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## The Suicide Note

I'D BEEN LIVING in Brooklyn for a few months when I met Sarah. She came to shop at Fresh Market on Myrtle, where I worked six days a week, from noon to midnight. It was early December, the city dusted with snow. Garlands of lights looped around windows and lampposts. My coworkers and I had just finished decorating a small artificial tree by the entrance. It appeared lopsided, with flimsy paper ornaments caught in a swirl of wind each time a customer walked in or out. An angel sat crooked on the very top.

In her knee-length fur coat, Sarah stood in front of the tree for a moment before raising her cane to adjust the angel. To my surprise, she was able to reach it without much effort, but now the angel leaned to the other side. She kept fussing with the cane until the winged creature appeared dead center.

"That's better," she said. "Whoever put you up there didn't try hard."

That "whoever" was me, but I didn't volunteer the information. Instead I offered her a shopping cart someone had abandoned in the aisle. She asked if she could order a fresh turkey.

We had turkeys, frozen though, but she shook her head.

"I need fresh. My son is coming home for the holidays. I want to cook up a feast."

A half Russian-half Ukrainian, I occasionally had trouble pronouncing English words or hearing them correctly. So I asked, "You're cooking a beast? Animal?"

Sarah wrinkled her forehead. Her skin resembled recycled parchment paper, creased and thin. "Where are you from, young man?" she asked.

"Russia."

"Thought so. Your accent."

She had a sharp nose and dark, solemn eyes. Slouching over her right ear, a black beret covered all of her head, so it was hard to guess what color her hair was. Her eyebrows were painted brown, one longer than the other. She looked slim under the lustrous bulk of her coat, with delicate wrists and glossy maroon nails. She must've been eighty or older, somewhere close to the lip of eternity, as my mother would've said.

“I’ll ask about fresh turkey and let you know in a day or two, if you leave your phone number,” I said.

She nodded, and I spent the next fifteen minutes following her around the store, reaching for various staples on higher shelves. She kept her feet wide apart and moved slowly.

“I had both hips replaced, in case you’re wondering,” she said. Her husky, crackling voice made me think of trees, dead trees.

“Oh, wow. Does it still hurt?” I asked.

“No. But my marathon days are over.”

I gave her a compassionate look. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I hate marathons. At least there’s no pressure now. My son, on the other hand, always runs places.”

When she said that, I thought of my father constantly rushing out, always late—for work, gatherings, and even my grandmother’s funeral. How I’d almost missed my plane to America because he’d been late driving me to the airport.

When Sarah finished shopping, her cart brimmed with produce: fingerling potatoes, avocados, asparagus, pomegranates and persimmons, artisanal cheeses, smoked fish, milk, cranberry juice, crackers, a stick of salami, chocolate-chip cookies and vanilla gelato. One would think she had a house full of famished guests. I suggested delivery.

“Will it be you or somebody else? I’d rather it be you,” she said.

“I’ll ask the manager. If it isn’t too far.”

“No, just across the road. Bridge Street.”

I wrote down her address and phone number on one of the bags, and she left, unhurriedly climbing up the ramp.

Late in the evening the store was empty. One of the cashiers yawned while scrolling down on her phone, the other devoted her attention to a peeling strip of her fake nail. They were my age—twenty-nine—also immigrants, but, unlike me, they had their naturalization papers in order. They were half Mexican-half Puerto Rican, with glowing skin and thick ropes of hair. One had a scar above her eyebrow; the other a parrot tattoo on her shoulder that stayed naked even in the winter, her sweater pulled low.

Out the window, the girls showed me Sarah’s building. She lived in BellTel Lofts, an art deco tower originally constructed as the headquarters of the New York Telephone Company. I needed a cart, since I didn’t own a car or a bicycle.

“If you run away with our cart, you’re in deep shit,” the girl with the scar said.

“What would I do with it? Sell it to Target?” I joked, but they didn’t laugh. Yet again, I thought how hard it was to make someone laugh in a foreign language. And if you couldn’t laugh together, how could you live together? In that sense, America remained a mystery to me.

