

THE CHOCOLATE KANDINSKY



By: SUZANNE GRIFFIN

The Chocolate Kandinsky

a short story written by

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Sevda

Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, about ten years ago. A cozy, nearly silent street on a deep winter's day, snow thickly falling. Across from the old synagogue, a neglected brownstone. Lovely iron fence, rusted, the parlor window frames half-devoured with rot, and shuttered tight within.

Behind the old glass, a small, handwritten sign proclaims "BOOKS".

A heavy-set figure cradling bags of groceries in his burly arms labors up the stoop - Carl Hoffman, sixtyish - an elusive Brooklyn grizzly. A bit wary, with kind brown eyes.

Carl's narrow front hall is half-devoured, too, with enormous stacks of books, threatening to avalanche. Carl expertly slides his bulk past the parlor's antiques, which groan under the weight of bibliophilic towers - floor-to-ceiling shelves likewise sagging under their literary burdens. Coffee-table heavyweights, preening contemporary lit, dog-eared paperbacks, the leather-bound classics with their gorgeous patina. All cheek by jowl.

A house for a person who loves the smell of old paper.

As Carl does.

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A real cook's kitchen - deeply unglamorous and steamy, Carl stirring a hefty pot of goulash. He ladles out his beautiful stew.

Carl sits, and eats. It's good.

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Retrieving a book from a locked case, Carl installs himself at a large, impeccably-ordered work table in his front parlor, turning the pages of *The Pickwick Papers*. The table an oasis in a chaos of papers, drawings, well-loved books. Carl sketches page after page of Pickwick chasing his hat - a Pickwick progressively more like Carl - Pickwick reaching desperately for his hat, and tumbling to the ground.

The doorbell rings. Tucking in his shirt tails, Carl hurries - as much as he ever hurries. His front door opens to reveal Sevda, mid-thirties, waiting on his front stoop with the hopeful air of a freshly-minted New Yorker. Snow falls on her pale face and dark hair.

“Yes?” Carl’s a Brooklyn voice. *Her* voice musical, and instantly disarming, with a Russian accent.

“I’m looking for a book.”

“So am I. Maybe you can find it for me. I’m joking. Come in. Come in.”

Carl leads Sevda to his desk, pulling up a chair for her, Sevda quietly marveling at the room.

“I love all your books.”

“And you’ve only just met them!”

Sevda smiles. Opening a notebook, Carl writes -

“Author?”

“Henry Mayhew.”

"*London Labor and the London Poor*"?

"Yes!"

Carl maneuvers through boxes and disorderly piles to an elegant glass display case, and unlocking it, extracts four gilt-edged volumes.

"This edition - 1863. Interviews with London street sellers. Mayhew picked the daguerreotypes himself. Each person looks as real as if they were photographed today. This is one of my favorites. The blind seller of bootlaces."

Carl shows her.

"Poor man."

Carl sensing a fellow bibliophile.

"You see! He's *real*. Because Mayhew saw the people other people didn't. Or didn't *like* seeing. He listened, too – "

"How much is it?"

"For you - 2,000 dollars."

"Oh, but I - !"

"I wanted to show you how beautiful the original engravings were. *Now* – "

Carl snatches a paperback out of a box.

"Penguin. Good condition - fifty cents."

Sevda relieved. "Thank you."

Sevda fishes in her purse, Carl discreetly studying her.

“May I ask, why this book?”

“My step-father had a bookshop, in Russia. I remembered looking at the pictures when I was a girl. But then the book disappeared. As did the bookshop.”

Sevda turns to the frontispiece of Mayhew's portrait.

“I liked the way he looked. Those crinkled up eyes. Funny, but serious about his work. Kind.”

“*London Labour* made him famous. Then he lost everything. His work, his money, even his wife – “

“Now, I love him even more.”

“So, you're Russian. Where from?”

“St. Petersburg. But a Russian wouldn't say I was Russian. My step-father was an Azeri Jew. My mother was a Jew, born in Russia. So, you see. The New York Public Library is my homeland, now. “

Sevda rises, and Carl shows her to the door.

“How did you find me?”

“I saw your sign. The big stores didn't have the book - but I thought you might.”

“I have everything. Even if I don't know where it is, it's here. Sometimes the bookstores send people. But usually no one comes in because of the sign. Unless they're a pro, sniffing out a first edition. Then, I'm not home, because I'm not interested in someone who only wants a book because of what it's worth.”

Sevda smiles softly.

“I'm glad you have the sign. And I think - you know where everything is, really. Thank you, again – “

“Carl.”

“Sevda.”

Sevda extends her hand, and they shake.

“I thought maybe "Liubov". I knew a girl named Liubov.”

“Oh?”

“She taught me Liubov means "love" in Russian – “

“Yes, it does – “

“And you love Mayhew, and books, and the New York Public Library - and lots of things, I think.”

“I do. But, it's funny – “

“What?”

“Sevda means "love", in Azeri. So, you were right. Goodbye, Carl.”

“I have a sense about these things! Good bye, Sevda. Watch your step!”

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Eugenie

Carl peers into the bakery's display case.

“Two coffee eclairs, three chocolate. And a half pound of the pistachio macaroons.”

He reconsiders.

“A whole pound.”

*

In his parlor, Carl clears the cluttered coffee table, carefully arranging the bakery treats.

Carl’s front door opens - on Carl's stoop Eugenie, slightly younger than Carl, elegant and sad. Behind her, Joseph Hoffman, slightly older, and with the manner of a suave grim-reaper.

