

“Arepsta, Pshegisha, Atsetuki.”

Suddenly, one by one, these strange words floated to the surface of the exhausted woman’s mind like some pagan incantation. How many times had those same words come to her during her darkest hours as she stood, exhausted, on the sandy shores of despair?

“Arepsta, Pshegisha, Atsetuki.” The clock struck half past something. The woman cast her eyes around her. In the ashtray in front of her a thin column of smoke rose from the nub of an abandoned cigarette and all around her everything – the soft armchair, the tapestry, those corner cupboards from Bohemia or God-knows-where filled with crockery and books, the expensive glass chandelier – everything was caked in a thin, indifferent layer of dust. Everything in this house had been bought by her father. Apart from the books.

Settled in on the ottoman sofa in front of the flickering screen, legs tucked up under her, she listened to the noises coming from the street and carried on her waiting game. A child’s tuneless song drifted in from another room. “He’ll get tired soon and fall asleep,” the woman thought. Every now and then he abandoned his song and in its place came endless mumblings, incomprehensible, monotonous, made more audible by the woman’s expectant waiting. The bright light from the chandeliers in every room only served to highlight more mercilessly the emptiness that surrounded her. Only in the child’s room had dusk been allowed to fall, a tranquil dusk filled with disparate, unfamiliar, and mysterious sounds.

“Arepsta, Pshegisha, Atsetuki.” The names of these mountains had first been told to her by her father.

They were sitting in a restaurant, eating fried trout and gazing out of a vast window at the shimmering green lake. The tourist season was nearly over. Far below them the last few suntanned vacationers lingered on the lake shore, but high up where they sat nothing broke the silence of the densely forested mountains and the lake, perilous and cold as the eye of some prehistoric reptile.

“The most stunning feature of this landscape is that lake,” her father said, “but you know if it weren’t for these mountains – Arepsta, Pshegisha, and Atsetuki – it wouldn’t even be here. It’s the mountains that hold back the clouds, make them release their rain onto the slopes, give source to the streams, establish which way they will flow, then stem them, block their path, make them pool, provide underneath them a bed on which to form a lake...”

This charming man, well into his sixties, always spoke in such short, razorsharp sentences to his colleagues at the construction department; even he was surprised to find that when speaking to his daughter he used such an affected tone and highly literary vocabulary. In his daughter’s opinion it was all a bit bland and mediocre. Her father, an engineer by training, harbored a secret wish to be somewhere else and an unfulfilled love for refined language and beautiful art that made his more erudite daughter smile wryly... The father lit a cigarette and gazed out at the black cloud that had appeared over Mount Atsetuki. It was clear that the weather was worsening.

“I don’t know whether you realize it, but you and I are of that stock. Our people are the kind that that dam rivers...”

The black cloud now covered half the sky and on the far shore of the lake the pretty government dachas were shrouded in a cold, heavy mist.

“If you don’t know what I mean by that, then I’ve brought you up wrong. I wanted you to be surrounded by great books, art, and music. But those poets, those opera singers and artists who I still feed and clothe to this day, whose pockets I sometimes even line directly, they come from a lower order, I’m sure of it. They’re dairy cattle...”

Sitting cross-legged on the ottoman, the woman recalled her father's eyes, tired, all-knowing, devoid of hope, and that bottle of plum sauce, accidentally knocked over, its contents spilled across the white tablecloth like spots of blood, and the sound of her own increasingly exasperated voice, full of thinly veiled irritation.

"I never asked you for any of it. Just the opposite, in fact."

It was an unguarded comment and an unfair one at that. This man – pragmatic, sometimes severe – could not be blamed for the fact that at one point she had taken full advantage of his generous charity. To her amazement, her father said, quite calmly and without a hint of irritation, "See? You're talking like them now, too."

And at that very moment a storm blew up outside. Amid the blackness of the tempest the wind tore through the clouds of mist that hung low over the surface of the lake, ripped them to shreds, spun them, mixed them, roused the steely waves and sent them roaring and crashing against the shore.

"People like that think that God created the entire universe and everyone in it to serve their needs!"

And with a sudden thunderous clap it seemed the sky had split in two, the heavens opened, and her father's voice now fought against the roaring of the wind and rain and the scraping sound of metal against metal from the sheet-iron roofs.