“Oh, and when she talks about her son,” the other girl said, “pretend that you don’t know he’s dead.”

“He is dead?” I asked and felt the weight of Sarah’s bags in my hands.

“Yeah.”

“Cancer?”

“No,” the girl with the scar said. “He killed himself.”

“Drugs,” the other said.

“Overdosed?” I asked.

“Yeah. On purpose. He left a suicide note.”

“What did it say?” I asked.

They both shrugged.

“Don’t know. There used to be a guy here. He and Sarah’s son, they were buddies. He mentioned the note.”

“You took his job,” the girl with the tattoo said. “He wasn’t illegal or anything, but he sort of broke down, started drinking and doping.”

“I do neither,” I said.

“No, Vlad. Vladimir. You’re more dangerous. You invade countries and hijack elections.”

They laughed, and I felt a prickle of needles in my spine.

The store closed at eleven, but I always stayed later to clean up or restock the shelves or just stretch Glad wrap over sliced deli meats. I washed floors, too, wiped foggy fingerprinted coolers, took trash out and plastered food advertisements over the windows. I also replaced lightbulbs, sorted and discarded rotten produce, swept tables and benches in the back of the store. In short, I did anything the manager asked me to do and for as little money as he could pay an illegal immigrant.

No, I didn’t cross the Mexican border on foot. Nor did I enter the country in the belly of a giant ship, hidden amid barrels of dead fish. My arrival was more prosaic and less strenuous. I entered America legally, on a three-month tourist visa, and then I ended up overstaying it by nine years. I’d brought some money with me, from counterfeiting Levi’s jeans and selling them in one of Moscow’s

markets. I couldn't afford much, but it was enough to carry me into another year until I found a job that paid cash.

When I'd first arrived, I lived with a former classmate in D.C. He was a student at George Mason University, a tall, dorky twenty-year-old virgin with Stalin's moustache. We were getting along beautifully until my roommate fell in love, and his girlfriend, a short, plump American from southwest Virginia, insisted he give up his former life for his future one. Vodka, pickles, and black bread for hamburgers, Coke, and apple pie. She moved in, and I moved out, and my classmate stopped speaking Russian, even to me. Still, I didn't want to return home and listen to my mother accusing my father of stealing her youth. Or my father accusing my mother of stealing his country, of forcing her Russianness on his Ukrainianness. I preferred distance and virtual love. Skype visits.

As I pushed the cart toward Sarah's building, it began to snow again, the flurries landing on my cheeks and lips. A taste of home in my mouth. Across the street, crowned with a red star, a giant Christmas tree stood wrapped in lights. I remembered the last New Year's Eve before I left. A scrawny pine my mother and I had tied to an old sled and dragged through the snow. My father, drunk and asleep in the bathroom. I thought of Sarah, and how bizarre it was that she spoke of her son as though he were still alive while my mother referred to my father as though he were dead. She always mentioned things in past tense, and, at some point, I stopped correcting her.

When Sarah opened the door, I hesitated for a moment because the person in front of me was almost entirely bald. A few strands of remaining hair were held back with bobby pins. Her apartment smelled of melted wax and a hint of incense. Yet I saw no candles. In fact, her home was cold and dark like a cave. I noted no ceiling lights anywhere, which was something I'd encountered in D.C. and other American cities. It puzzled me because I'd always thought it was a Russian thing—to keep people in the dark.

In the kitchen, I placed the grocery bags on the counter. On the other end of the room a petite square table and two chairs sat next to the window. A few large ships stranded in the distance, a shimmer of lights along the shore, the jagged outline of lower Manhattan, like a pop-up Christmas card.

"Wow," I said. "What a view. The Statue of Liberty is over there, right?" I pointed between the two skinny buildings.

She shrugged. "Whoever thought of putting it there."

