't have my first kiss until I turned twenty.

Another survey. *Love for a women is always intertwined with a love for one's oppressed homeland,* says Gordana P. Crnković in her study regarding gender construction in Yugoslav literature. *By such constant correlation between a loved woman and loved homeland, a woman becomes an idealized figure larger than life. Indeed, most of the romantic poetry constructs women as a projection of a male writer's desires and ideals rather than an entity in her own right.*

The Serbian-run detention camps during the Bosnian genocide weaponized that very notion. Rape camps of the 90s were not a byproduct of war, but rather, a strategy. Serbians not only used rape as a way to target and drive out non-Serb national identity, but also to ethnically cleanse. As recounted by a Croatian woman who was detained in

Omarska detention camp: *They said I was an Ustaša and that I needed to give birth to a Serb— that I would then be different.*

Rape as a war-time strategy is not unique to Serbs— Moroccans in Italy, Nazis with Jews, Soviets with Germans, Kenya and Somalians, Peruvians. As a strategy it is highly effective when bolstered by a purity culture which emphasizes women's sexuality as an extension of the honor she brings to her family and community. In being raped, she brings dishonor to her community, in this case, the national identity of her people. Not surprisingly, it is this emphasis on the woman's state identity that delayed for so long the human rights violation it is now considered. In the characterization of "crime against honor" the physicality of the actual victim is overlooked. Even in the numbers game of how many rapes actually occurred— an impossible fact to acquire due to the silence that honor-bound rape breeds— it was either used by politicians to dramatize the victimization of "their women" or denounced as propaganda against Serbs— and never actually addressed how to reintegrate the lives of the women into society.

To be clear, the Sandžak had managed to steer clear of direct warfare in the 90s. The closest to conflict I have personally been was missiles flying over my head into Kosovo in 1998, when I visited my grandparents in Plav. So I say all this as someone who was not alive during the rape camps, or related, first-hand to women who were officially or unofficially obtained in rape camps. And so, the reality of the rape camps are removed by several degrees for me. Yet the rules were made clear: sleeping outside of my culture— with Serbians particularly— directly disrespected the women who were raped and the entirety of my ethnicity. Mourning takes on many forms.

Other mourners: in Julie Mertus's study "Women in Kosovo: Contested Terrains" male presenters at the Kosovar women delegation for the World Conference on Women concentrated on the dead: *Official presenters appeared more comfortable talking about the women killed by women than the alive women who are attempting to build a better society*. The living reality of illiterate village women who were suffering from domestic abuse didn't make screen time in the face of victimization which led back to nationalist motives— to blame the Serbian state: *When village women remain illiterate, girls turn to prostitution, and women throughout Kosovo suffer from lack of medical care, the reaction becomes: Look what they [Serbs] are doing to us*. Remembering the dead takes away the quality of life from the living.

Mertus interviewed a Kosovarian who went by L.— a woman who had just started to practice medicine when she was arrested for possession of an illegal newspaper. The arrest was meant to pressure her into implicating her boyfriend, a fellow activist she had been seeing for three months. Her relationship was prude like most women of my mother's generation— inundated by religious standards of a good girl.

L. recalls: *There was never any dating or anything like that. We would just meet at clandestine meetings and do clandestine activities together. It was a kind of ideological love… And then when you both were thrown in prison, the entire community romanticized your relationship. You were expected to get married whenever you both were freed.*

L. resisted her interrogators and was then imprisoned, where although she wasn't raped, she was routinely tortured— *[The guards] would brag to me about how many [prisoners] they had raped… And whenever I heard the screams of women I thought they*

were being raped… and there was nothing I could do… I felt ashamed. I was no longer a woman, no longer a human.

L. Was married within a month of her boyfriend's release. She went on to practice gynecology, treating victims who would respond to L.'s questions about their torn vagina with unwavering avoidance— *It must have been the cold prison floor*.

Her torturers hadn't only been Serbs— Albanian men, as well, who were later imprisoned for trying to establish their own police force. Her reaction to these men was anything but solidarity— *I think of those policemen in prison, my torturers, and I wonder if they are watched while they pee… [I would go] just to see them… and to have them see me on the other side of the living.*

I thought back to my grandfather's pain over the poor deaths… How different L. felt! I was struck by her nature— her willingness to reengage with her life despite the ways in which she was rerouted, over and over, to her Albanian identity. That is, she chose, like she said, the side of the living.

IV

My otoplasty had cost one thousand dollars. We arrived in Podgorica, where Mama, Ibrahim and I stayed with her first-cousin and his wife. Other relatives from New York had decided to go to Montenegro that summer too: Mama's brother and his family, my neighbors from 77th street, my first cousins from the Bronx. We had converged at JFK, switching between three planes, with an eight hour layover after the second. We lounged

around the courtyard, where my uncle's children, between four and six-years-old, splashed water on me. I sat by Mama, behaved and quiet in the presence of even younger children, an example of some sort.

In Podgorica, the other relatives transferred to a bus, a four hour drive to their final destination. After my surgery, we would follow them into Plav. After we saw them off, Mama bought me white cheese sandwiches and Milka chocolate. We toured the city, and one day, instead of stopping by a cafe, we arrived at the office.

Past the front gates, small pond and garden, the front office secretary greeted Mama. Mama handed over documents. They spoke. The nurse walked around the desk and indicated that I follow her. Mama turned to me.

Be strong.

I looked at Mama and the nurse. I had never imagined going in alone.

Okay.

I turned and followed the nurse. The operating room was dimly lit and air conditioned. In the center, a surgical table glowed with operating light. As I passed the tray of retractors and scalpels, I realized that I had signed up for surgery. The nurse told me to lie down and covered my face with a napkin.

This part will hurt but then you won't feel anything.

They administered two shots of anesthesia on either side of my head. I dug my nails into my hands and squeezed my toes, hoping to deflect the pain like at the dentist. I don't know how long I laid there, the incision on the back of my ear being so small. Eventually, I was turned over, and the numbing effects wore off. What were at first alien, pricking sensations, became hot welts across the side of my head. I felt their fingers

blotting out the blood. I felt every tug of skin as they pulled the thread of the stitching. I felt the needle every time it broke my skin. I tried not to cry, but when my tears bloomed across the napkin on my face, the surgeon spoke up.

How do you feel? He asked.

Good, I said. My language skills were limited.

We're almost done, he told me.