Carl, in a clean shirt, greets them.

“Eugenie. Come in.”

Eugenie enters with a gust of snow, Carl kissing her cheek, and taking her coat. She drifts on into the parlor, Carl's eyes following her. Joseph brushes off the snow, annoyed.

“I need a chair.”

Carl looks at Joseph, blankly. Joseph explaining - as to an idiot -

“To take off my boots. To sit down – “

“Do you see any chairs? Use the fucking stairs.”

“I'll get it myself - ”

“I'll get it, you goddam moron.”

Carl liberates a chair from the front parlor’s chaos.

He sees Eugenie wandering into the back parlor - a beautiful lost soul. In the hallway, Carl closes the door behind him, half-throwing the chair at Joseph. Joseph almost frightened.

“Lunatic!”

“What did you do to her, now?”

“Nothing. I did nothing.”

Joseph sits to remove his boots, Carl not relenting -

“She's drinking again, isn't she? “

“I didn't know she'd stopped. Of course, she's drinking. That's what she does, you fucking idiot – “

“Fuck yourself. If you – or anyone can. Even that frozen-faced wine bar phony you were screwing behind your lovely wife's back finally came to her senses when she saw you were just a pathetically selfish dentist with a cruel streak miles wide who's never really loved anyone in his whole fucking life - “

Joseph thrusts a crooked finger at Carl.

“Don't start. Don't start or I swear I'll kill you – “

“With what? Your gold toothpick?”

“She's not well today and if you start, I'll kill you with my bare hands and leave you to rot in this steaming pile of shit. “

“How can you let her - ? “

Joseph hangs up his coat and scarf.

“Eugenie's always done exactly what she wants, and I don't stop her. *She* can't love, because she's too busy boozing and thinking about some dead painter who laid her thirty years ago. You're exactly the same. You just wallow in your own filth and hide your prick under that hideous gut and never touch anyone because your beloved Liubov died before you could completely destroy *her* life, too – “

“Don't you *ever* say her name! “

Carl flings Joseph's boots into a corner, suddenly overwhelmed, Joseph smoothing his tie - and sauntering past him, into the parlor.

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In the back parlor, Carl fusses over Eugenie, who's seated by the coffee table, Carl pouring tea, Joseph reclining on the sofa - brooding.

“Some cream, Eugenie?”

Eugenie purrs, her lilting Russian accent as effortlessly elegant as the rest of her.

“No, thank you. All these macaroons! I must really have made a pig of myself last time. *And* a chocolate éclair. I'm sorry it's been so long since we stopped by – “

“Six months. It's been six months. But you're here, now. So eat something.”

Eugenie bites into the éclair. “Mmmm.”

Joseph green with distaste - and his own bile.

“It's sickening just to look at all that.”

Carl checking Joseph, with cool contempt - “*Don't* look.” He gently pivots to Eugenie.

“So, how's your writing going?”

“Slowly. But that's how I write. And my wrist is still healing, from the fall.”

“What fall?”

“I had too much to drink, and I fell down the stairs. People, like me, who like to drink, we have to be prepared to take a spill now and then. But I'm fine, Carl.”

Carl grumbles to Joseph – “Why didn't you tell me?” Eugenie cutting in -

“It would have upset you. Joseph just accepts these things. It's all the same to him. Sitting having macaroons and tea, or sweeping up my latest mess. Maybe cleaning people's teeth fosters a useful sort of detachment. I wish I had that. You're too soft, Carl. But I'm sorry we didn't come by sooner. You're always such a good auntie to me.”

Joseph smiles - his phony dentist's smile.

“It's nice, isn't it? - how she hands us our balls on a silver platter.”

Eugenie *not* rattled, licking the éclair crème from her fingers.

“I leave yours to the women who know what to do with them. And no matter how stupid I am, Carl knows I -

“I made goulash. And it turned out pretty well. I thought you might stay for dinner.”

Joseph pounces –

“As long as you give her enough to drink. She's only like this because she hasn't had enough. Let her drink enough and she's a girl out of a Russian novel. Dark eyes. Mysterious. Passionate, but never vulgar. Like someone I used to know.”

Eugenie's wounded eyes meet Joseph's. Carl sees her look, detonating -

“She *drinks* because of you, you fucking abomination!”

“Don't, Carl. He's right. He's always right. I think I'll go outside to have a smoke, now.”

“Let me get the door - “

Carl opens the door and Eugenie's dark figure descends into the white garden, the falling snow glittering around her.

Carl watches Eugenie light her cigarette, and puff - Joseph studying Carl.

“I thank your Liubov every night in my prayers, for introducing me to Eugenie. We were so lucky in our Russian wives. Look at you. How many years have you been lovesick for my wife? And she just pities you. Do you really think she'd want all this? “

Joseph gestures to the clutter, Carl's eyes still on Eugenie.

“It's all going to be obsolete soon. It is already. No one will have books. A few rare editions for show maybe, but all this worthless crap will go up in smoke. And what woman could live here? She'd suffocate, like Liubov did.

“I told you not to mention her.”

“There is something I have to mention. The Kandinsky.”

Carl's eyes fixed on Eugenie.

"I'm not selling it. Mother said it's to stay in this house. And my wife, WHO DIED OF CANCER IN THIS HOUSE, loved it, the way Mother did. You don't get to touch it till I'm dead, too. So just raise your rates for root canal if you want to take one of your syphilitic hookers to Vegas, or wherever the fuck you take them.

