

Petrakis

Nicholas burst through the back door of the church into the autumn light, where the parish men had divided into two camps. The first was paying its respects to a dead air conditioning unit at the back of the building, burning off-brand cigarettes in place of votive candles, and the second was gawping into the engine compartment of a Reagan-era minivan. One of the men called out in Russian, curious about the bandage on Nicholas's hand.

“I dislocated a couple fingers playing football Friday night,” he said.

The whole group turned to him and another of the men asked, “American football or ours?”

“American,” he said, and they surrendered their interest back to the Dodge and its wheezing engine.

Nicholas and his mother left Saint Petersburg when he was six years old and he spent the next eleven years in the Virginia public schools system, where the ceaseless agitation of American living eroded the footings of his Slavic heritage. His mother tried to shore up the damage by lugging him to the Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church in Manassas on Sundays for Divine Liturgy, but with little success. The congregation was a montage of displaced innocents mostly from Central and Eastern Europe who gathered for potluck lunch in the basement after services, and while he endured these weekly immersions for his mother's sake, Nicholas would never share her nostalgia for the old country or their former life.

The smaller children swarmed the playset as he walked past to the back of the lot, where the high school kids had stretched out on the weedy lawn.

“Here comes the American,” Igor Sokolov said. His few comrades chuckled, but most of the group shared Nicholas’s opinion of Igor and ignored the comment. He leaned against a chain link fence with Rada, the new girl from Serbia, at his side. Nicholas had chatted with her once and she seemed friendly enough, but seeing her wedged against Igor that way made him wonder if her judgment might be defective. He nodded to the group as he entered their circle.

“What happened, American?” Igor asked. “*Mamochka* sent you to play?”

The frustrating thing about Igor’s sniping was its accuracy. Nicholas had pressured his mother to skip lunch after the service and hurry home, and once she denied him, he started pushing her to eat quicker. His badgering finally got to her and she ran him out of the cafeteria. He tried explaining that he needed to check in on Mr. Petrakis, their elderly neighbor, but she insisted that the old-timer would be fine on his own a few more minutes and picked up her conversation with the choir director. Had he bothered to point out that he had found Petrakis drunk and disoriented when he looked in on him that morning, she might have cut short her gossiping and dragged her son home by his ear.

“You’re right, Igor,” he said, stretching out his sarcasm. “She sent me out here to play with you.”

Igor and Nicholas attended the same high school, though in the presence of American kids, Igor was reserved and wary, invisible. Here, his self-

assurance didn't waver even when good sense dictated otherwise. He was about to comment when Rada stepped forward and cut him off.

"What happened to your fingers, Nikolai?"

He held up his right hand, the third and fourth digits taped together and braced, and said only, "Football."

She reached for his hand to examine the damage. Rada was pretty but her thin frame was only a couple of missed meals away from deprivation. "Do you really play on your school team?" Nicholas nodded and she raked her fingernails across his palm, tracing them outward to the tips of his fingers. She nearly purred when she asked, "Does it hurt when I do this?"

"Nothing hurts American hero," Igor interrupted. His language skills were lacking but English was the common tongue among their group. "He also plays baseball. Only American sports for our *Nee-ko-lass*."

Rada smiled, not breaking eye contact with Nicholas. "And what is your game, Igor?" The silence drew out and her grin spread like a spill. Back to Nicholas, she said, "Your palms are so rough."

His throat tightened and he pulled his hand away, resisting the urge to conceal both of them behind his back. "My family runs a dairy."

"His mother married into working class." Igor laughed, adding, "Don't get excited, Rada, he has an American girlfriend. He doesn't waste his time on immigrant trash."

Rada blushed a furious shade of scarlet. "Everyone warned me that you would be an asshole." She used the Russian noun, which better suited Igor. A

pair of girls from the group scrambled to her aid and walked her toward the church.

“Mention Russia to his American friends and they think only of Putin, prostitutes, and vodka.” The girls distanced themselves and he raised his voice, kicking the sarcasm up a notch to anger. “The American is their dancing bear.”

Nicholas took a step toward Igor and a Ukrainian kid named Taras caught him by the arm, shaking his head. Igor stared at the Ukrainian for a long moment before returning his attention to Nicholas. “You were maybe born in Russia, but you are no Russian. You are no one.”

The girls reached the rear door as Nicholas’s mother stepped out, accompanying two other women. “I don’t know exactly who I am,” he told Igor, “but I sure as hell never claimed to be a Russian.” He patted Taras on the shoulder. “I’ll see you next week,” he said to the Ukrainian.