Finally, it was over. The nurse pulled off the napkin from my face. I sat up and swung my legs over, twisting the sheet of roll paper underneath me. I walked, quietly. I sat in the recovery room and stared at the white stucco wall. I heard Mama's steps down the hall. She entered.

How do you feel? She asked.

Good, I said.

Mama stood by the door. She looked at me anxiously. Her hair was loose. I had a cast wrapped like a headband over my forehead and ears. I could feel my brows puckering underneath the pressure of the cast as I stared at my mother. I wanted to ask her why she left me. Instead, I smiled at her. And then I cried.

Mama's face fell. We began to cry in unison. "Don't cry," she said, crying even louder. She crossed over the small room and held me in her arms. Relief swamped my stomach. I was so grateful for her tears.

V

EXT. BEACH- DAY

MIRELA

I'm not your soulmate. I’m not even a dog person.

NED

Are you allergic to dogs?

MIRELA

What? No.

EXT. BEACH- EVENING

NED

Look I’m 36 yrs old and I’ve never truly been in love… I’m saving that for the right person, for the one I’ll spend the rest of my life with.

(beat)

Anyway, have you ever been truly in love?

MIRELA

Yes. My ex.

NED

But like *truly.*

MIRELA

Yes.

NED

Yeah? Well there's different types of love. There's the love in the moment— and the love that takes a long time.

MIRELA

It took a long time.

(beat)

But maybe I need more time to look back to know if that was it.

NED

Yeah, probably. One day you might think he was just practice.

MIRELA

Is that how you look at people you've been with- as practice?

NED

How do you?

INT. BAR- EVENING

NED

Be my girlfriend. C'mon. I've never done this before, either. Be spontaneous.

MIRELA

We haven't even kissed.

NED

I'm patient.

VI

Ned recognized immediately my distinction as Bosniak, not Bosnian, and in that way, my ties to the Sandžak— a geopolitical region that functioned as a sub-division of the Ottoman Empire and an influence in the roads to Constantinople— but that, even in prehistoric times served as a border between western and central regions in the Balkans, where signs of human life date back to the Paleolithic Era. Warlike tribes both from the Illyrians and Slavs fought against or for the Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans.

Particularly, Ned understood that my family was *from the country.* While Plav-Gusinje may have been impressive over a hundred years ago, by then it had become a cesspool of uneducated and unemployed rural folk.

I told my dad about us, Ned said. *He said I should give up— that the people from your town are*— I knew what he meant— tribal, nationalists— but I waited for the Serb to find the delicate phrasing— *Old fashioned,* he said. *Village minds. But I told him I can't give you up.*

You're full of shit, I said. *But you're right, they would never accept you.*

They haven't met me yet, he said.

We were at the beach, observing one another in day light. By virtue of my being *Yugo,* tall and having long hair, he decided to accept everything about me. The hairs on my legs were cute. The scars on my knees meant I had lived. The way I snorted in restaurants while I laughed, *od sela*, but in a cute way. He told me, earnestly, when I met him the next day at the overcast beach, I have nice small boobs. They reminded him, he said, of the first porn video he ever watched as a kid.

I was both amused and repulsed by Ned, who in return thought I was shy, and that when he assuaged me with compliments, my blushing a sign of virtue. Ned took for granted that I listened the things he was saying: My exes are bitches; There are some *really* ugly vaginas; I don't usually listen when girls talk, they're boring— except you; My friends call me the Virgin Slayer; I'm not looking for love… but I finally have this life that I can be proud of as a man; I could tell you' re a good girl.

Ned's presence felt very familiar. He talked like every Balkan guy I ever met who liked a girl- *You're so beautiful, with the sun on your face like that. I don't think I ever felt this way before. Isn't it romantic? Come on, hold my hand.*

I enjoyed the attention, despite my continually ringing alarms. I soaked it up like the vacation sun that wasn't there. I did not believe his feeling for me, and if for a moment I thought he was honest, I felt sympathetic for Ned. I could see he was creating a story of his own: two people on the opposite sides of history start anew.

And I was curious. I wanted to play my part in his love story, for it certainly was his narrative that I entered, not having the time or resources to arrange my own. Ned created our future before me, adjusting details as new aspects of myself were revealed. When he asked me why I wouldn't be his girlfriend, I told him, for what seemed obvious to me—

I don't even know you. And you're Serb.

Babe, he said, *you wouldn't be with me over religion? That's barbaric.*

Ned overlooked that I was referring to having met him twenty hours before. He also didn't quite catch that I hadn't mentioned his being Christian and mine Muslim. Arguably, the meaning was implicit. His automatic association pointed to an even deeper remembering. Oh, Constantinople! The Byzantines and the Arabs, the Orthodox and the Latin. Even the Enlightened West— the romantic French Catholics slaughtering the romantic French Calvinists. American Puritans hanging Quakers. Or more recently, American Republicans and Democrats circling one another in a Twitter ring.

The Balkans are not unique to the war over consciousness— which I'm loosely associating with being a True Believer, here. Human consciousness— our narrative as to

how we came to be and why we do or don't belong here— is a matter of life or death as our own passing life reminds us. There is no escaping death. As a society— as a people on the side of the living— we need to be able to look forward to the future. I'm not sure we will, any of us— any sub-faction of a religion, political ideology, wellness trend— will truly come to terms with our end. But to offer hope, again shifts into the improbable— perhaps the only thing humans are good at— pushing the limits.

I read recently a quote by Nikos Kazantzakis in the *Report to Greco* which made me laugh, and then angered me: *Following the tradition of reason and empirical inquiry, the West bounds forward to conquer the world; the East, prodded by frightened subconscious forces, likewise darts forward to conquer the world.* To delegate one conquering as more honorable over another seems a false, insecure stance. All I see, East or West, are scared people.

A stance I am more likely to agree with: *A nation knows what it is because it knows what it is not—the dangerous stronger, the Other.*

What if we recognized that the night were the dangerous stronger Other, and that our electricity was in part, a need to dominate darkness— an atavistic enemy, one that leaves humans aware of their own vulnerability.

I'm not actually advocating for a return to the dark ages. But I want to suggest our reason and empirical inquiry led to nuclear bombs as much as it did antibiotics. That is, even this reasonable, enlightened consciousness, seeks the death of the Other.