Joseph sighs.

"I can't afford to divorce Eugenie. I admit, I still love her. She *is* beautiful to look at. I'm less pathetic when she's with me, even if she falls down drunk. But our life is a complete nightmare. She can't afford to leave me - she has nothing of her own. She won't get a divorce. Because she knows she'd die without me to sober her up now and then. But if we sold the Kandinsky - I could move out. She could hire someone to take care of her. She might even give in to you, knowing she wouldn't be a financial burden. At least, we'd have our own separate hells and that would be an improvement."

"No."

"You say I'm an abomination. If you could only see yourself, just *once* - "

"Our mother must have found you in a gutter and taken pity - "

"What do you want, Carl? To make Eugenie happy. Even Liubov knew that. So sell the Kandinsky, and take my wife away. Buy a house in the south of France and spoil her. She likes being spoiled. Of course - "

“What?”

“She might not *want* to screw you. I know that's held you back from really seducing her, like a man - not licking her boots like some pathetic servant. But if I were you, I'd take your chance, now, before she becomes completely - irretrievable. Sell the Kandinsky, if there are still some signs of life below your belt, and take her. Besides, how do you live?”

“I don't go to eno-fucking-tecas. I don't buy sex. I'm not going to buy your wife. I'm not going to sell the picture my wife loved.”

“Liubov would have understood. Does her ghost still bother you?”

“Sometimes – “

“And you say I'm crazy. You should get one of these. An e-reader. It's the end of people like you.

Joseph retrieves a device from his pocket, Carl glancing at it.

“Since when do you read?”

“You can check your e-mail on it, too. That's what people want. Thousands of books to take with you anywhere. Freedom. Instant gratification. Not real estate filled with paper and filth.

“Let me see that.”

Joseph hands Carl the e-reader. Carl lays it on a desk. He opens a drawer, and finding a hammer, smashes the e-reader, *repeatedly*, pulverizing it – even Joseph shocked.

“You insane, fucking bastard - you should be in a museum - the Museum of Filth and Lard!”

Carl hammers the e-reader *hard*, for emphasis.

“It never even occurs to you that a woman might have a sense of decency, that I loved my wife and I still do, that things can have some value, some value even greater than freedom and gratification, you soulless fuck. I told you not to say her name, I told you. I'll kill you first before I sell it, I'll kill all of us - get out!

Joseph puffing himself up, as he leaves.

“I'll have you declared incompetent. I'll sue you! This time I'm finally going to have my way! You can tell Eugenie I'll stop by the liquor store, so she doesn't have to – “

Carl throws the hammer after Joseph, for good measure – missing.

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Carl goes down into his snowy backyard, joining Eugenie.

“He left.”

Eugenie turns to Carl, her face stained with tears.

“Eugenie.”

He gently wipes her cheek with his rough thumb. Eugenie leans against Carl, and kisses him – Carl embracing her.

“Six months. You sleep with me - once - tell me you love me, and then you disappear and won't even see me. You come back and say I'm like an auntie to you, and *now* - !

“I was frightened – “

Carl caresses her face.

“I thought disgusted, revolted, maybe – “

Eugenie's eyes smile.

“I'm the revolting one. Tell me this isn't another bad thing in the long line of bad things I've done.”

“No. This makes everything right. It's the only right thing.”

“I can't stop drinking. I can't.”

“You'll stop. Little by little. We'll go inside and eat the goulash - which turned out pretty well - and things will start to change. Then we'll go to bed and sleep, or make love, if you want to, and things will change a little more. And in the morning, I'll watch you get dressed - and this time, you won't go.”

Eugenie laughs, tugging at his bristly chin.

“Sex makes you an optimist.”

“It makes all men optimists. Eugenie.”

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Carl and Eugenie lie in bed together. Carl draws her nearer.

“Maybe Joseph will fall into a snowdrift, and they'll find him in the spring, clutching his frozen balls and a gallon of cheap Merlot to his petrified heart.”

“Before I met Joseph, I liked to go out in the snow and get very cold, then come inside and have some vodka by the fire - with my clothes off.”

“We could try that, too.”

Eugenie grows serious.

“Did he ask you?”

“Ask?”

“About the Kandinsky. “

Carl looks up at the little Kandinsky that hangs on the wall opposite. Luscious clouds of color and whimsical shapes spin across the painting's rich, brown field.

“I promised Liubov I'd keep it. “

“Joseph doesn't understand. He can't.”

“Selling it would make your husband very rich. And you. It might help, if you got divorced – “

“No. It's not even right to ask me what I think. No one should be able to touch it. It is beautiful, isn't it? I wonder what Kandinsky was thinking of when he painted it – “

“Chocolate. “

Eugenie bemused - “Chocolate?”

“That's what Liubov said. The chocolaty background. And all the little abstract creatures Kandinsky invents and those irreverent, electric lines. That's how chocolate feels in our brains. Racing through our bodies. That dark happiness. It was something Liubov couldn't get enough of. She loved that she could buy chocolate here, whenever she wanted. It's not on the menu a lot when you grow up the daughter of a convict in Novosibirsk.”

Carl considers - “You don't have to pretend, you know.”

“Pretend?”

“That you're staying. I just want to know, if you are. Because I want you to. And if you think you would be some kind of burden, you wouldn't be. You'd be the opposite of everything that's a burden.”

“I'm sure Joseph gave a very clear picture of what it's like. Being with me.”

“Even as a kid, my brother could make milk curdle just looking at it.”