“That’s right. Hurry to Mamochka, American,” Igor said. He stepped toward Nicholas, chest inflated and thin shoulders thrown back. “She wants to get home to your Internet papa and—”

Nicholas delivered a jab to Igor’s jaw that dropped him to the lawn like a sack of bottles. His body convulsed twice before coming to rest and the group stared at Nicholas in hushed awe, a counterpoint to his mother’s scream.

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The priest got Igor to his feet and calmed the spectators, but Svetlana— Nicholas’s mother—was unable to stay her tears. Nicholas took the car keys from her and settled her into the passenger seat, where she dissolved into sobs. “What were you thinking, hitting that poor boy like that?”

What he knew with certainty was that if he had been thinking he wouldn’t have hit Igor, and he now had two injured hands. His mother had earlier parked the car at the back end of the lot, forcing him to motor past the lineup of onlookers on his way out. He absorbed the scowls as he paraded by the reassembled congregation and noted everyone but Igor watching and no one but Rada smiling. “Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but he had it coming.”

“*Maybe* you shouldn’t have done it? What is with you? Why did you hit that boy?”

The entire truth wouldn’t do here, so he went with the portion of it that he considered incontrovertible. “I hit him because he’s an... an idiot.”

“Nikolai!”

“It won’t happen again, so let’s drop it. And don’t call me Nikolai, please.” He reached for the radio with his bandaged hand and she blocked it, sending an angry thrust of pain up to his elbow.

“This is how we settle disagreements? We fight? At church?”

“I wouldn’t call what happened back there a fight.” He stared out the window at an oncoming car as if his mother’s safety was his single concern.

“I’m sorry I embarrassed you in front of your friends,” he said. He held out his hand in a ploy for pity masked as a peace offering, but she declined to take it.

“How I can go back there? Sunday is the one day I can have a discussion without searching for words or mistaking grammar.” She turned away, looking down the road. “Why you would do something like this to your own mother?”

“That was Igor stretched out on the grass back there, Mom, not you. It had nothing to do with you.” It had everything to do with her, but pointing that out wouldn’t brighten her day or get him home any quicker.

“Those are my people, do you understand? You quit your heritage, but you can respect at least my struggle to keep mine.” She reached into her purse for a tissue and dabbed at her eyes.

He wanted to assure her that she spoke English like a native when she had to grapple every word out of her mouth, and to promise that her friends would forget the dust-up with Igor in a day or two when they’d natter on for months about how he was becoming too American for his own good. He searched for words to ease her pain but came up short with, “Don’t worry about me causing more trouble at that church. I’m not going back.”

“Fine solution. You don’t like someone so punch his face and run off.”

“I didn’t hit him because I don’t like him.” He recalled Rada’s observation. “I hit him because he’s a *mudak*.” He pulled up to the line at a four-way stop and his mother glared at him, but he wouldn’t apologize. “I need to talk with Mr. Petrakis when we get home,” he said, breaking the renewed silence, and he drove on.

Svetlana rummaged her purse for another tissue and lowered the visor in front of her to get to the vanity mirror on its backside, a sign that her mood was on the mend. She looked at her reflection and a sigh slipped out of her. “Why are you so worried for him? Don’t trouble him about fighting today.”

“Mr. Petrakis is the one person who gets me. I’m talking to him when I get home.”

She dropped her hands to her lap under a heavy exhalation, a corner of the crushed tissue poking out from her fist. “Don’t start. You are not so complicated as you think you are.”

“I’m not complicated at all, Mom. The trouble is that Igor resents me because I fit in.”

“Maybe he resents that you try so hard to be not Russian, *Nicholas*.”

“You and Igor go to your church to deal with your problems and Mr. Petrakis and I talk to each other to work through ours. He’s seventy-three and lived over fifty of those years right here, but what does every farmer in the county call him?”

“The Greek, I know. People remember what is unique about a person, and Mr. Petrakis didn’t waste his time trying to be not Greek.” She resumed her makeup project. “You can talk to him at dinner, but don’t trouble him about fighting.” She snapped the visor back into place and they rode home in silence.

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Nicholas rushed through the kitchen and lifted last season's baseball hat from the hook near the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Svetlana smacked her wooden spoon to the countertop, spattering gravy up the wall behind the stove. "One time." She turned down the heat on a back burner. "I wish you would do one time what I ask without argument. You're all in sweat and I told you to take a shower before going anywhere."

"I need to talk to Mr. Petrakis. We'll only be a few minutes, then I'll bring him back here and clean up in time for dinner."

"You spent the entire afternoon with your father and now there's no time for talking. Go take your shower."

She maddened him when she called Matt his father. He hadn't been able to visit Petrakis when they got home from church because Matt called him up to the roof of the workshop to help him patch a leak and to hear Nicholas's version of the clash at the church before giving him hell for his role in it. "I was working, Mom. You say that like Matt and I went out for a couple of beers."