"And now it will be us, not them, my dear, who'll build the ports, the railways and embankments, and the wind belts. Without us they wouldn't even have their lovely glass houses, crammed full of food and drink, built to withstand even storms like this! And yet we don't ask them to flatter our egos, or applaud us, or declare us Fathers of the Nation. Why have you gone so quiet?"

"What do you want me to say? Piffle!"

"What do you mean, piffle? Just tell me what you think!" "I think Lear hath gone mad..."

This snobbish jibe was lost, lost in the roar of the storm that raged on the other side of the restaurant's vast window.

Then later, staring out of the window of the car as they drove along the wet, deserted road, staring at the mountain slopes under a sky now clear again her father said, "I haven't gone mad. Some of them are normal, but most of them can't even eat their bread without bragging and boasting and flattering. Listening to them talk always made my head hurt, their compliments made me sick, their laughter was like poison to me."

Eucalyptus and oleanders flashed past the window where before there had been spruce trees. On the surface of the sea, now turned deep indigo, the golden sun's reflections made fiery bands across the water.

"I can feel a sea change coming. They'll ruin this country if they're given the chance, God forbid."

His words were interrupted by his daughter's laughter. "Who? Poets and artists? Ha!"

Many years have passed since then, but she can still remember how her father took a cigarette in his hand, lit it and glanced over at her. In his eyes she saw no hurt or anger, but rather loneliness and fatigue.

"Your mother has been dead a long time and you'll be nineteen in three days. I don't know how to tell you the things mothers tell their daughters."

"Just tell me straight."

"Well, basically, don't let men like that fool you with pretentious talk and fancy manners, and then expect you to feel you owe them something."

Was this really what was happening? Or had some withered former lover, some stupid woman with an ax to grind told him that his precious daughter was having steamy trysts right there in his house with an esteemed and promising young art lover? It was interesting to think what this powerful, steely nerved man would say if faced with the sight of his own child, stripped of the protection of clothes and culture, naked in the arms of a stranger, moaning with animal passion.

“Explain again how embankments and wind breaks come into this, will you?”

“I’ll say it again, we’re not like them. You won’t be able to put up with it, their pride, their meddling, their weak will and countless little lies and eccentricities, their fake enthusiasm and conceit.”

“If that’s what you really think then, yes, you did bring me up wrong.” “What do you mean?”

“I mean that the door of our house was only ever open to the very people you now dislike. Ordinary people – engineers, builders, workers – only ever existed in that other bit of your life, the side you kept hidden from me and shrouded in darkness.”

“What do you mean? What dark side?”

“Money, the ruthlessness you need if you want to get it, the endless dealings with prosecutors and investigators if you want to keep it, the law of the jungle that applies in a world that is hidden from the sight of ordinary people. In short, everything you hid from me so deliberately.”

“And who opened your eyes to it? Or is that something you’re going to hide from me?”

“It’s not time for that yet. I’ll tell you when it is.”

The car went gliding down the rain-soaked, tree-lined avenue. The rays from the sun, half sunk into the sea, gave the magnolia flowers a stunning blood-red hue. Flowers of death, thought the girl. For some time the two of them stayed silent. Then her father broke the silence once again.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it was a mistake, all of it. Absolutely all of it. Anyway, an old man’s warnings count for nothing, I realize that only too well.”

“You never talked to me about life. And you brought other people in to talk about books and pictures.”

“I didn’t want you to see the ‘dark side’ of my life, as you call it. I just wanted you to have a different path in life, a different fate,” her father said and stopped the car by the main gates to the vacation resort.

“But when you can do almost anything and have almost everything, and others cannot, and do not, then you remain alone. People greet you with false smiles and well-rehearsed hospitality, they make long toasts in your honor, praise you, entertain you, joke with you – but really they’re only thinking one thing, and that’s how to get you.”

“You’ve only just realized that?”

“No, I always knew, but it never really bothered me until you grew up. Now I see how they circle around you, these poets, artists, and painters, how they stick to you like butterflies to a lilac tree, how they try to intoxicate you...”

“But they live on the light side, don’t they? Is that why you don’t see them as the same as you?”