“What did he say?”

“If I sold the painting, he'd have the money to divorce you, and then you *might* give in to me without having to feel you were a burden. But he wasn't sure you'd screw me - maybe if I bought you a house in the South of France.”

“He was wrong about that.”

“I even thought -

Eugenie combs Carl's hair with her fingers.

“What?”

“When he was talking about your dark eyes and girls in Russian novels - I let myself think for a moment that you still loved him. Because I'm an imbecile. And what does Joseph know about Russian novels? He doesn't even have a soul!

“You thought I *still* - ?”

“That maybe you weren't completely over him. I almost wished I could hurt you like that, just so you'd look at me the same way. So, you see what you're getting. It's not all goulash and eclairs.

“I hope not. You forget.”

“What?”

“After I looked at him, I looked at you. “

*

Exile

A wide expanse of Prospect Park, mid-snowstorm. Carl and Eugenie stumble arm-in-arm through the drifts. They collapse into a snowbank and kiss, nearly swallowed up by the whiteness.

*

Animated sketches - Carl's - a flip-book of Eugenie undressing. The real Eugenie, naked, sits cross-legged on the floor by the fire, a ragged blanket wrapped round her, thumbing through books. Stretched out on the sofa, Carl sketches her -

“Do you have enough wine?”

“Yes, thank you. When will I stop drinking, altogether?”

“Not just yet. But soon.”

“What do you do, with your sketches?”

“Sometimes Liubov sent them to my gallery. But I – “

“- you did them for her, I think. The book of Liubov.”

“I started a new book the day I met you. What poems you like. The way you put your hair behind your ear, when you don't know what to say. Everything. “

Eugenie reaches up, and they kiss. Carl considers her.

“I would have been crazy about you.”

“Would have!”

“In Leningrad about 1968, a beautiful Jewish girl with her nose in a book. And I would have sat and looked at you the same way you sit there and look at my books.”

“That's how I want you to think of me. As a girl who likes books. Who likes you. “

“Well. I'm an easy read. No footnotes.”

“Books were my escape. And a book can't see what you've become, can it?”

Eugenie finds a copy of "Oliver Twist".

“I found this in the village library when I was in exile and tried to memorize it - to practice my English. I don't think the KGB ever meant for "Oliver Twist" to be the solace of a Jewess in Siberia.”

Eugenie runs her hand across a shelf of books.

“I love books. Each one is like a love affair - some better than others. When did books stop being so powerful?”

“They didn't.”

“My mother had a copy of Akhmatova's "Evening", and she guarded it with her life. People would risk their necks for something like that. I suppose they were your escape, too – “

“I *have* been a prisoner in this house. In my own failings - but I don't so much escape as wallow – “

“I like your gilded cage. If I had to be a prisoner, I wouldn't mind being locked up here.”

Carl sighs.

“The insignificance verging on parasitical worthlessness which I have nearly always felt has suddenly deepened.”

“You're not so in over your head as you think.”

“I've been in over my head from day one. “

“What I mean is. Some people ask about my past. Some don't, and you feel how much they don't ask. But you just sit there and sketch, in your very easy way, and make me smile. “

“I drew this for you the other day - Pickwick chasing his hat. Only it's really me, chasing you. “

Eugenie smiles at the drawings.

“And now, you've caught me.”

They kiss, more passionately - a terrific crash of books in the next room startling Eugenie.

“What's that?”

“Books - falling down. They do that, sometimes.”

Eugenie whispers - “It's not – “

“Liubov's ghost? It's true she didn't like the idea of you and me – “

“She knew - !”

“She never said, but she knew. Even though I never touched you. Well, I did touch you, but not as much as I wanted to.”

“That's worse. When a woman sees a man can wait, she knows he's in love.”

“Come here. “

Eugenie rests her head on Carl's chest.

“I loved her. But she never really let me in. Not the way you have. I thought I could wait, that she'd change. I didn't know I'd have to wait forever.

Eugenie deflates, more than a little.

“That sounds very romantic.”

Carl caresses her face.

“I'll tell you what's romantic. Eugenie, the lovely poet from Tsarskoe selo, who cared like a sister for a sick woman, a woman she was under no obligation to care for – Eugenie draws back.

“That's not romantic - it's selfishness. I did it to be near you, you great, unwashed beast, because despite every effort to the contrary, I couldn't help myself. I did it because you loved her, even though it made me loathe her every breath. I'm completely, completely selfish, and don't ever tell me otherwise! “

A log rolls out of the fireplace quite close to Eugenie - singeing her bare skin. Eugenie picks up the tongs, angrily flinging the log back.

“Damn Liubov! Damn her! If only I were brave, I would have put poison in her tea! “ Eugenie throws down the tongs. Carl looks up at her -

“You're getting better.”

*

Eugenie eats Carl's feast greedily, steaming through stew and mashed potatoes and cherry dumplings. Carl marvels at her.

“More cherry dumplings? “

Eugenie eagerly sweeps the dumplings onto her plate.

Later, Eugenie lies on the sofa, Carl massaging her swollen stomach.

“You cooked so well tonight, Carl. And I know why.”

“Why?”

“Because you love naked, swearing women. And over-eating, and hoarding, and crumbs in the bed. Tell me again. When do I stop, altogether?”

“Soon.”

Eugenie sees tears in Carl’s eyes. She gently holds his face.

“Stupid beast. Stupid, stupid beast.”