A car pulled into the driveway and Svetlana pointed it out through the window. "Lauren is here. Take your shower and she can get Mr. Petrakis."

His frustration manifested into a stinging in his sinuses and Svetlana extended her arms the way she did when he was a little kid and one of them had offended the other. "Come here," she said. He hugged her with hesitation, feeling too old for this, yet still yearning for her closeness. "When did my baby get so big?"

She was a tall woman but had to look up to meet her son's eyes. He had filled out to a lean 220 pounds over the summer and he always sensed when she looked at him this way that she saw a young version of his father in him. She turned away as though she had read his thought, picked the sponge out of the sink, and went to work wiping up the gravy mess on the backsplash.

"I'm going," he said.

She planted her palms on the countertop and lowered her head. "Why must you argue like some American teenager?"

"I'm an American and I'm seventeen."

Svetlana turned to him, her chin raised, but Lauren worked her way through the door and Matt strode into the kitchen like a bear foraging for food and she eased off. "What do we have to eat?" Matt asked. He hugged Svetlana from behind on his way to the refrigerator.

"Dinner will be in fifteen minutes." She held up a hand to block him from the fridge and said to her son, "Take Lauren and don't waste more time."

Lauren was like family and had been coming to Sunday dinner for years. Svetlana greeted her with an eye signal that Nicholas figured meant something akin to *He's all yours, I've had my fill of him today*. Matt laid a hand on Lauren's shoulder and she pulled close for a hug.

"Thanks again for your help on the roof," he told Nicholas. "You're going over to get Gus?" Nicholas nodded. "Are you driving or walking?"

"I'll cut over on foot," he said. He slipped up to Lauren and kissed her forehead. "It's quicker and he likes to walk back home after he eats. Why?"

“He was cloudy when I telephoned him this morning. If you get there and he doesn’t seem well, drive him over in his pickup. It’s still pretty hot out.”

The old man had been all-out drunk, but Nicholas couldn’t mention that after withholding the information all day, so he agreed with Matt and tugged his cap on. He hustled across the yard with Lauren loping after him and they passed through the wire fence, careful not to snag their clothes on the barbs, and dodged cows across the upper pasture, finally making their cut into the copse of trees that bordered the place.

He paused at the top of the hill where the properties abutted and where he could just make out Petrakis’s house through the branches. Beech and oak commingled above him and scattered a mosaic of shadows too feeble to mitigate the oppression of the late season humidity. The heat had reached its peak for the day, that point where the mugginess and his patience to tolerate it met in a standoff before backing down for the evening. Looking up at what sky he could see through the leaves, he decided it would rain tonight.

Lauren caught up and kissed him on the mouth. “First, why are you in such a rush that you can’t give me a decent kiss? Second, what did you do to piss off your mom?”

His mother would share the details of the church shakeup later, so he didn’t waste time with it now. “Everything’s fine, I just I need to talk to him.”

She hooked her fingers through his belt loops. “Not one of your philosophy marathons, I hope. Dinner’s waiting.” Mrs. Petrakis used to pull

Lauren into the TV room when she and Nicholas visited so *Plato* and *Socrates* could be alone to iron out the problems of the world.

“Nothing like that.”

He pulled away and she tugged him back. “Sweetie, what’s troubling you?”

“I’m fine.” He led her to the clearing where Mrs. Petrakis used to raise her vegetables and the house, a two-bedroom brick matchbox dwarfed by the barn looming in its background, came into view. They paced by the garden, where the fence had given way to the nudging of deer that had then wiped out the season’s derelict effort. The wide doors of the barn, always open, hung nearly closed with a narrow rectangle of darkness between them.

He removed his cap to blot the sweat from his brow with his forearm. The humidity was a living thing today, quelling even the hymn of the cicadas. “He’s been drinking,” he said, preparing her for what he feared might be a coarse reception at the house. Petrakis was a sweet man, always good for a root beer and a plate of Oreo cookies when they stopped in, but his light had dimmed since his wife’s recent passing.

“What do you mean? He’s drinking more than usual?”

“Quite a bit more,” he said, and a chill shimmied across his skin like a clutter of spiders.

“And?”

“And his memory’s getting worse. He didn’t recognize me this morning. In fact, he threatened to call the police if I didn’t get off his property.” Nicholas

was uncertain how much he should reveal and distress mounted in Lauren's eyes as she waited him out. "And he said this with the barrel of his shotgun shoved into my chest."

"And you waited until now to check on the poor man? What were you thinking?" Lauren broke for the house and Nicholas sprinted past her and hurtled up the back steps, into the mudroom and on to the kitchen.