Her home was larger than expected in a city this crowded. I saw no decorations, though, and no tree. Oriental rugs covered the floors. The oak furniture seemed old, frayed, and heavy, yet somehow befitting the apartment, the tall ceilings and soundproof windows. For the first time since I'd arrived in New York, I couldn't hear a shrill of sirens or the hum of exhaust fans. I was entombed in silence. The apartment had three bedrooms, although one without windows, and for some reason I thought that it must've been the room where her son had killed himself. His pictures were displayed everywhere, but they were mostly baby pictures, and a few of a teenager with crooked teeth and red clown hair.

Pointing at the two of them in a gaudy piazza, ambushed by pigeons, I asked, "How old is your son in that picture?"

"Eighteen. We went to Europe right after his graduation. I wanted to show him the other side of the world. I'm German, you know. My parents fled the country right before the war."

When she said that, I felt a pang of resentment. I was three generations removed from the war, but like most Russian-born citizens I grew up celebrating Victory Day and watching military parades in Red Square.

"And your husband?" I asked. "Is he also German?"

"No. American. He died of cancer when Robert was ten."

"Do you ever go back to Germany?"

"Not once. I didn't learn the language either, although my parents spoke it at home. I understood everything, but I refused to speak it. When my mother picked me up from school, I insisted she didn't talk. Robert, on the other hand, took German in college."

"What does he do?" I asked, marveling at how easy it was to pretend that Robert was alive because nothing in Sarah's home contradicted her lie. My question, however, caught her off guard, so she paused, adjusting her turtleneck sweater, pushing the sleeves down and then up, all the way above her sharp elbows. Her skin was white like snow and translucent. A plexus of veins crawled up her arms.

"Robert is an artist. A painter. He lives in California," she finally said. "Come, I'll show you."

In the corner room with triple windows, the floor was protected with an old stained sheet. Everywhere, against the walls, drawings and paintings leaned in no particular order. Nudes and landscapes, a still life with apples and a dead bird. There was nothing remarkable in those paintings, as far as I could tell, except maybe for the aggressiveness and juxtaposition of colors, fiery orange against seaweed green

against rowanberry red. I remembered that in his youth my father also wanted to be an artist, but my mother always said that he had no vision. He could mix paints and knew technique but lacked imagination. He ended up being a mechanic and worked on trains.

Brushes lay on the floor, used rags and tubes of paints. I stepped over them, walking up to a small desk cluttered with colored pencils, erasers, and notepads. I viewed a life-size hand carved out of a pale chunk of wood and, next to it, a face cast in white plaster, a kind of a death mask. Eyes shut, lips, too; the rest of the features smooth and perfectly delineated. Staring at it made me uncomfortable. I knew it couldn't be her son's face, although did I?

I switched to the easel that displayed an empty canvas initialed at the bottom. There was nothing else on it, yet I kept thinking that I could see something if I looked hard enough.

"It's called 4'33." After John Cage," Sarah said.

I turned my face to her. "Who?"

"An American composer. Went to The New School, here in New York. One of his pieces has no notes and lasts four minutes and thirty-three seconds. A performer just sits in front of a piano and does nothing. We're forced to listen to the sounds around us. It's a kind of rebellion against social norms."

"That's a lot of—" I was going to say shit, but said, "emptiness."

"Well, it's part of the automatism movement, when the artist wishes to remove himself from the process of creation to achieve higher truth. Because self-expression is really nothing more than an infusion of the art with the social standards to which we've been subjected since birth. Nothing original can come from that. My son says that about painting, too—how light touches a blank canvas, baring its irregularities, darker or lighter threads, perhaps even an occasional defect or a shadow. We're forced to study a pure, original form the artist can't control in any way. It's the art of seeing."

I stared at her; the ardor with which she spoke about the blank canvas and her dead son commanded respect. In my family, no one spoke of anything with such veneration. My mother cursed profusely while gossiping about her coworkers, their many sex scandals; my father drank on weekends and watched political talk shows, which my mother called impotent or sterile.