*

Eugenie and Carl lie together in the darkened bedroom, Eugenie studying the ceiling, unable to sleep.

“I wish I could give you a child. But I'm too old and worn out.”

“Can you imagine a child, here - books falling everywhere! Logs jumping out of the fire! But you'd be a wonderful mother.

“A drunk, like me?”

“You're not a drunk, anymore. You had good reasons to be. The best reasons. And now that's over.”

“Were you sad that you and Liubov couldn't have a baby?”

“Sometimes. Many times. But this is my family, now. This.”

“Still. I wish. “

*

Carl sits at his work table in the darkened house, opening a notebook labeled with the name "Liubov", and flips through sketches of a lovely woman with short black hair and shy

eyes - Liubov Myakshina. He studies one sketch, closely – a sketch made about fifteen years earlier – of Liubov, reading in the kitchen.

*

Liubov

Sitting on the kitchen table, legs dangling, Liubov reads aloud, a younger Carl cooking.

Liubov's Russian accent thicker than Eugenie's -

” - but Peter did not care. He slipped – “

Carl checks the book.

"Underneath - "

Liubov continues –

“ - He slipped underneath the gate, and was safe at last in the wood outside the garden." Oh, I love America! The rabbit always gets away.”

“Well, he's an English rabbit, but same thing. Our countries favor the rabbit. *We used* to, anyway.”

Carl feeds her chocolate batter on a spoon.

They kiss, messily.

*

Dressed in one of Carl's old shirts, Liubov tidies Carl's papers, Carl rapidly sketching her. She discovers the Kandinsky, on the wall.

“Who made this?”

“A guy named Kandinsky.”

“Kandinsky! “

Liubov takes the painting down, studying it closely, Carl explaining -

“There was a Kandinsky in my grandparents' house in Vienna, before the Anschluss. My mother escaped to friends in America, but her parents were killed. Then one day, my mother's walking down Madison Avenue and she sees this little Kandinsky in a window. She took all the jewelry her mother had given her, and everything she'd earned herself as a doctor, and she bought it. We left the apartment uptown and came to Brooklyn. With two suitcases and the Kandinsky. And I learned to cook, because there was no more eating out.”

Carl looks up and sees Liubov holding the painting close. She sees Carl's look, and smiles at herself.

“It's good to have something that can't be taken away.”

“Like my cooking?”

“Like you. “

*

Liubov sits in a chair beside a rose bush, heavy with blossoms. Carl brings her a slice of chocolate cake on a plate, but Liubov doesn't stir, her trimmers in her lap. He sees blood on her hand, and pushing up Liubov's sleeve, finds her arm has been deliberately cut - several times.

Carl gently rouses Liubov and she comes to, pushing him away. She gasps for air, clutching at her throat.

“Don't, Carl. Don't. I'm smothering. You're smothering me. “

Liubov sinks to the grass.

*

Liubov, at 53, her hair streaked with gray, lies napping beside Carl in the bedroom, her hand in his. She wakes.

“Carl. I'm sick.”

Carl retrieves a basin next to the bed. He holds Liubov's head as she is sick, wiping her mouth.

“Is there blood in it?”

“Lie down. I'll get you some water. “

Liubov angrily knocks over the basin.

“You never get angry with me. “

Liubov lays her head on the pillow.

“I'm too slow dying. A Russian would do it - a Russian would knock my head in and be done with it! I've been nothing to you anyway - a stone around your neck.”

“I should get mad? All right. Yes, you should already be dead. Why don't you die today?”

Carl throws the basin, breaking a mirror.

“Now, there's just more mess for me to clean up. What would a Russian use to knock your head in? Oh. “

Carl selects a poker from the fireplace, coming towards Liubov.

“Carl!”

Carl abandons the poker and sits, tenderly stroking Liubov's silky hair.

“Even if you never looked at me again, I couldn't. Know what I *should* hate most of all? Not that you can't love me. Because I know you live in some crazy world of the past, and that's fine. What I should hate is that you're still so beautiful. You're still so beautiful, Liubochka.

Liubov lovingly traces his eyebrow with her finger - and sighs.

*

Carl carries Liubov down into the garden, red leaves swirling round them. He carefully lays her on a chaise, next to the faded rose bushes. Liubov touches his face.

“Forgive me?”

Carl adjusts her shawl.

“What's to forgive?”

The words don't feel as kind as Carl meant them. Liubov closes her eyes, Carl lying down on the chaise next to hers.

Later, Carl wakes, and leaning over, kisses Liubov's shoulder. He takes her hand - it slides out of his, her face ashen, her eyes half-open but unseeing. Carl shouts at her -

“If that's what you want - yes! I forgive you - ! “

Carl appalled that he's shouted at her. He gathers Liubov's lifeless body in his arms.

*

Carl covers the bedroom's broken mirror. Liubov lies on their bed, beneath her pale hands the garden roses. Carl sits by her, wearing a skull cap. He reads aloud, in Russian -

"Tomorrow you will come to visit us over the new-fallen snow. They will light the drawing-room candles, whose shimmering is more tender by day, and from the greenhouse they will bring roses, a whole bouquet."

*

Ghosts

Carl sits in the dark, at his desk. He covers his face with one hand, reaching out with the other, whispering.

“Liuba. Liuba.”

A hand grasps his. Carl falls backwards, clutching his heart. It's Eugenie.

“You almost killed me!”