“It’s all just a charming fairy tale. The dark side and light side don’t really exist. Life would be much easier if they did. Sometimes well-lit living rooms are much darker and more dangerous than a prison cell, and sometimes, even in a rat-infested dungeon, there’s a shining light that only you can see. Experience teaches you how to perceive it. But a lot of water’s got to flow under the bridge before then,

and I won’t be by your side anymore. That scares me.”

“Maybe it would have been better if you hadn’t raised me in this hothouse.”

“Maybe.”

“What’s that, a belated apology?”

“No, I’m not apologizing. But the doctors say I haven’t got long. Not long enough to change anything, anyway.”

That was September twenty-fifth, 1980. They went back to their government dacha and in the orange light of the setting sun her father no longer looked anything like King Lear, alone and raving in the storm. It was one year, four months, and three days until he died. The young man came to his father-in-law’s funeral with a white-flecked burgundy silk scarf wrapped around his neck in place of a tie.

He was an expert in eighteenth-century French art.

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The woman stared blankly at the wall opposite. There, above the television, where the Mondrian reproduction now hung, there had once been a picture of her father. The picture showed him sitting on the back seat of the car, looking out of the window, a lit cigarette in his mouth and a full glass of wine in his hand. She didn’t know why they’d taken it down. There had never been much warmth between the two of them; the conversation they had on September twenty-fifth, 1980 was, in fact, the only one the woman could even recall. Maybe it was because of the man she now sat waiting for – and not for the first time – chewing her lips till blood came, the man who owned nothing in this house but for the Antoine Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard books, a few novels, and a razor...

The woman stared blankly at the fuzzy image on the television screen. “The antenna needs adjusting,” she thought, and suddenly realized that something had changed, unexpectedly, and broken the sluggish torpor of her waiting: the child had fallen silent. The woman got up and headed to the darkened room.

Looking through the glazed door all she could see was two gleaming dots.

The boy, she realized, was not asleep at all; he was staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. “Aren’t you asleep?” she asked him from the doorway.

The child did not answer. The woman went over to the bed. “Are you still thinking about it?”

“What?”

“The fight you and Zuriko had at the cinema.”

“I can’t believe Nana told you. I’m not going anywhere with one of your friends ever again. I don’t want her to take me out anymore.”

“Were you fighting over a girl?” “No.”

“Come on, we’re friends, aren’t we? Tell me what happened.”

The child scrunched up the corner of the blanket in his hand and said nothing.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?” “No.”

“Okay. Then go to sleep, it’s past eleven,” the woman said, and closed the door.

The harsh light of the chandelier dazzled her. In the middle of the room the television flickered pointlessly. All the programs had finished. The woman looked at the clock. It was half past twelve. How had she missed midnight? Surely that old clock hadn’t stopped? She turned off the television and went over to the window.

Everywhere the lights were off, only in the house opposite could she see one light

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in a window and, against this illuminated square backdrop, the dark, clearly defined silhouette of a woman, as if her own image was being reflected in the mirror

of the pitch-black night. Somebody was waiting there, too.

The woman came away from the window and went over to the mirror hanging in the corridor. For no good reason she opened the box in which she kept her many pieces of jewelry. For a long while she stared intently at herself, as if she didn't recognize the thin, disheveled creature peering out at her from the mirror. Slowly her face changed: the look of expectation was replaced by one of disgust. A man would not have deemed her unattractive, but still the woman was slowly seized by anger, about the endless waiting, her unkempt appearance, the woman in the neighboring house who was waiting just like her, and more besides. She could not take much more – any longer and she would probably have reached for the first thing she could lay her numbed hand on and thrown it at the mirror – but at that precise moment she heard her child calling.

“Mom!”

The woman could not speak. It took her a moment to quell the fire kindling in the depths of her soul and that flashed in her eyes, the fire that augured evil. Without thinking she picked up the antique enameled brooch with the coral-coloured stones and clasped it to her chest.

The cry came a second time: “Mom!”

“What? What do you want? Go to sleep, right now – I don't want to hear another peep!”

“I'm not sleepy!”

The woman straightened her hair, raised her hand to her face and then headed for her child's room.

“Why aren't you asleep?” “I'm just not sleepy.”