I walked to a tall bookshelf in the far corner of the room. I guessed them to be books on painting, and some of them were, as well as on famous artists—Klimt, Schiele, Kandinsky, Magritte, Munch—but most of the books were literary epics.

*Moby-Dick, War and Peace, The Grapes of Wrath, A Farewell to Arms, To the Lighthouse.*

"These are Robert's," Sarah said.

I pulled out the last book, with a woman and the sea on the cover. "Is this one good?"

"Yes. Remarkable."

"Is the author still alive?"

"Virginia Woolf drowned in 1941 in London. During a bombing raid, I believe."

"She went swimming while," I was going to say Germans, but said, "Nazis bombed the place?"

"No. She killed herself. Filled her pockets with stones and walked into the river. Can you imagine the strength?"

"Maybe she was murdered," I said. "Happens in my country a lot."

"I doubt it. There was a suicide note."

"What did it say?"

"I have no idea. Google it."

There was a moment of silence between us, so I said what my mother often said, "Strange how the echo of that war is still here, still haunting us."

"Yes," Sarah said. "It's hard to fathom sometimes."

That night I read Woolf's suicide note. Addressed to her husband, it started with "Dearest" and ended with "I don't think two people could've been happier than we have been." I didn't cry, of course, but I felt as though I'd been stabbed repeatedly in the chest with a dull knife. She'd loved him not only in life but in death. He was that important to her. I couldn't think of any such person. I loved no one, and no one loved me. Robert left his paintings and one blank canvas. Woolf—the literary masterpieces. All I could bequeath to the world was a pair of fake Levi's.

I called my mother. It was an early morning in Moscow, so I caught her before she left for work. She was a hospital nurse. She hated her job, but she earned good money, more than she could've ever dreamed of earning during the Soviet regime. Although most of that money came from the patients' relatives, who placed cash envelopes in her pockets so she could provide extra care or painkillers. My father used to joke that he needed some, too, to spare him from the pain of living with her.

I told my mother about Sarah, and she explained that it wasn't uncommon for people who lost their children to remain in denial.

“When you left for America,” she said, “I didn’t wash your sheets for a month. I napped on your bed too. But when you didn’t come back, I took all your things to the church.”

“What? Why did you do that?”

“Why did you drop out of Moscow State and start counterfeiting jeans? You could’ve become a doctor or a professor. You loved studying.”

“Is there anything of mine left in that room?” I asked.

She was silent, but then said, “Yes. A book on English grammar.”

That book wasn’t even mine. She gave it to me before I left, but I never got to study it. I learned everything by ear. “How’s Dad?” I asked.

“How the fuck would I know?” she answered.

“Doesn’t he call?”

“Where from? Maidan?”

“That’s mean.”

“What’s mean? He left me for his country.”

“Why can’t you forgive him for being Ukrainian?”

“Why couldn’t he forgive me for being Russian?”

I didn’t answer; I didn’t know what to say. All our arguments started and ended the same way—with a rhetorical question. We both knew the vague, pointless nature of such questions, but we couldn’t help ourselves. Our relationship, just as our culture, fed on rhetoric, which didn’t contradict the existing order or leadership.

“For once, why can’t you pretend not to hate him?” I asked.

“Because. Because he didn’t need me to. It was easier for him to fucking hate me if he thought I hated him too. There was no moral dilemma that way: wife, country; country, wife.” She sighed. “You aren’t coming back, are you? I need to know because I’m thinking about renting out your room. It’d be nice to have some company for the holidays.”

I swallowed her words. They fell somewhere deep inside me, where all her words fell.

“Go ahead,” I finally said. “I’m staying here.”

A week passed, and I finished reading *To the Lighthouse*. Half of it I didn’t understand, but the last line tied a knot in my throat. The lengthy rumination on the meaning of life reminded me of Tolstoy, but the novel was so slim, so delicate. It felt like entering a new city, its maze of streets and hidden alleys, the mystery, the



joy of discovering them one by one, while Tolstoy's novels, as grand as they were, often reminded me of entire countries being under siege.