“If I could! I'm alive, Carl. I'm here, in your house, in your bed – “

“I didn't forgive her. She wanted me to forgive her – “

“How can you be so childish, blasphemous, as though her death meant nothing? “

“Yes, I'm crazy, yes! - sitting in the dark hoping she'll touch me. “

“Does she - ?”

“Why should she start now? But I can't stop – “

“I should go – “

“I knew it!”

“Knew - ?”

“Of course, you love him. He looks at you with those brown eyes and makes you feel like a girl out of Tolstoy and risks his life climbing over snowdrifts to buy you cognac and there's no hideous gut pushing you off the bed – “

Eugenie shoves him, hard.

“Idiot! I loved you so much it made me sick - even before I married him. Because I couldn't be *her*. They should have killed us both – “

Eugenie sinks to the floor, Carl bewildered.

“What do you mean?”

“I killed Liuba – “

“You've been drinking – “

Eugenie shrugs.

“It was cancer. You didn't kill her.”

He reconsiders.

“Did you?”

“Her heart. I killed that. And it's Liubov you're still chasing, not me – “

Eugenie pulls away from Carl, but he hangs onto her.

“I thought if I could finally forgive her for not loving me the way I wanted her to, she'd go away and leave us both alone – “

“Is that what you want? For her ghost to leave us alone?”

“Yes - I swear it. Yes!”

“Then sell the painting.”

“What?”

“Sell it! Then we'll be free of her *and* Joseph.”

“You can't. You can't want him to win. You can't trample the wishes of the dead – “

“It only gives her hope – “

“Hope! “

“That now, now that she can't turn away from you in bed, you'll finally love her as much as she wanted you to. You'll cling to the one thing she loved. And you do love her more, now - don't you? “

Carl opens his mouth, but hesitates – Eugenie crushed.

“Oh. “

“All I know is I want *you*. Liuba couldn't really love anyone – “

“Only you. That's why she put up a wall. Because she didn't want to contaminate you with the filth her life had been - not that any of it was her fault. Being a drunk, I guess I don't care what people see -

Carl throws open thick sketchbooks, filled with drawings of Liubov.

“I *know* what her life was. They spit on her 'cause her mother was a Jew and her father a criminal - so the party said. They sent her off to a camp for stealing food she didn't steal. And then they worked her like a slave in an aluminum factory - I *know* – “

“You don't know. That Liubov and I met in Novosibirsk Prison, on our way to a labor camp in Tayshet, thirty-six years ago.”

Trembling, Eugenie hands Carl a sketch pencil.

“I was young and stupid enough to publish a book of my love poems and distribute it through a women's collective. And to attend a rally in memory of the Decembrists.

Carl sketches, Eugenie continuing -

“Which meant, the court said, that I was a deranged parasite and an enemy of the state. I arrived at Novosibirsk prison, with a group of girls who'd just turned 18, who were being transferred to an adult camp.

*

Novosibirsk

The early 1970s. Cell no. 247, Novosibirsk Prison, the Soviet Union.

Filthy, Gulag-style wooden bunks, overcrowded with ten teenage RUSSIAN GIRLS in their equally filthy clothes. The girls laugh and sing loudly - an old Russian song.

Young Eugenie, twentyish, smiles at the girls - she's slightly better clothed, but dirty, too, and haggard. She sees a pale girl resting in the arms of an anxious friend, Eugenie touching the friend's shoulder.

“What's wrong with her?”

“She's had a heart attack. It's happened before, but the doctor won't treat her. He thinks she's playing him up.”

Young Liubov, just 18, is there, too. Her beautiful eyes flashing with excitement, she sings the loudest of all. The girls collapse into laughter.

A painfully thin girl pokes Eugenie, curious.

“Why did they arrest you? “

“I wrote poetry, and published it myself. And I'm a Jew. “

Liubov's eyes meet Eugenie's.

“But you're not a criminal - not like us!”

“You're not criminals. You're just girls who sing too loud!”

The girls laugh, singing loudly again. The anxious girl screams.

“Tatiana's dead! She's dead.”

The girls try to revive the pale girl, to no avail. Liubov bangs on the cell door.

“She's dead! She's dead! Let us out!”

Liubov sinks to the floor, clawing at her own throat, gasping for breath. Eugenie gets down beside her, the thin girl lifting Liubov's head.

“Liuba! Liuba! “

The door flies open - a male guard, there. He sees Liubov lying helpless, and drags her by her arm into an adjacent cell.

Eugenie follows him, pushing past the screaming mentovka – a stout and surly female guard who curses the girls, shoving them back in their cell. Eugenie grabs the male guard’s arm.

“No! Take me, instead. She's sick – “

The guard drops Liubov, throwing Eugenie against the cell wall, his body against hers, his hand pressed hard over her mouth. Eugenie's eyes shut tight. The mentovka slams shut the girls' cell door, the girls bang on the door, shouting.

“Liuba! Liuba! What have you done with her! Let us out! We need a doctor!”

In the adjoining cell, the guard releases Eugenie - Eugenie shattered as she sinks down. The guard lifts Liubov, forcing her against the same wall. Eugenie punches his leg.

“No, you can't - she's a child! “

The guard slams Eugenie's head against the wall – Eugenie passing out.

*

Tayshet

Tayshet Labor Camp, Siberia. The prisoners’ food hall. Grim. A small piece of dry black bread is dropped onto a tin plate.

Heads crudely shaven, faces bruised, Young Eugenie and Liubov hungrily eat their few grams of bread.

*

Eugenie, Liubov and other gaunt female prisoners stumble through the camp yard, passing the trash pile behind the food hall.