I came upon the term "History as End" in Matthew Karp's essay *History As End: 1619, 1776, and the politics of the past.* Karp examines the 1619 Project— a revisionist history initiative from the Neo liberal hub of the New York Times to reorient 400 years

of American history around the impact of slavery— and its right wing counterpart— the 1776 Report— more or less a deluge of delusion— and while he claims himself as left-leaning, he is overwhelmed by the liberal's *passionate remembrance of things past*. The U.S. is not immune to the troubles of remembering and it feels like our present has never been so stagnant.

Karp examines a Civil War monument at the Trump National Golf Club— the plaque reads "Many great American soldiers, both of the North and the South, died at this spot. The casualties were so great that the water would turn red and thus became known as 'The River of Blood.' This battle, Karp tells us, never happened.

I laughed. Blood from our heads. When Robert Kaplan suggested that what happens in the Balkans, happens in the West, he wasn't kidding.

While I don't reject my own grandfather's history, or the generational trauma so implicit in my family line, I do see the way in which these narratives persist.

Even a revisionist history that claims the arrival of the first African slave ship in 1619 as the country's *original sin* and even the country's *very origin* seems to deny indigenous history, genocide, or all the ways in which global impact isn't about the United States. The dangerous other, itself.

***

In his room, on his bed, Ned pressed down on me. *Smiri se, mala,* he told me, his weight settling my nerves. I had never laid with a Bosniak, let a lone a Serb, hearing our language in this context simultaneously familiar and wholly new; it felt strange, not

correcting the pronunciation of my name. He kissed me slowly. His hands fumbled with my skirt. I pushed them away. He turned onto his back.

A final survey: In a research surveying 335 unmarried undergraduates, heavy viewers of romance-oriented television, such as soap operas and reality- based programs about relationships, were found to more likely than light viewers agree with statements such as ‘‘you should know each other’s inner feelings.’’

Let’s play that American game, he said. *Truth or Dare.*

Okay, you first. Truth or dare.

Dare.

I dare you to do a handstand.

Okay now your turn.

Truth.

How many guys did you sleep with?

Three,

I could work with that.

My mood sank. And what was the kill switch in the minds of men where their 90s antiwar propaganda read, “The hand is better off on the cunt than on the gun”?

VII

INT. BEDROOM- EVENING

MIRELA

Yeah, but, you know what’s interesting?

(beat)

One of the guys was bisexual and offered me a threesome with another dude.

NED

Mirela- don't mess with me on this. It's not funny. It's my weakness.

(beat)

Mirela, did you do it?

***

For the first time since I met him, Ned was serious. I could feel my smile shrivel up, hanging limply from the corners of my mouth. All our humor gone. Without it, there was no ignoring the obscene. When I think back to this moment, I wish I had frowned. But I hung on. Whatever preferential treatment, lamentations of love, or degree of likability I had achieved until then, was now at risk, the "rewards" revealing its twin, "punishment." I felt a shiver ricochet from my spine to my belly, actual fear as my body held these two options, but my brain did it for me- the words fumbling out, dry, empty, before I could stop myself— *Yes,* I told him, *And I liked it.*

I had lied. While the proposal had been true, I was still too conventional to commit to the real thing. But Ned's self-satisfaction angered me. I didn't want to fit into his picture.

Ned shook me off him. He could no longer adapt. The conceit was over. I slid off his bed, slipped on my shoes, and left. I walked home, the limp in my mouth spreading unevenly over my body. It seemed the rules of gender could not be forgotten.

He texted me after I left him with his face in his hands, *Nobody has fucked my head more than you did. I fell in love with you.*

Now that I wasn't his dream girl, I was nothing. *You hoe wanna be. I fucking hate you. I thought you were my soulmate. Go fuck a bunch of dudes like you want to. I'm so naive. I never felt like such a loser. Hope you are happy.*

In the long silence between me saying *Yes I did* and *I'm leaving*, I felt Ned picturing my body in-between that of two men. Perhaps I had fucked with his mind. I was not the prude he had been drawn to. The virgin he had set out to conquer.

I never saw Ned again. But the next day I saw his family at a cafe. I said hello and his brother choked on his bite of acaí bowl. I was not quite shy enough for a girl with a threesome. I asked for Ned, prepared to tell him off for his hateful messages with my own Balkan flare. *Shame on you*, I had practiced. But he was not there and in truth, we all have too much of it, anyway.

VIII

Everywhere I went people stared. The other children, especially. Mama, Ibrahim and I boarded a bus headed for Plav. In the reflection of the passenger window, I watched as a girl seated behind me stared at my cast. Slabs of limestone and pine whirred behind our faces as we locked eyes. I would wear the cast for ten days.

As the bus entered Plav, we were greeted with a long view of the town's glacial lake. Plav sat at the base of the Prokletije mountains. Several springs sprung from the

town, and the vista of wild flowers and sheep interspersed thin gravel roads with wooden picket fences. The town was still chaste in its development: cobbled stone homes and clean white concrete stapled the edges of the pavement.

The bus dropped us off beside my father's childhood house, where my uncle continued to live and take care of his parents. The house would be inherited by all my grandfather's five sons. I went past the front gate into the courtyard— the entrance facing away from the street. There was a shed for two cows and a calf. Manure piled neatly near my grandmother's garden— stalks of corn and potato beds. Green beans. Peppers. Clumps of nettle bounded at casual intersections of building material and earth. I ran to the front door, which was covered by a cut of white lace fabric. I stuck my arm through the missing glass plane and unlocked the door from the inside.

Adzo! I called. I pushed open the door. Four more doors greeted me. To my right, the restroom door was closed. I heard my uncle, Abedin, flush on the other side. I banged on the door, knowing it was forbidden for him to speak while in a restroom. The bathroom had once been a pantry which held four to five tubs of cheese. My father didn't have indoor plumbing until 1990, and left in '94 for New York. The house itself was built in 1951. My grandfather started with a single sack of concrete mix. For the rest, he and his brothers hauled stone and timber with their horses from the river Lim. For the next two decades, its red brick roof stood out from the gray wash of the wooden singles that covered most houses in Plav. The roof had cost two thousand kilos of potatoes.

I continued down the hall. The next door to my right was the kitchen— a pantry with an installed sink. Bowls of clotted cream and pickled cabbage matured on the shelves. To my left, the bedroom door of my grandfather's oldest son, Kemal. His gaunt

frame sat halfway up on the only twin metal frame in the house. The door was wide open and I could see the cigarette butts piled high in his ashtray, spilling onto the table, filling his used Turkish coffee cups. He looked out the window, silently.