I hadn't seen Sarah since that evening. She didn't come by or answer my calls. I kept leaving voice mails about fresh turkey, and, on Friday afternoon, I decided I'd deliver the bird to her. Perhaps she'd caught a cold and couldn't go out or talk on the phone. I also wanted to return to her apartment. I was still curious about her son. On Christmas Eve the store closed early, and I had no place to be. The cashier girls had invited me to a gathering in Queens, but when I imagined riding for a miserable hour on the subway that looked and smelled like a bomb shelter, I abandoned all festive thoughts. I thought I'd rather burrow into my rental, a room on Brighton Beach, and gorge on Russian movies from the revolution to the present day, all the Soviet epics once vetoed by the regime.

The snow fell in large, sticky clusters, the roads turning to mush. The neighborhood felt deserted, except for a group of young people skidding past me. I smelled alcohol and marijuana, its thick, sweet incense. I thought of the night when my father had left my mother, how she stood on the balcony, sucking vodka out of a bottle, cussing him and the rest of the goddamned impotent world. The neighbors called the police. She was so drunk she couldn't even button her shirt, and I ended up doing it for her. Her large, naked breasts pressing against my fingers. She smacked me, and smacked me again, then started hitting me in the chest and shoulders, anywhere she could reach. Her face was awash in rage and tears as she continued to hit me because my face and my silence resembled my father's, and also because, just like him, I didn't know how to stop her.

I entered the BellTel Lofts building, rode the elevator to the eleventh floor, and followed a long, dark corridor that ended at Sarah's apartment. I brushed my coat, stomped and wiped my feet twice before ringing the bell. Sarah didn't answer, so I pressed my ear against the cold, gray surface of her door. With a fifteen-pound turkey in three layers of paper bags, I knocked, then rang the bell again, then touched the handle.

The door yielded with a squeak.

"Hello?" I said. "Sarah? Are you home?"

There was no response.

Slowly, I stepped into the darkness of her flat. "Sarah, it's Vlad. Vlad from Fresh Market. Hello?"

Stripping off my shoes and jacket, I walked down the hallway. I peeped inside the rooms and turned on the night-lights. Everything seemed in order: the rugs,

the furniture, her son's pictures. The books slouching on the shelves, the paintings displayed on the walls. The third bedroom was closed. I remembered that it was the one without windows and that I hadn't seen it.

I knocked. "Sarah? Are you in there? It's Vlad. I brought fresh turkey."

I pushed the door open and at first noticed nothing but a bed or a couch pulled out into a bed. It was low, draped with blankets, under which a body lay motionless. The room smelled of unwashed clothes, but nothing else, nothing putrefying or decaying.

The turkey weighted down my arm, so I set the bag on a chair. I could now see that, unlike the rest of the apartment, the room was in disarray. Sheets flung about the floor, sweaters, pants, underwear. A heap of T-shirts in the corner. A tennis shoe, a soccer ball, a stack of newspapers, which must've come from another century because who read newspapers today? As I approached the bed, I halted, not sure if I was ready to experience death in close proximity. At my grandmother's funeral, the open casket had terrified me.

It was Sarah's body under the blanket. I recognized her sharp profile, her beak of a nose and bald, ostrich-egg head. Her eyes were shut, and no matter how hard I squinted, I couldn't tell whether she was breathing. I smelled something earthy, like moss on trees. My throat tightened. I could hear myself swallow thick pockets of air. Before getting any closer to the bed, I searched for a floor lamp. I found none and took a few steps backward, pushing the door wider.

Sarah opened her eyes, but otherwise didn't move.

"Oh, good," I said, exhaling. "You aren't dead. I was afraid you were. I knocked, but you didn't answer."

She closed her eyes, and I thought that maybe she had a stroke and couldn't talk.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

She blinked twice then stared at me, still saying nothing. Her eyes were cold and glassy, as though frozen with tears. My discomfort rose. My ears burned. A tingling sensation in my arms and legs.