Several 'goners', men and women near death with starvation, pick through the kitchen garbage, eating.

Eugenie looks away.

*

Young Liubov and Eugenie huddle in a wooden bunk, shivering, their breath steaming. Eugenie's eyes are closed, but her lips move, soundlessly - Liubov watching her.

"Evgenia Isaiovich. Are you sick?"

"No. I'm remembering a poem I like."

"You know it by heart?"

"A poem you know by heart can't be confiscated. "

"I'm so hungry. I want to go to the trash pile. "

"Don't say that."

"The other day, I saw a woman eating there - they said she'd been a famous singer. The camp director dragged her by her hair to his room. Now she has food, clothes - "

Eugenie grows angry.

"You're not going to let that happen to you, are you? "

Liubov uncertain.

"No."

“She'll be passed from man to man, and if she isn't dead in a week, she'll pray she was. Only 'goners' go to the trash pile. You must *never* go. You must care for yourself, however you can. Even if you just clean your face with snow - with spit. That's why I recite poems to myself, to remember I'm not an animal.”

“Would you teach me one? “

Eugenie caresses Liubov's sickly face.

“The poet's a girl, waiting for her lover. He's hurt her, but she still wants him.

She recites, eyes brimming with tears -

““I've forgiven those dear lips their cruel joke. And tomorrow you will come to visit us over the new-fallen snow. They will light the drawing room candles, whose shimmering is more tender by day. And from the greenhouse they will bring roses, a whole bouquet.””

*

Night. Liubov wakes.

Liubov moves through the shadows to the garbage pile. A dark figure paws through the refuse.

Eugenie. She looks up at Liubov.

Liubov gently takes Eugenie's hand, leading her back to the bunkhouse.

*

The tip of Carl's sketch pencil breaks as he sketches the Young Eugenie's starved face - Carl's body rigid with anger.

Eugenie gently takes the broken pencil, exchanging it for a fresh one. Carl sketches on.

*

A small crew of women prisoners, Young Eugenie and Liubov among them, pull firewood on sledges through the deep snow, just outside the perimeter fence of the camp. Snow falls heavily, blinding the women and their two guards. Eugenie and Liubov struggle, eyes sunken, as they fall further behind the others.

A guard slams the butt end of his rifle against Eugenie's back. She falls, Liubov helping her up. The guard laughs.

“The fat whores, bringing up the rear!”

The guards move ahead, their figures fading into the storm. Eugenie looks at the dark forest, close by. She abandons her load of wood, grabbing Liubov's hand.

Eugenie runs, as best she can, towards the forest, dragging a fearful Liubov with her. As they enter the woods, a guard looks round at them, and sees the women vanishing into a veil of snow. He smiles, shooting at the women, half-heartedly, and missing.

“Why waste bullets? In an hour, they'll have frozen to death. Better, we'll give the dogs some exercise.”

*

Eugenie and Liubov stagger through the dense forest - they are both quite pregnant. Liubov falls but Eugenie mercilessly drags her on. In the distance, dogs bark, Eugenie shouting at Liubov –

“Lift your feet! Walk! Walk, or we'll both die!

*

An enormous logging truck bears down on Eugenie and Liubov, standing in the road. The truck driver, half-blinded by the falling snow, screeches to a halt - just in time.

Eugenie pushes Liubov up into the front seat, climbing in behind her. The driver sees blood on the lower half of Liubov's coat. He opens it - she's hemorrhaging.

The truck starts off.

*

Eugenie remembers, as Carl sketches -

“The driver's father had died in a camp. He brought us to a doctor who helped - with clothes, and a bit of money, too. Liubov's baby - a boy - was lost. But I gave birth to a perfect little girl. We fled to the flat of my lover, a Jewish painter, in Leningrad.

*

In Leningrad, in a decrepit apartment building, young Eugenie and Liubov, both half-dead, climb the stairs. Eugenie stops, suddenly handing the baby to Liubov.

“Take her. I want her to be yours. It was my fault your child died.”

“No – “

“Besides, my lover might hate me, out of jealousy, or disgust. He'll see what she is. Please. You'll be able to love her - more.”

Liubov takes the baby girl, who cries. Eugenie kisses the child's head, then climbs the stairs, not looking back.

*

Eugenie, paler now, continues, as Carl completes the sketch -

“My lover doted on the child - and Liubov - but I could never tell him the truth. A few months later, Liubov was arrested in the street, for not having papers - my child was with her. They were sent to a labor camp in the Urals, and my little girl was put in an orphanage, nearby. Liubov saw her only once - she was covered in bruises.

Carl pauses in his sketching to take Eugenie's hand, Eugenie resting her head against his chest.

“The camp director asked Liubov why she kept writing the orphanage - after all, her daughter was probably dead. I met Liuba again, years later, in Leningrad. Somehow, we needed to be near each other. She introduced me to Joseph - I think she believed I'd finally be happy with this elegant, successful man. And then I fell in love with you, when she was dying. Have you written it all down, Carl?

“Yes. And now, we'll sleep.”

*

In bed, Carl wakes to the sound of a door banging in the wind. He reaches over for Eugenie - she's gone.

*

Carl sees the back door has been left open, snow blowing in. He runs down into the snowy garden. Eugenie is lying there, in her nightgown. Carl lifts her, carrying her into the house.

*

Blue-lipped, Eugenie lies wrapped in blankets, Carl forcing hot tea into her mouth. She shudders back to life. Carl kisses her. Eugenie whispers to him, her eyes still closed, Carl straining to hear.