Lauren caught up and pushed through to the living room and Nicholas fell back at the doorway. She retrieved a notepad from an end table and looked to him, her face distorted with concern. Petrakis had recently started scribing checklists and reminders to himself in an effort to overcome his diminishing memory. "He loses that thing twenty times a day."

"Pay Washington Gas..." she read, and she turned her eyes toward him. "Feed Scuttlebutt..."

"Whoa... That dog's been dead five years."

"Take Nora to beauty parlor." She stumbled through her tears, adding, "He drew lines through that one like he remem..." Lauren dropped the scratchpad to the sofa and rushed toward the stub of hallway that led to the two bedrooms, calling out for Petrakis in a faded, nearly inaudible voice. Nicholas hurried across the living room and she doubled back and dashed out the front door.

"Damn it." He raced out after her.

She reached the broad doors of the barn and turned back before clearing them, her expression of anxiety replaced with one of muted horror. She leaped

at Nicholas, knocking him back a step, and pressed her face into his chest. “Help him. Please. Do something.” The neck of his t-shirt stretched and then tore as she pulled at the back of it.

Nicholas reached for her wrists and squeezed them, encouraging her to loosen her grip. She relented and he pressed her hands into his and kissed them, saying, “I’m going inside the barn and I want you to wait here.” She sniffed and nodded. He pushed the door further open to allow in more light and the arthritic wheels beneath it squealed as they labored across the rusted iron track. Inside, the old man’s body was sprawled on the floor like a rag doll fallen from a shelf.

A voice in his mind repeated Lauren’s plea for him to do something, but what could be done? He looked back at her tear-lined face and shaking lip and reached out to her as she extended her arms to him. He hugged and then kissed her. “Are you alright?”

She shook her head.

“I need you to telephone Matt,” he said, and she refused him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this myself. I need you to make the call. Tell him Mr. Petrakis had a heart attack or a stroke, or something. He’ll take care of everything.” Matt was a problem solver and Nicholas’s shaking limbs signaled the fact that he needed help.

“I can’t—”

“You have to be strong.” His voice quavered as he spoke, but he pushed ahead. “I need a few minutes out here. Go to the house and call and I’ll get there when I can.”

He let her go and turned back to the barn, uncertain of what he should do but aware that he had to be alone to do it. Dust covered the old man’s work boots and the untied strings were a scramble. He tilted his baseball cap back and drew in a constricted breath as he stepped closer to the body, imagining that he saw life in the open eyes until an ant marched across the face and its serene expression didn’t flinch.

“I can’t leave you like this,” he said, though he knew he’d take an ass chewing from the police and maybe Matt for messing with the body. He looked around the barn and saw a decade’s worth of the sort of debris that accumulates on a declining farm—broken implements, shelved tools, and enough tractor parts to fall just short of aggregating to a functional machine. The aborted overhaul of an ancient chainsaw lay on the workbench coated with grime, and the damp recollection of moldering hay loitered all around.

There was no tarp or blanket in sight to cover the body, so he dropped to his knees beside it, thinking what to do next. He had first met Petrakis at Matt’s place the night he and his mother arrived in the States and the two made an enduring connection that would never allow him to leave his old friend splayed on the floor this way.

The body reeked of dried sweat and jug wine that had leached through the old man’s pores, compelling Nicholas to hold his breath as he worked. First

knuckling his eyes to clear his vision, he tied the boots and settled beside the body with his legs crossed. He drew the corpse into his lap and cradled the head to keep it off the dirt floor, then fixed the old man's hair with his hand.

He imagined Petrakis giving him grief about the trouble he had caused at the church that morning, responding in the irritated voice he contrived for just that sort of a dressing down. *For Christ's sake, you gotta think before you do something like that, Nick. The poor bastard's doomed to be a foreigner the rest of his life. Give him a break.*

"You're right." He was always right. A cold wave of shame washed over Nicholas and when he slumped, his hand came to rest on Petrakis's bony chest, where it caught the ridge of a folded slip of paper in the breast pocket. The old man had been walking around with the note for a few days now, but Nicholas hadn't thought to ask about it, believing it to be another of his numerous memory jogs. He pulled the paper from the pocket and recognized the Greek's unsteady hand:

*The young man who
comes around to help
is Nick, Matt's boy.
You and Nora love
him like he's your own.*

He sank into darkness. How many times had his friend warned him that he wouldn't be around forever to look after him? That he'd have to start working things out on his own?

Lauren stepped into the barn and slipped up to him, pale and unsteady. He pushed the note into his back pocket as the familiar hum of the tires on Matt's slowing pickup made its way into the barn and the faint but growing wail of approaching sirens cried in the distance. Nicholas pressed his lips to the old man's forehead and laid him out, and then he rose to his feet.