A fox skin hung in the hallway, beside the door to the main room, its nose pointing to the ground. I pushed open the door.

Despite it being July, the main room was heated with a wood stove. The rest of the house was cold. On the walls hung a rifle, a drawing of a man in a turban— a great-great grandfather, perhaps— and a large plastic print of the Mecca. White lace curtains pulled over the windows, the coffee table, the tops of doorways, like a banner. Red hand-woven runners with black flowers covered the emerald green sectional. The rug, red. Wooden stools were pulled to the table, as if the whole room had just been filled with people.

In the corner, across a sofa that had been laid flat, heaped in blankets, was my grandfather. His blue eyes looked at me through the haze of his cigarette. His deformed hand covered his face as he took another pull, his eyes never moving.

Mirela mala magara!

Abedin burst through the door, having washed his hands, and lifted me into a hug. Mama followed and while the rest of the family came down, I walked over to my grandfather. He smiled at me. My grandfather had large ears.

Ćao Babostari.

As I kissed his cheeks, he asked me something in our language. Perhaps it had been about the cast around my head, or the trip itself, but I didn't understand the phrasing or words. He asked me again. I stood there, mutely and he became confused. I

felt all my familiarity crimp and then fold. I couldn't look at him. I wanted to explain that it was still me, but I didn't know how. He had known me as a four and seven year old, and somehow, as a ten year old, I could not renew my membership.

Mama stepped over and kissed his cheek. I used the distraction to pretend to do something with Ibrahim.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I sat by Mama in the living room, abiding by her signals for when I could eat or not, when Abedin opened the glass door of the armoire and pulled out a barbie in a yellowed, smoke-stained wedding gown. He held it out to me.

Babostari saved this for you, like he promised.

I remembered asking Babostari to take care of it at the end of my last visit. The glass armoire was meant for the most precious glass cups and porcelain. I understood what it meant for him to have had it placed there. I looked back at my grandfather. He continued to watch me while silently puffing his cigarette. The doll was hideous.

So Long, Shy

a novel

I, How to Crash a Prom

After Desya became religious, he told me he had been addicted to porn as an eleven-year-old. He meant it as a revelation as to why women should protect themselves. But I understood it as evidence for his abandoning our friendship. Of course, it's easier to blame porn addiction and pre-teen boy hazing than the impalpable before and after of your best friend having outgrown you.

Our mothers are sisters— his having birthed all sons and mine, all daughters. My aunt liked me because I was pretty and did well in school. At least, that's what other relatives told me. They said, she likes material things as a reflection of herself. That her interest in me was in the way I made her look.

When I visited my aunt's house, she would play-pretend. She had us get our nails done, hair made. She bought me clothes from Macy's, which I showed off at family gatherings, not understanding the point my aunt was making to my mother. They arrived in the U.S. together. My aunt's husband was hardworking and my mother's, prone to drinking and unemployment checks. This was supposed to explain why they had money and we did not. That she had an odd number of sons, was another edge over my mother,

who had an even number of daughters. Still, she seemed to regret not having girls. It confused me, as she often spoke of the mental and physical inferiority of women.

She was a patriotic immigrant and her three sons turned out to be all-American football players. They were consecutively recruited into Columbia, which was a fitting distance from their upper-east side apartment. But the real advantage was in having the status of sons who would carry on the family name over the daughters who would not. When my mother birthed my youngest sister, the fourth daughter, my aunt sent her four yellow tulips, which represented sadness and mourning. The intensity of our lineage and rebirthing our lineage was as intense in New York as it was in Russia.

Desya and I were both middle children, born on the same day, same hospital, and therefore given similar names. Asya and Desya. There is a picture of our fathers holding us side-by-side, equally squalid. Most baby pictures are of us together, his hair long as an ongoing joke that he was, in fact, born a girl.

As a kid, I felt I had complete authority over Desya. Not only was I was two hours older than him, but we had a marriage ceremony at eight. We decided I was in charge because our mothers were clearly in charge of our fathers. To consummate our marriage, we spat in our palms and slapped each other in the face.

Desya was strong. At ten, he successfully fought off eighth-graders on field trips in Central Park. When Desya refused to do his older brothers' chores, he was lifted and thrown across the room. "You fucking pussies," he always told them. He never cried but I was vengeful. One day, I smashed a bat onto their cable box when the game was on.

Desya and I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. The oldest brother punched through the door, which had a hollow core, so that white knuckles loomed several inches from our faces before unlocking the door from the inside. We screamed. When my sister was drowning in Brighton, where my family lived, Desya dragged her out of the water and punched her chest until the lifeguard got there. He broke her ribs, but we were impressed. He was decisive.

Everything else was a competition. In Brighton, we timed who got to the roof of a building fastest through the fire escape. In the upper east side, we unlatched the hatch in the elevator and took turns sitting half-out, our feet dangling in front of the camera, the doorman yelling at us through the speaker to get down. We dared each other down the garbage chute from the seventh to sixth floor. The trick was tightening your limbs enough to create traction. But for safety we held out our arms on the floor below. We really did believe we would catch each other. That we were safe, so long as one of us was watching.

By thirteen, our interactions were reduced to formalities at family gatherings. I didn't understand what changed. I was simply no longer invited to their weekend house. Sleepovers were out of the question as he now had football practice. The shift was silent. My parents never asked me anything, and I never asked Desya.

So when he dropped out of his Manhattan private school to join my Brooklyn public high school mid-way through sophomore year, I stupidly thought, *He's back.*

***

The first week, I showed Desya the building layout, walked him to his classes, and gave him a hug. The third week, he told me in passing,

"I wish they knew how you really are."

"What do you mean?"

"You're like a different person in school."

He was referring to my being a friendless recluse. I already knew this and didn't understand why he thought it important to say out loud.

"I can't help it," I told him. I wanted to tell him that I couldn't feel my body in school. That finding my way to a conversation meant finding a way to my elbows and jaw from the loose gravel inside me. The distance was exhausting.

"Try," he said.

A year passed after that. By junior year he had led the school into the football championship. As a sophomore, he had immediately been admitted into varsity. The seniors tried to beat him out, but he fought back until they were all friends. Desya was taken out on dinners by recruiters. He had fan-clubs named after him. All the girls loved him because he was nice to all of them. He became religious, too, and made it cool not to drink and have sex. He was a virgin football star and a few of his friends converted into Islam. He would pray on the football field with his friends, the full salat, in the middle of a game. I thought it was a cheap trick for attention. I wanted to hate him for being typical. But he wasn't.