“Cherry. Dumplings.”

*

The Kandinsky

Eugenie sits at Carl's desk, tired, sipping tea, writing a little. She hears voices at the front door.

Carl brings Sevda into the room.

“This young lady's looking for a book of Akhmatova's poems, in English.”

Sevda sits at Carl's desk, across from Eugenie. Eugenie shies away, Carl rummaging through the shelves. Sevda's eyes stray to Eugenie.

Eugenie looks back, irritated, Sevda lowering her eyes. Carl lays the book in front of Sevda, Sevda paging through it, as Carl writes in his ledger.

“It's a good translation. Does it have the poem you wanted?”

“Yes.”

Sevda reads.

"Tomorrow you will come to visit us, over the new-fallen snow. They will light the drawing-room candles, whose shimmering is more tender by day, and from the greenhouse they will bring roses, a whole bouquet - "

Sevda's voice grows hoarse, and she looks up at Carl and Eugenie, who look back, stunned.

Carl stammers out -

“That was my wife's favorite. I read it to her on our wedding day – “

Sevda places a packet of letters on the table.

“Liubov wrote me, a few years ago. She had kept the name of the orphanage guardian. You see, the guardian discovered that a nurse took me, when her own child died. Liubov sent money, to bring me here, when she was ill. But she asked me to wait. I believe she meant to tell you herself, first. But she felt such guilt. And then she died - I haven't come too soon after your loss, have I?”

Eugenie eyes the letters - and Sevda - shaken.

“What did she call you?”

“Sevda. Liubov told me the Azeri painter in Lermontov Street gave me my name. That he was like a father to me, until I went to the orphanage. “

Eugenie stares at Sevda, a long moment, Carl drawing the packet of letters towards himself. Eugenie snatches the letters away, but can only glance at the handwriting, afraid. She returns the packet to the table, dismissively. Carl looks at Sevda. If it were up to him - but it isn't.

Sevda reaches to retrieve the letters, but Eugenie abruptly puts her hand on Sevda's, stopping her. In a sudden rush, Eugenie goes to Sevda, wrapping her tightly in her arms.

“Sevda.”

“Mamochka.”

Eugenie grows weak, her eyes wet - someone pounding on the front door, now. Sevda and Carl help Eugenie to the couch, Joseph entering. He sees Eugenie lying down, tended to by Sevda.

“I thought you'd have her dried out by now. “

Joseph throws a document on Carl's desk.

“I have a court order that allows me to take the Kandinsky - to get it appraised and put in a safe. You won't stop me, or I'll have the police in here.”

Carl confronts him -

“I'll never let you lock it up. Our grandmother's blood bought that painting – “

“You can't stop me – “

Carl grabs Joseph by the collar shoving him against the wall, turning to Sevda.

“Sevda. There's a painting in the first bedroom upstairs. A crazy chocolate painting. Get it. Get it and run away with it, fast. Go! “

Sevda dashes from the room. Carl and Joseph struggle, falling to the floor, each trying to strangle the other. Grabbing a poker from the fireplace, Eugenie tries to hit Joseph, but the two men roll wildly back and forth. Joseph punches Carl twice, stunning him.

Sevda rushes in - with the Kandinsky. Joseph grabs for her coat, catching her. He pulls her savagely towards him, Sevda clutching the painting.

Eugenie strikes Joseph hard on the leg with the poker. He cries out, but wrenches the poker from her -

“For godsakes, it's just a painting. And it leaves today, or – “

Joseph lunges towards Sevda and the painting, but Carl rallies, grabbing Joseph's ankle, Joseph falling on his face. Carl takes the painting from Sevda.

He looks at Eugenie - and tosses it into the fire. The women gasp. Joseph pulls the painting out, burning his hands.

But the canvas is already blackened.

*

Carl moves stiffly, offering chairs to Eugenie and Sevda, who've just arrived. The three sit in the bright morning light, the room nearly bare, and completely emptied of books, Carl confessing -

“Joseph had all my assets seized. Except for the house. He just put a lien on that. I used to say this house was like a prison. But a home's never a prison when you have books. And someone crazy enough to share them with you. “

Eugenie sees Carl's hand is shaking. She takes it. Sevda speaks first.

“I'm so sorry. About the painting.”

Carl shrugs.

“Well, it's not like Kandinsky was Vermeer, you know. It's not like we have just a few Kandinskys in the whole world. What bothers me is that I wanted to help Liubov out of her dark place. Which was even darker than I thought. But I couldn't.”

Eugenie squeezes his hand.

“You did help. You were her witness. You saw her. She knew that. All those beautiful drawings. You were *my* witness, too.”

Sevda leans in.

“It's what you said to me, about Mayhew. How he saw - and listened. We brought something for you.”

Sevda offers a flat, rectangular package in plain brown paper. Carl unwraps it. Inside, he finds the Kandinsky. Or something very like the Kandinsky, Eugenie explaining -

“It's chocolate. It's made of chocolate.”

Carl, moved.

“That's very. Kind.”

Carl hesitates, then lets the chocolate Kandinsky drop on the coffee table, shattering it. Carl offers the women a piece each. Sevda takes a bite, then Eugenie and Carl – Carl serving judgment -

“It's good. It's very, very good. “

They all reach for more, eating hungrily, Carl's eyes meeting Eugenie's -

“I hope you're both staying for dinner, because I made goulash. And it turned out pretty well. “

THE END