

Prologue

The old man walks from the cabin to the porch behind, palming his whiskey glass from the bottom and swirling the ice in it. A drop of water falls from his knuckle, falling on the head of the beagle mix snaking near his feet. This distracts the dog so that it halts long enough to get underfoot, almost tripping the old man, who swears viciously in Russian that Khrushchev might have barked, then apologizes in Pushkin's honeyed tones. The dog wags halfheartedly but steers starboard in case his master kicks at him. The kicks are infrequent and never hard, so the evasion is lazy, and the kick never comes. An observer would note how balletic the interaction is, how practiced each is at his part.

But no one is watching them.

Not yet.

The man lips at his glass and sits facing the sunset.

The dog curls at his feet and begins a snorting, chewing hunt for a flea that has disgraced him near the base of his tail.

"Kill that fucker," the man says in a jovial Slavic growl, scratching under his left tit in sympathy.

The sun has already performed its nightly slow-motion dive into Lake Ontario; it has slipped behind its blue veil like a bulb of molten glass, so beautifully that a man on Fair Haven Beach, one town west, spontaneously proposed marriage to his girlfriend of less than six months, and a group of actors on the McIntyre Bluffs, near the bird sanctuary not a mile away, silenced their chatter about the day's rehearsals and broke into applause. Now the aftershow is wrapping up; the surface of the lake has turned an iridescent color reminiscent of mother-of-pearl, a hue that has proven irreproducible in watercolor; an ephemeral purplish-silver that even the great Eastman Kodak an hour and change away in ashy Rochester has never brought to shore alive.

The old Russian's nearest neighbor, a former comparative religions professor in a nearly identical summer cabin a hundred yards down the ridge, once told him, "These sunsets have been rated the second-best sunsets in the world."

"Rated?" the Russian had said, "Who rates a sunset?"

"The photographers of *National Geographic*."

"Oh," he had said, pushing his lower lip out and nodding. The professor, who is renting long-term and working on some atheistic magnum opus, loves sharing that piece of trivia with other visitors just to see them first reject and then accept the idea that sunsets might be rankable. He had been disappointed that the Russian did not ask the usual follow-up question, so he had answered it unbidden.

"The best sunsets are over the Sea of Japan, looking toward Russia."

Now the lake spreads squid's-ink black beneath a sky like a luminous bruise. The Russian wants a cigarette, but it is a mild want that only comes with inebriation and goes away when ignored. He looks at the dog, at the white in his face that stands out from his black-and-tan body like a cheap plastic ghost mask.

"Go get us a pack of Marlboros, Caspar. Caspar the son-of-a-bitch ghost."

His wife comes to mind.

She had called the dog Caspar. She had made him quit smoking. She had taught him to say *son of a bitch* correctly, separating and emphasizing *bitch* where he had always run the three words together and accented *son*.

This ache for a dead woman will be harder to chase away than the ache for nicotine.

Here is the devil!

It is too beautiful an evening to wallow in melancholy again. Maybe the professor will consent to play chess? The thought bores him senseless; the man is a good conversationalist, but he can't smell a trap, is too lazy to think more than two moves ahead, and understands nothing about keeping force in reserve—he will jabber away about the Upanishads, or about the cowlike stupidity of evangelical Christians, and send his pawns out too far, the light shining on his bald dome, stroking his orthodox-thick

beard, crossing and recrossing his legs and saying “huh” as if surprised that the center of the board, which he thought he had in his fist, is turning into a kill box.

Besides, he is enjoying the night air and doesn't feel like going anywhere.

He toys with the notion of turning on his computer and looking for an escort, but the connection is sketchy at best, and waiting for the pictures to load on the escort site will be purgatorial. Besides, once he has selected one, assuming he can talk her into a last-minute meeting far away with an unknown client, she will have to come from Syracuse or Rochester, and that will be two hours. Perhaps three. Perhaps there are prostitutes in Oswego, half an hour east, but he shudders to think of what one of those might be like; the profile, so poorly written even a Russian could correct it, will lead to some pale, plain-faced girl raised in the shadow of the nuclear plant and plumped on foldable pizza; he can see her now with her bad tattoos and her mouse-brown hair, undressing clumsily, asking him questions about his life and interrupting with “uh-huh” when he answers; then, after ten grim minutes of fucking, slipping one of his liquor bottles into her backpack while he discards the prophylactic and struggles to begin a postcoital piss.

Oswego is for chicken wings and beer.

Oswego is not for pretty girls.

Not that he is any prize himself, with his shirt open on his hard, round, Florida-brown belly and his toenails that barely fit in the clippers, but a man need not be a horse to buy one.

His father said such things.

His father had ridden bare-chested into Berlin on a tank and had paid a month's wages for the privilege of taking a shit in Hitler's bunker.

If his father were here, he would call the Rochester escort *and* the Oswego hooker and send his mother out for cigarettes.

Which is why he loves and hates him thirty years after his death.

He will call no escort.

“Caspar, the son-of-a-bitch dog. Go get us a woman.”

Caspar squares his black lips and makes a barely audible whimper, as he often does when a

command word like *go* is followed by something he does not understand.

Now Caspar's nose twitches.

The Russian smells it, too.

Foul and tidal, as though something has washed up from the lake.

He had just been remarking how sweet the night air was, and now this.

Has a whale beached itself?

"Lakes have no whales," he tells Caspar, pointing a nut-colored finger gravely at him. The dog doesn't seem to understand, so he tells him in Russian, too.

Now Caspar looks toward the lake.

He wags his tail a little as he does in lieu of barking when a stranger approaches.