One day in May, before we all became seniors, in a rare accumulation of wrong turns, I crossed paths with Desya in the cafeteria. I never had a lunch period, having gotten special permission from my guidance counselor to replace a lunch break with an

extra-curricular. They thought I was committed to school, but in reality, I couldn't deal with the public display of my friendlessness.

I spotted him in the center of the athletes and a couple of girls who had made a Facebook page about me earlier that year. They photoshopped my face onto the bodies of girls with their legs open. I had also become religious, separately from Desya, but when I decided to wear a headscarf over the summer, it wasn't cool. I never addressed the Facebook page, never looked at the girls in class, at anyone, really. But I did take off my headscarf. To spite them, I signed with a modeling agency and began posting professional photos of myself in lingerie. Suddenly, I was a real slut.

Despite never speaking to each other, Desya and I still addressed each other the way we grew up, the way we were culturally drilled into greeting family: one kiss on each cheek.

"What's up, Cuz?" he said airily, as if to diffuse the looks his friends were now giving him.

"Hi," I said.

The girls looked at me like they were about to laugh, but waited for approval from Desya. He never gave them a cue. I looked at him, curiously, having never tested him socially. He avoided my eyes. They continued their conversation as if I wasn't there. I left.

A few weeks later I had a mental breakdown. My parents sent me to Russia, where they were better able to afford my rehabilitation— fresh country air. They knew something was wrong, but none of us understood what: "Babi," my father had said, "You look like a fish." I stayed with my uncle and his family in Ufa, the east of Russia, for most of my senior year, never quite figuring out the right amount of pressure on an utter

for milk. It wasn't until May that I went back to Brooklyn, having missed all the senior activities and trips. My graduation date wasn't affected as I already had too many credits when I left. But to ensure a smooth transition my uncle had the local high school in Ufa forge my attendance and grades. I explained to my guidance counselor the 2's meant A's, although that was a lie. The administration in Ufa refused to forge a record of good grades out of principal.

My aunt visited the weekend I was back. Word got around I tried to bleed myself out the summer before. But none of that was true. I simply cried for six hours before entering a comatose state for two days. My aunt had condemned me when I turned into a slut, but now, as head of my mother's family line, felt responsible for my well-being. She also believed I had learned my lesson.

"Asya," she said, "Desya is taking you to prom."

"I'm not going to prom," I said. How absurd. It was so soon. Not to mention, I would never go with D. "But thank you."

"Who's asking you?"

"It's my choice, Tetya."

"I already paid limo. Your dress. Desya paid your ticket. He knows. That's it."

"Tetya, people here don't go to prom with their cousins. It's actually really weird."

"Asya," my mother interrupted. "You have to go."

She patted my arm softly. I shrugged off her hand. She treated me differently since the night I lost it. At first my family ignored me, embarrassed by my emotion. I tried to hide it in the dark of the laundry room. But I quickly lost control. After an hour,

my youngest sister checked on me. Soon, another. They didn't say anything. Just walked in with hands on their hips, as if to tell me off, then awkwardly relenting to my solitude. By the fourth hour my mother came home from work and sat next to me as I sobbed into my hands. Crying for so long is painful. My throat felt as if it had been mangled. The skin around my nose tapered into bleeding clots.

"Asya," she asked me, "What happened? Tell me."

"Nothing," I said. And it was true. I simply felt it coming, and then it came. She stayed there for the next two hours, rubbing my back and occasionally tucking my hair behind my ear. When I stopped eating for those two days, she stopped eating, as well. I watched her shrink at my expense. When I left her at JFK for Ufa, she cried. I felt so guilty betraying her in this way- all her sacrifice for a sickly daughter.

"Please," she said. "Go to prom. It's good for you."

I couldn't imagine anything worse. I had planned on ending the year quietly. I had been accepted into community college, as I missed most college-application due dates. All my honors had meant nothing. I had no scholarship. And when I bumped into Desya at school two days before, he mentioned being accepted into Columbia. I told him I was jealous. He looked at me like he was bored. He turned, talking over his shoulder:

"I'm sick and tired of people being jealous of me."

I stared at the back of his head, stumped. A vague shame swelled inside me. We were in the hallway. It was the second time people had ever seen us talk.

"Go fuck yourself," I told him. He stopped and turned, now stumped himself. I spat at the floor and left. It was terrible— the spitting— but I was still freshly infused with the dramatics of the Slavs. I wondered if he had mentioned this to his mother.

“Okay, Mama,” I said. I turned to my aunt, “Thank you, Tetya.”

My aunt smiled at me. I wondered if she was a real person underneath, after all.

II, Dating Christina

I had never been attracted to Russian men. Somewhere in the literature, I read that meant I had absorbed society's hatred of the communist 'other.' But I had known Russian men before ever knowing society. And my lack of attraction made it much easier to date them. I had chosen to return to Ufa a few weeks before Putin declared war on Ukraine. It was my spring semester junior year. With the impending violence, I had hoped the schools in Ufa would shut down. When I had mentioned this to my new, temporary classmates, they laughed. As it turned out, snow days didn't matter much either. There were no sweet pauses for the roads to clear.

My mother wanted me to return immediately, while my grandmother, who I then lived with, in addition to my uncle, his wife, and their daughter, bought a sniper and tried to join the war effort. My uncle forced her to return the sniper, and she muttered about his weakness for several nights in our shared bedroom. My cousin, Sofia, also slept with us, but hers was a sound sleep, long accustomed to the pained nationalism of our grandmother, and long depressed before world affairs convulsed with tension and insecurity. I used to think I wanted to do Good and Help Save the World. There was a time where it felt like my personal responsibility. But then I decided I didn't like people— that they were selfish and irrational and unloving— and with that dislike, I grew weak in the face of my personal responsibility. Part of me believed there was once a

time where people were better, perhaps because they had faith in a God— but more likely because people trusted their own goodness. I imagine they had to rely on themselves for heat and bread and sour yogurt. But now we've even outsourced our own memories. I've never had that trust in myself. I am sore with self-doubt so I understand what it's like to seek the expression of strength in a wrong, but sure man. So, whether Putin invaded Ukraine or not made no difference to me.