“Close your eyes and you'll fall asleep.” “I want a story!”

“You've been watching cartoons all day long, what on earth do you need a story for?”

“Oh, go on. Please?”

“Why should I? You never tell me anything.” “Oh, please. Tell me a story.”

The woman smiled. She sensed that talking to him was helping him settle.

“Okay, but only if you close your eyes.” “Okay.”

“Which one do you want?”

“A boys' story. One where the main people are boys.”

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“A boys' story? I'm not sure I can think of any... Come on, let me tell you one with girls in. Don't you want to know what girls get up to?”

“Which one is it?”

“The one with the widower and his daughter, Cinderella. You know, where he takes a new wife and she gets a new stepmother. Remember?”

“No.”

“Well, as soon as they got married the poor girl's life became miserable, because although the stepmother never made her own daughters do anything, she made Cinderella work day and night and only gave her old rags to wear.”

“She sounds wicked.”

“Yes, she was very bad. Anyway, one day there was an announcement: every girl in the kingdom was invited to the palace! But only if they dressed up in the finest, most exquisite clothes.”

“Why?”

“Because nobody wants people wearing horrible clothes with their hair all over the place, do they? That wouldn’t look nice at all! And who’d get any kind of pleasure from seeing something ugly and unattractive like that in a palace, eh? Anyway, the stepmother was crazy with excitement. She bought her daughters expensive dresses and took them off to the palace.”

“How much did they cost?”

“Five thousand. And close your eyes – we had a deal.” “What happened next?”

“Poor Cinderella was left behind. She sat at home and started to cry.” “And was that when the fairy godmother appeared?”

“Yes. See, you do know this story!”

“No, no, I just guessed. What happened next?”

“Well, the fairy godmother pointed her wand at the girl’s tatty old dress and it turned into a beautiful gown. There was nobody else in the whole kingdom who had a dress like it, because no seamstress could ever sew anything that beautiful.”

“Was Cinderella beautiful?”

“Yes, she was very beautiful – but when she was dressed in rags with her hair all tangled nobody ever noticed. Then the fairy godmother turned a pumpkin into a carriage and some mice into horses and sent Cinderella off to the palace...”

Suddenly the woman heard the sound of a car coming into the courtyard.

Engrossed until a moment before in her storytelling, absorbed in the half-light of the child’s room, she suddenly found herself back on the deserted shore where she

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waited, waited... In the depths of her soul something sinister and nameless began to stir once more. She heard a car door slam and – briefly – the sound of a car alarm. Then everything went quiet. The woman wiped the beads of sweat from her brow with her hand... Their Peugeot had a different alarm.

“Mom, keep going!”

The woman looked at the boy. “Surely,” she thought, “he’ll never say the kind of pathetic things to a girl that his father said to me? Like ‘The eighteenth century brought freedom to man, liberated him from religion, morality, the tyranny of his own past. Without that I would never have dared to embrace you so boldly and kiss you on the lips.’ Or ‘Eighteenth-century art rescued pleasure from a forest of hazy prohibitions and created an atmosphere of free thought and action that can be seen in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard, and the writings of the Marquis de Sade and Choderlos de Laclos. It is thanks to this that you are able to close your eyes and calmly surrender to the pleasure of a man’s hand caressing your breast’...”

“Okay, where were we?”

“The bit where Cinderella’s waiting for the prince.”

“Ah yes. Well, Cinderella waited and waited, endlessly waited. The waiting almost drove her insane.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when somebody does the same thing over and over again for a very long time it can drive them crazy.”

“So when you spend all day cooking it might drive you crazy?”

“I suppose it might – but then again I don’t make the same food all the time, do I?”

“Oh yeah. Then what happened?”

“The prince fell deeply in love with Cinderella and searched far and wide for her.”

“How much did he love her?” “He was head over heels.” “What does that mean?”

“Well, you know, he loved her very, very much. He didn’t even sleep at night.”

“Why didn’t he want to sleep?”

“Well, he wanted to but he couldn’t – he just kept thinking about Cinderella.”

“What kind of things was he thinking?” “Things like ‘If only she could be mine! ...’ “Oh.”

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“Look, are you not sleeping at all tonight? Close your eyes like we agreed!