"I thought I heard Russian," a woman says, in Russian.

The light from his cabin lights the area of the porch, ending in the sun-grayed handrails at the top of the stairs leading down to the beach.

As though the world ends with those rails.

Beyond is lake and night, as black as the black behind a star.

"Ha!" he says, and then, in Russian, "You did. And so did I. Come up the stairs and say hello."

"In a moment," she says, in accented English. "I'm changing."

She sounds young.

He feels the small thrill a man feels when he is sure he is about to meet a pretty girl. Of course, one can be disappointed making such assumptions, as she will be if she thinks him handsome for his deep, rich voice.

That smell again.

"Do you like whiskey?" he says, matching her English, suppressing the old-man grunt he usually makes when he gets to his feet.

"Oh, very much," she says. "Is it scotch?"

"Oban. You know it?"

“No. But it smells good.”

“You can smell it over that”—it wouldn’t do to say *shit* before he knows her character—“other smell?”

“I can smell it. It smells like peat and burned seaweed.”

“Ice?”

“Please.”

He enters the house and fills two glasses, pleased at the turn the evening is taking. He glances at his nearly transparent reflection in the hutch, thinking he doesn’t look so good. But not awful for almost seventy. He walks out back again, managing the screen door with more difficulty, burdened as he is with two dripping glasses now.

Still no woman.

The wooden handrails stand out, brilliantly illuminated against the primordial darkness behind them.

He looks down to see if Caspar is still wagging his welcome at her.

But Caspar is gone.

He sets the glasses down and whistles.

He walks to the rickety stairs and hoists himself down to the level of the beach, his back deck bathed in light and receding with each step down. He steps onto sand that soon gives way to rocks, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. He listens for the sound of Caspar’s collar, the jingling of the tag with the dog’s name and his master’s information, and the legend *Help me get home!*, but all he hears is Lake Ontario’s languid whisper and a gentle breeze in the crowns of the maples and birch trees behind him.

His sandaled foot plunges into a puddle, which some precivilized part of his brain registers as incorrect—the tide doesn’t come this far and it has not rained—but he walks on.

“Girl, you didn’t take my dog, did you?” he asks in Russian.

Nothing.

He walks farther down the beach, closer to the water, the smooth rocks pushing up against his sandals’ bottoms.

“Caspar?” he says, his concern for the dog growing and mixing with anger. Has this bitch with the Leningrad accent taken his dog? Is there a market in upstate New York for old mixed-breed dogs who flatulate like dying grandmothers?

Here is the devil, he thinks.

Now he hears the jingle of the collar behind him.

Is the old bastard actually going up the stairs on his own power instead of whimpering to be carried?

He remembers the smoky amber of his whiskey and feels happy to be making his way back to it.

He climbs up, hearing the jingle inside the house.

“You little fucker,” he says, smiling.

Warm light spills from the windows and door of the cabin.

He looks for the whiskey and finds only two wet rings on the table.

That is incorrect.

Another sound registers as incorrect, though familiar.

His shower is running.

A sly smile creeps onto his face.

The girl. What game is she playing? This night will be very good or very bad, but at least it will produce a story.

This was the sort of thing his father said.

He takes his sandals off and opens the screen door, stepping in. He finds the floor wet. He goes to the hallway and stands before the closed bathroom door—God in heaven, it stinks of the lake in here—and then he turns the handle. The shower is running, the curtain pulled back to show the rusty showerhead and the bad grout.

No steam, though.

The water runs cold.

He turns it off.

An empty rocks glass sits in the sink, one very long auburn hair coiled near it. He plucks this from

the off-white porcelain and looks at it—how coarse it is!

Hearing Caspar's jingle, he goes into the hallway again, and his heart skips a beat.

A woman stands in the hallway, pale and nude, her hair thick and russet-colored and wetly quilting her shoulders and breasts. His eyes trail down to her tight, alabaster navel, below which a scud of curly hair leads to the kind of prodigious bush one doesn't see on young women these days except on specialty Internet sites.

The second whiskey glass drips in her hand.

With the pointer finger of her other hand, she makes her collar jingle. Caspar's collar, more properly, which she wears on her neck.

The man has bounced between shock, worry, anger, and glad surprise so precipitously that when he speaks he only sounds old and bewildered.

"Where's my fucking dog?"

"Help me get home," she says, showing yellow-gray teeth that don't belong in the mouth of a first-world girl. "That is very sweet, Misha."

The smell that pollutes his cabin is coming from her, maybe from that thick, cabled wet hair, maybe even from her mouth or cunt. How can something so beautiful smell like that?

He notices now how scarred and sinewy she is, how strong her limbs look.

"You didn't hurt him, did you?" he asks in Russian.

"You'll kiss me now even if I did," she says in English, moving the mouth with the bad teeth and the beautiful lips closer.

He thinks to pull away, but he does not.

Something about her eyes fixes him in place.

How green they are.

How cold her mouth is.

He tries to pull away, but her hand has found the back of his head and anchors it where she wants it. His mouth is too full of cold tongue for him to yell.

Past her, he sees his collarless dog pad from the kitchen, squaring his lips and wagging gently, unsure what to make of the struggle in the hallway.

When she drags the old Russian down the stairs and to the lake, the dog follows, even down the stairs, but he only walks to the lip of the water, where he paces back and forth as the woman who does not smell like a woman pushes his master's head below the surface.

He thrashes, but she holds him under with ease.

The dog has enough beagle in him to make him howl.

Owoooooooooooo

She howls back at him playfully until her head goes under, and the dog is alone.