I told my mom I would stay and immediately created a Tinder profile. I found two pictures of a Czech girl online. One was in day light, the green leaves of a tree thwarted by a silver fence. The girl looked away from the camera so that the light spread evenly on her wide-set eyes and boxy jaw. Her shoulders were bare except for thick red strips of what seemed like a respectable blouse. The other picture was orange, as though taken from underneath a street lamp. Again, she smiled, but without teeth, so that it seemed she were in on a secret. Her eyes were heaven-bound, the face entombed by darkness save a lone lit window of a concrete paneled building behind her. Almost always, the men swiped on the second.

At my uncle's, we lived a in a two-bedroom apartment. When I had imagined getting some fresh-air, I hadn't expected another apartment, in another city. I asked my uncle where was their farm, and he told me sold, and to stop complaining, that I was already a spoiled American. It was my first time meeting him or his family in person. For years, we had gotten to know one another over the phone— forced, shrill conversations which eventually loosened into warm cordiality. This was my father's side— Russian, Christian— while my mother's were Bashkir, Muslim, and while we were all Russian, technically, my uncle felt my parent's union had sullied the bloodline. Because I was so

ruined, he took special care to groom the best qualities out of me. On the phone, he would tell me, *You will depend on the light half of your blood to wrestle with the dark half.* When I was still learning Russian, I thought these were riddles which would reveal deep wisdom. But the language differences only masked his prejudice. I simply had not known what was being said or what to say for the first ten years of my life. And now here we were. My uncle was a tall, brooding man. We argued relentlessly.

Perhaps to spite my my him, I named my tinder alter-ego Christina. My uncle had expected me to be receptive of his teachings. He was strict and suspicious of my being American. So in our conversations, I always said— I disagree— and this flustered my uncle.

Christina looked like me, except older and darker. I figured the similarities made the whole enterprise less deceiving. On Tinder, I made Christina to be 169 centimeters instead of 174, twenty-one instead of seventeen, and atheist instead of agnostic. We were both good looking. Not to mention, for most of the men, it was like having two girls in one.

I never started the conversation as men in Ufa easily panicked should they feel approached. So I waited.

Hey pretty, let's meet up.

Okay— but there is something you should know.

What is that?

This is a fake profile.

Without fail, they were intrigued. Not once did they worry whether I was a maniac, which after a while, made me angry— why should they feel so safe? Instead, they wanted to know my motives, and how I looked in comparison. I devised a long, complicated lie about working with my best friend to find out if her husband were cheating. This created the most self-defense. In Ufa, the men rallied for their imaginary brethren—

Why shouldn't he have some fun?

If man is the breadwinner, man has more privileges.

Why does she want to know? All girls are the same. She will never leave him, anyway.

I was not particularly feminist. I did not particularly trust women. But as these conversations developed, I took on the persona of a radical feminist, until the men dissipated into fragmented, raging sentences. After, I would tell them, I was, in fact, a man, and that I had orgasmed several times throughout our discussion. By then, they sent me block paragraph death threats and attempted to track me down, as everyone seemed to have a programmer friend from the Ufa State Aviation Technical University. The Find My Device alerts on my phone induced me to send them dick-pics I also found off the internet. Finally, two men showed up to our apartment, only to greet my grandmother. Eventually, I had to ask myself, what are my intentions? But before I had real time to think my grandmother informed my uncle, who then confiscated my electronics. I couldn't believe it was me being punished when the others could have been tried for premeditated murder. I told my uncle, over and over, It's not fair.

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Had I known my uncle would be allowed to ground me, I would have never left Brooklyn. Without my phone, I was lost. I was vaguely aware that I had obsessive tendencies before, but without my phone to satisfy my urges, I felt fallow, my skin a dry bowl. When I stalked the social media of people I had hoped to leave behind, of people who had hurt me, when the very act of doing so created erratic despair in me, and yet I could not stop, it was a compulsion, not tendency, I learned.

Gloom set over me. I begged my uncle for my phone, but he refused. He called my parents and told them what trouble I had been. They sent him more money. Thoughts flowered like dark whorls. Why did darkness stick so well, I wondered. Good sifted loose through the sieve of my mind, as though it never existed. This was always my problem. I know objectively, there was good in my life. But I could not remember. In my bed, my grandmother's sleeping body zinged across from me. I could not remember.

The next day, still without my phone, I woke up with an abscess in my left eye. The boil was small, pale. Grandmother threw a garlic clove over it. By noon, my entire eye swole.

"I need a doctor," I told her, as she prepared mustard powder in warm socks for my ailing eye.

"So go," She said. "See what that gets you!"

By then it was late April. Tulips bloomed in clumps along the sidewalk, with no instinct for design. I hadn't expected Russians to be so interested in flowers that they

would plant them so effusively. But then, it was so bleak here. It would not warm until June.

"Fine!" I told her. I grabbed my bag and tied my shoes. I left. I came back.

"Can I use your insurance?" I asked.

With her card, I took the bus to the nearest dentist, where there was a shared office for the optometrist. A blonde, severe woman, who hardly looked at me before, declared that I would be moved into a room for surgery in fifteen minutes.

"Surgery?" I asked her. "I'm actually very sensitive. Is there anything else we could do? Like antibiotics?"

"No," She said. "Surgery is the only way."

"Why?"

"If you don't like it, you can leave and go blind."

Perhaps I had been spoiled by customer service in the States, but I felt she took an unnecessary tone. An uncaring, uncompromising tone. I yearned for the mustard socks. And then I felt myself submitting to this tone, this absoluteness.

"Okay," I told her. "But I'm telling you, I'm very sensitive."

I cried through the whole surgery. I did not feel a thing. But I cried as soon as she needled me with anesthesia and at one point, my arms thrashed against her without my permission. Three thin streaks appeared on her collarbone.

"I'm sorry" I cried, as she tried holding down my arms. "It's not on purpose."

In the end, she bandaged my eye as I continued to whimper, coagulated salt water and mucus suckling the corner of my mouth. I hiccuped.

“Call someone to pick you up,” She told me, not without mercy, and went on to her next patient. I hoped she felt guilt for earlier. But I could not read her. She was a cool surface I could not touch. I felt in me a violent need for her kindness.

Outside, I did not have a phone to call. I cried anew as I waited for a taxi to pull over.