"Sarah, please, can you say something?"

I walked to the bed and squatted, placing my hand on hers. It felt cold, the skin chaffed and scaly. On the floor, near the foot of the bed, I spotted a piece of paper and picked it up. Somehow, I thought it was a suicide note. I flipped it over. The paper was blank on both sides. I flipped it and flipped it again before dropping it. I didn't know what else to do. I studied Sarah's face, so calm and pale like a mask. Her wrinkles barely visible in the dark. Her lips folded, a large mole on her neck.

The apartment filled with silence.

I imagined being submerged underwater, sinking to the bottom of a river, the weight of stones in my pockets. I imagined my mother's face as my body would be discovered weeks later, the things she would yell at my father, him dumbfounded against the wall. I imagined never seeing them again. Them never seeing each other. Not a word passing between us for eternity.

"Sarah," I said. "Please get up. If you don't get up, I'll call the police. And they'll call the paramedics, who'll pronounce you 'incapable' and sign you off to some guardian, who'll take charge of your apartment and your life. You'll be placed in a nursing home, where they'll keep pumping you with drugs until you die."

She ignored me.

"OK, then, I'll ransack the apartment and steal jewelry and set the place on fire. Everything will burn. You too."

No response.

I finally stood up and shuffled to the corner room and dragged back the easel and the blank canvas, brushes, paints, and a heap of crusted rags. From the living room, I transplanted a floor lamp and plugged it in. The room illuminated with a halo of light.

With the corner of her eye, Sarah watched me squeeze a thick layer of rusty paint on a flat-tipped brush. I raised my arm and paused, waiting for her to stop me.

She didn't.

"This painting isn't finished," I said. "It needs shit. Like family, sea, a fucking lighthouse."

In a single bold gesture, I touched the brush to the canvas.

"No!" she yelled. "Don't ruin it. It's perfect."

I drew a crooked line in the middle just as she rose from the bed and grabbed my hand. "Don't you dare touch his things. You, you"—her lips quivered—"why did you come? What do you need? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Because," I said.

"Because what?"

"Because I'm hungry, and it's Christmas, and I brought turkey, and I have no place to cook it."

She dropped my hand, and I dropped the brush. It landed on my foot, coloring my sock.

"I'm not cooking any turkey for you," she said in that same husky voice that reminded me of dead trees. "I haven't cooked in ages."

“What about Robert? Don’t you cook for him?”

“Robert?” She hesitated, as though recalling a long-forgotten face. “Robert died years ago. And before that he never visited. Not even on Christmas. He hated me.”

Her eyes blurred with tears. Her shoulders trembled, her chest heaved, her whole body convulsing, one silent wave after another.

I felt the need to embrace her.

I remembered how my mother always accused my father of never feeling sorry for her. How all she ever wanted was for him to pity her—when she had her periods, when she worked night shifts, when she’d gained weight, when I left for America. But he refused to succumb, and he refused to pretend. Instead he demanded pity from her—because he’d lost his independence, his country, his desire, his masculinity, because he’d abandoned his dream of becoming an artist.

I inched closer to Sarah and placed my hand on her shoulder, slowly wrapping my arms around.

“Robert hated me,” she whispered, her voice soft and cold like snow.

“No, he didn’t,” I said, also in a whisper. “He only pretended. Sometimes we all do.”

She sighed, a chestful, then shook her head, but it seemed that she was nodding too.

I suddenly felt extreme fatigue, as if I’d just crossed the ocean in a small boat, smashing through storms, whipped by rain and wind. I didn’t know who I was, who my parents were, or why I’d left home. I remembered being hurt, stubborn, the feeling of absolute freedom and absolute powerlessness. Years, places, experiences, all blurred together except for one. One evening. A Christmas Eve in some old woman’s home. A room lit by a floor lamp. A smell of paint. Two people, amid rags and brushes. The way the shadows lingered on the wall.