That’s right. Anyway, as I was saying, the prince searched far and wide for Cinderella.

He carried the small glass slipper with him wherever he went because that glass slipper would fit no girl in the whole wide world but Cinderella...”

The telephone rang briefly and then fell silent. The woman jumped. It didn’t ring again. She felt the winds of anger begin to rage somewhere on the edges of her exhausted consciousness; soon these winds would gather force and unsettle her mind, stir up the searing dusts of outrage and cloud her understanding.

Maybe it would better not to put them up this time, those rickety wind-breaks torn to shreds by countless previous storms. She had been given an opportunity to harness her own hellish raging, to blast through the protective levies she had so carefully constructed around her own mind over time, to finally uncover and investigate what lay beyond. And maybe that really would have been better – but right at that moment her child lay there in front of her, tired and confused by the day’s events...

The woman lifted her fingers, long and pale from waiting, to her face again, then straightened the child’s blanket and continued with her story: “Cinderella waited for the prince who loved her so much to come for her, to turn her rags into beautiful dresses and to carry her off to the palace... See, you’re feeling sleepy.”

“No, keep going.”

“Do you know what time it is?” “So? Keep going, keep going!”

“Keep going, indeed! Don’t you know how it ends? Cinderella finally made it to the palace, but it wasn’t the prince who came to get her as she’d been expecting. Instead it was a servant who came with the glass slipper, tried it on her, and took her to the palace. They put Cinderella in a beautiful dress instead of her rags and, true, it wasn’t as beautiful as the one the fairy godmother had lent her, but Cinderella liked it all the same. And from then they lived there in the palace, and that was the end. Now go to sleep. Sweet dreams.”

“But Mom, what was their life like?” “Normal.”

“Normal how?” the boy asked, mumbling, fighting sleep.

“Normal: the prince spent the rest of his life looking for other Cinderellas and Cinderella spent the rest of her life sitting in the palace waiting for the prince. Now go to sleep. It’s three in the morning!”

The boy was already asleep, and in his dreams he was bringing a glass slipper to a little girl jumping about in an empty cinema foyer...

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The car drove into the courtyard at the precise moment that the woman was

tucking the child's arms in under his blanket and straightening his pillow. The sound of the front door slamming brought her around, and the fire that augurs evil and that had flashed behind her eyes a while before was kindled once again. She could already hear his footsteps. She could see his polished Spanish shoes and crisp, long-sleeved shirt. A man was coming up the steps. It was as if she could already hear him breathing... Her mind clouded over, somewhere on the edges of her consciousness a storm was brewing, the surface of the waters turned cloudy, waves formed on the boundless seas of her patience. The woman felt not a moment's fear – she surrendered to the winds of anger, which filled her swollen lungs with fresh air and let her feel some happiness again. The flames of revenge spread across her face and a strange light flashed in her eyes. The woman was ready. She stood in the corridor with her hands on her hips and waited for the door to open so that, finally, she might tell him what she was thinking...

The keys turned twice in the lock, the door opened, and a man walked in. He walked in as only he could, his movements somehow free and elegant, then no less elegantly placed his folder on top of the cupboard and said, "Oh, you're not asleep yet, then?"

He walked over to her, looked at her brooch and said, "That suits you, you know. Where have you had that hidden away all this time?"

The woman's hands hung down by her sides. The man went down the corridor with lively, unfettered steps and went into the bathroom without closing the door.

"You'll never guess where I've just been! I really will have to take you one day.

I've discovered a new painter, you know, really fantastic..."

He washed his hands, then took a towel and dried them, hung the towel back up, and headed toward the kitchen.

"Have we got anything quick to eat?"

The woman barely managed to move her flagging body from the spot. She went to the kitchen and said, "Piffle."

"What did you say?"

"Yes, we have. Hold on and I'll cut you some bread."

"What's the boy been up to today? Did Nana take him to the cinema?" "Yes, and he had a fight with Zuriko over a girl," replied the woman and smiled...

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And finally there were only three hours left till dawn. A starry sky hung over Arepsta, Pshegisha, and Atsetuki, and the moon that protects the world from the demons of revenge dipped slowly into the drowsy, perilous waters of the lake...