“What’s the matter?” The taxi driver said as he looked at me in the rearview mirror. I thought he might be from the Caucasus, where the bitter mountain range separated Eastern Europe and Western Asia. He had a long, wiry beard. I imagined him herding sheep on thin ledges of Cretaceous rocks while it snowed.

“Why are you crying?” He repeated, lowering the volume of Islamic, Turkic music.

“My eye hurts,” I bleated, uncontrollably.

“My ears hurt,” He said. There was a pause. And then he laughed.

“I’m just joking,” He said. Then he gave me a lecture, as is part of the culture, I think, to preach and convert vagabonds, on how I must be strong, even when I’m weak. My glut of tears made him uncomfortable, which then made me feel grubby and gross.

“Leave me alone! ” I said, crying still, and now shouting. “I am weak! I’m sick of your fucking strength. You’re all liars. Fucking liars!”

I said *fuck* in English, as was custom abroad. The man continued to drive another two blocks in silence, before pulling over and turning off the engine. He got out of the car. Is this when I die, I wondered, but would not leave as I was ashamed of having more people witness my behavior. After a couple of minutes, he returned, hoisted himself into his seat and turned back to me.

"Here," He said, passing me a cup of hot chamomile tea.

I took the tea and pressed my lips to the water without drinking. He turned back to the front and stared at passerby's. Eventually, I sipped until my body calmed and my eyes cleared. When I finished my tea, he started the car again and drove me home. If the mind couldn't remember the good, it was certainly stored in the body, I thought, as a calm transcended over me.

Later that evening, I apologized to my grandmother for not wearing her socks. I also told my uncle what had happened while he sat in his arm chair, smoking.

"I told you," said my Uncle. "You have half light and half darkness wrestling inside of you. But be patient. Good will come."

"Oh," I said, "I always thought you meant my Russian blood was more pure and better than my Bashkir blood."

"That's true, too," he said.

My uncle decided to return my phone. I found it on my pillow without any prompting. Immediately, I checked my Tinder.

Amongst the messages, there was one that pained me. It was from a classmate, a boy named Vagis. Thankfully, the name did not have the same connotation in Ufa the way it did in the States.

Hello Christina! He wrote. *Would you like to swim in a Fanta sea?*

Beside his message were two icons of soda. Of course he started with a pun. He was a future programmer at the Ufa State Aviation Technical University.

Yes, I wrote, *Let's have a drink.*

I met him at a gelato place without ever telling him I was Christina. Instead, I pretended it was a coincidence.

"Vagis," I said, as Asya. "Can I join you?"

"Yes," he said, "But I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh? Is she pretty?"

He blushed.

"How are you?" He asked instead.

"I'll just hang out until she arrives," I said.

"Of course."

He bought me gelato. Vagis was also Bashkir, and lived in Dyoma, an hour from the center. He was courteous and relaxed in his religion. Despite being Muslim, he ate pork and drank beer. I had hardly noticed him in class, but here, there was a hushed restfulness in his face and hands that set him apart.

"Will you be my friend?" I asked him. He twitched like a nerve had been pricked.

"I guess she's not coming," He said, looking into the crowd.

"No, she's not."

We sat quietly, our gelato long finished. He seemed to be at a standstill. I knew that whatever he said next would be true. Finally, he stood up.

“I would be happy to be your friend,” He told me.

For the rest of the semester, we shared vodka in a water bottle, and took weekday trips to different monuments of soviet playwrights. We went to the theatre often, as well, where we tried not to laugh in the darkness. We strolled through the Garden of Culture and Rest, which was simply a pond and a walking path beside it. None of these places were impressive. They were always unkempt and old. There was an air of stagnancy over the entire city. There was not much to do, but doing anything seemed special enough. On my last weekend, we went to the Lyalya Tyulpan mosque, which was designed to look like a blooming tulip, with its angular, red minarets.

When I went back to Brooklyn for the fall semester of my senior year, I was not yet prepared for all that was to come.

“Just don’t care what people say,” my mother had told me that morning of my first day, as though I could now simply not care.

“They have their own problems.”

“I know, Mama.”

I felt subdued as I entered the same halls I had been surrounded in, I could hear their chanting still, see the pictures of me on the walls. I felt weaker as my memories overwhelmed me. And yet—

“I still feel bad,” I said, as I inspected the loose green curtains over the stained glass. “But not as bad as I used to.”

The mosque tried to replicate spring in paradise, it flowers geometric and infinite. The walls remained yellow, as though blooming and death were not so different.

“I feel as good as I always have,” Vagis told me. We laughed.

III, First Day

I hadn't mentioned to anyone that I was leaving when I left, or that I returned when I was back. I simply walked the school halls as though I had always been there— ignored and inconspicuous.

"Shy!"

I looked up— Kali, my classmate stared at me. I was struck by her gorged eyes— the webbed clumps of mascara. The first time we had ever spoke was freshman year, when I pointed out her mascara had dried under her eyes. She told me it was a mole.

"You're back!" She said, starting our second conversation.

"Yes," I smiled. She continued to stare.

"Okay, bye."

I went my way. I truly didn't know what to say next. They all knew my school name— they often said *Hi Shy* when I entered the classroom— but I never knew if it were friendliness or pity or a form of taunting.

Those first few days back were strange — in my absence all sorts of reasoning for my going marred the halls: my family had forced me into marriage in Russia; I had been in a psyche ward in Manhattan; I was pregnant and gave birth but I couldn't keep it. Min, who I used to sit next to in chemistry, told me— You're a mystery.

Min had noted the signs of my despondence prior to my leaving. Our AP Chemistry class was the first two periods of the day. Halfway through the year, I only

showed up second period, my hair rolled into a slopping bun. She was my lab partner and always completed my side of the observations. She would let me write in the summary of her findings before we turned it into the instructor. Both Min and the instructor never mentioned my lateness or penalized me, though I did fail the exams. Still, I felt there was a knowing between the three of us.

So when she said I was a mystery I figured perhaps she never did understand me. My observation of her silence was only a reflection of what I had needed to think at that time. I felt misunderstood— that by implying I was a mystery, my motivation or thinking was so unrelatable that it was excised to a romanticized unseeing. It made me feel lonelier.

Because of my strange exit and reemergence, I was taken out of honors. The rest of my classes were extracurriculars— gym, painting and government for good measure. Even though I had relinquished my right to honors when I left the country and returned with untranslatable marks, the grades hurt my feelings.

I quickly became a bad student. For the first time, I showed up when I felt like it. I intentionally failed government— more out of spite for how little the teacher cared than difficulty. In fact, I mostly lied around the grass, by the football field, where I'd catch drifts of the salt air moving north, telling myself over and over, I didn't care about the grades, I didn't care, I didn't care.

It was here that the Dean found me.

"Where are you supposed to be, young lady?"

I looked up at the Dean— his gray polo tucked into his cargo jeans. He had a black leather belt with a silver buckle. He was a muscular, balding man who lowered at all the students, every morning, as we move through the security scans.

"Class," I told him. "I was going to skip, but I guess not anymore."

Even though I was no longer friends with Desya, I couldn't forget when the Dean had grabbed him by the neck in the hall.

Desya had been roughhousing with his friends. The Dean came by and told them to stop. In turn, the boys began mocking the Dean. The Dean called in reinforcements— police who had recently graduated our high school, finished their 60 college credits, and now lorded over the students— impenetrable seniors— when most of the boys slipped back up the stairs to their classes. But Desya, feeling honor bound to stick up for his friends— they were just fooling around, on their way to class, why threaten their records, why threaten arrest, etc. etc., — Desya, who was the quarterback, the reason the school was on its way to championships, where they would play at the Yankee Stadium— Deysa, who the school relied so heavily on for funding, could say what he wanted to the Dean without the threat of arrest, so that the Dean whispered sweet nothings into Desya's ear instead— *You're a dumb piece of shit. You'll never get anywhere in life. You know what happens to all of you after this? Nothing.*

The Dean meant that most of the football players would not go to college. Some would join the army— recruiters often making presentations before their practice, coach nodding— and the rest would fall into security, plumbing or the MTA— all of which I understood to be coveted jobs, as well, so I didn't understand the emphasis on nothing.

For me, it had been the opposite. Every morning, the school announcements read out loud another honor student's acceptance and scholarship into college. Our valedictorian, Brown. Salutatorian, NYU. The others were various private universities. The low-brow made it to Macaulay's.

When I had been asked by the honors advisor what I was going to do, I told her I didn't know yet as I only received partial scholarships to private universities and would only accept full.

"You mean you haven't reported your scholarships?" She said.

"No, I didn't know we had to."

"It's very important for the school to keep track of."

"But I won't accept them."

"It doesn't matter."

I told her I would not report. I didn't see the sense in it— it was my scholarship, not theirs. Besides, I didn't want to help represent the school. That I no longer believed in representing.

"It's like when I wore the scarf," I said. "A random woman on the bus told me, 'good for you for representing women in Islam.' All I did was take the bus."

"Oh, that," said my advisor. "Yes, I was very happy when you took it off."

A long pause. She waited until the period bell rang to send me away.

"Your cousin," She said as I pushed open the door, "reported his scholarship today. Full ride to Columbia."

I regretted never having applied to Macaulay's. In the end, there wasn't a single university that wouldn't put me into debt. I decided to go nowhere.

"Get to class before I have security walk you in," said the Dean.

"Fine."

I stood up and entered the front doors. I walked down the hall. I entered my government class.

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Veronica was another Russian whose being Russian only isolated us from each other further. Unfortunately, there was no seat left in the class except beside her. I sat down.

"Where do you always go?" She asked me.

"Nowhere interesting. Grassy spots. Next to trees."

"Bring me."

"Why?"

"I want to see."

Instantly, I felt defensive. The pressure for the grass to be worth seeing. I wish I had felt suspicious, at least— turned it back on her. But Veronica had always been so straight. She had managed to get through high school being likably-honest. She was the cool Russian. Her matter-of-factness, not to mention sexual maturity. At 14, she was a six foot woman who dated club managers from the city. There was nothing thin or waxy about her. She had full hips, full breasts, full thighs. She told people it was because she was from Siberia, which was not true, but when people asked *Where is that* she always clarified— *in Moscow*.

"I don't know," I told her. "I like to be alone."

"Oh, we know," She laughed. "You were voted most likely to become a serial killer."

I tensed. 'A mystery' sounded dreamy after all.

"I'm glad," I said. My response was meant to be a rendition of sticks and stones, but my voice wobbled so that emotion betrayed me.

Fucking Veronica! I rifled through my backpack, opening and closing several folders, until I felt it was unbearably obvious that I wasn't looking for anything. I began, instead, to pretend to remember something as I slowly packed my things and left, the teacher still taking attendance.

My leaving was overwhelmingly physical— as if I had been caught in a current. I found myself washed at the pier on Emmons, staring at swans.

Emmons was the true metropolitan. Turkish and Greek cafes. Japanese cuisine. Even the furniture stores were as ornamental as abroad— modern farmhouse stylizations found only on the other side of the island. The deeper into Brooklyn, the less plastered brick there was, and instead, silver fencing, alternative brick layering, marbled archway entrances. I remember hearing a remark in unfettered English— *They really don't keep the integrity of the building.* I think I understood what they meant— it was ugly.

"Is this your grass?"

Veronica stood before me like a lump of marbled stone.

"Did you follow me?"

"No. Class ended and I came home. But you don't live here," she said.

"No."

“You are weird. But I didn’t mean the serial killer in a bad way. It’s funny because you’re obviously not.

“Okay, thanks.”

I turned back to the swans, who seemed fixed in time on still water. Veronica turned with me.

“Look,” She said. “I wanted to ask you. Will you come to prom with me?”

“What? Like share a limo?”

“No, as my date. I want to make a statement.”

“What kind of statement?”

Veronica had been on the downswing. In my short time back, I had learned what happened to Kali and what was starting to happen to Veronica.

“That I could do whatever I want,” She said.

“People will think we’re lesbians.”

“So what,” She said.

“Sorry, but I can’t handle that. Besides,” I added, “I’m going to prom with my cousin.”

“Desya? No way.”

“Yes.”

“That’s hilarious.” She paused, adding: “Is it religious?”

I considered what to say next, but had little time with the wording:

“Yes. He can’t go on a date with girls.”

“Oh… Well, I wish I had a hot cousin.”

“I’m sure you do. Ask one of them.”

We smiled. Somehow I had found myself in a conversation. Slowly, the reality of that I was in a conversation caught up with me. I felt myself stiffen— don't be weird, I told myself, don't be weird.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?" I said.

Her smile slackened. My veins filled with sulfur. Again, I left.