

The Third Daughter

My father has no sons. When he learned that Mother gave birth to a third daughter, he drank enough vodka to hospitalize him for four days. I am that daughter. When I was eleven, he told me that I would never attract a suitable husband and he declared that this truth was my burden to bear, not his. Mother is less callous, but she does regret that I possess few of the traits Uzbek men seek in a wife.

My sixteenth birthday passed two days ago and Mother has been distant since then, but tonight she called me to the kitchen for tea. Her voice was thin, the way it gets in the late hours when my father has not yet found his way home. "The time has come for you to understand men," she said. "To understand their needs."

Of men's needs, I am already aware but I said nothing. My friend Anya talks about sex incessantly and she has detailed the mechanics of the act to me. Like me, she lacks experience, but she has a sister in Moscow who has made herself an authority on the subject. I cannot imagine why Mother wants to have this talk now, but her account will be less enthusiastic than Anya's are, and I am grateful for that.

She sat at the opposite end of the table, wringing her hands. "Some women enjoy it," she said, initiating the discussion. Her inability to utter the word aloud exasperates me. "They live at the mercy of their cravings like a dog on a chain." Her face reddened and I wondered, but refused to believe that she was one of those women.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Her cup slipped in her grip and the tea splashed over her fingers. “You are older now.” She wiped her hands and the table with the towel she kept tucked into her apron strings. “Before long you will marry.”

She was wrong, but I held my tongue and listened to her for what seemed an hour, but when she concluded and left me alone in the kitchen, my tea was still warm.

My father forbids me from talking with Anya because she is Russian, but she is my closest friend. We met this morning at the corner beyond her home and walked together to school, as we do every day. I started to tell her about my talk with Mother last night, while at the same time she said something about not waiting to get married. The idea that we both had sex on our minds had us laughing louder than we should have, which is a hazard of spending time with Anya.

I encouraged her to speak first and she told me that if she fell in love at university next year, she would have sex with the man. Her declaration so shook me that I forgot what I had intended to say. “Are you certain you’ve thought this through?”

She draped her arm over my shoulder and said, “I’ll think it through when the time comes.”

Anya is capricious in that way I have noticed among her people. I envy that freedom, but I felt her innocence slip away with those words. “I will miss you when you leave this summer,” I told her.

“Come to Moscow with me,” she said. “My aunt has plenty of space.”

How many times will we go through this? “My father will never allow me to study. You know that.”

Fire ignited in her eyes. “He’s an idiot, that’s what I know about him.”

“Anya!”

We went through the day attentive in our classes and silent between them. It was not in Anya’s character to apologize, but I saw that she regretted her words. As we walked home, I asked her, “Do you think boys will ever like me?”

She rolled her eyes with more drama than I thought the situation merited. “They follow you like puppies now. What more can you want?”

I felt my face flush. “I mean do they like educated girls? I want to study.”

“They’ll fuck anyone, but it takes an educated man to appreciate an educated woman.”

Her language embarrassed me and it caught the attention of an elderly woman sitting in a chair outside her home. “Stay clear of that Russian tramp,” the grandmother called out to me in Uzbek. She had a sack of raisins in her lap and she was pulling stems from the fruit. “I know you live in the big house up the way, so mind me little girl or I’ll tell your mother who you’re whoring with.” She glared at Anya as she leaned to her side and spit at the ground.

Anya spoke little Uzbek, but she had no trouble spotting an insult. “Look!” She pointed at the woman as if just noticing her. “Another bitter old gossip has confused the emptiness in her life for the authority to judge others.” She blew the woman a kiss, prompting a response that I refused to translate, and we hurried along. “You’re going to Moscow with me,” she said.

Heat marched up the back of my neck and the skin there prickled in anticipation of what I was about to say. “My father says there is no sense in girls going to university. He says studying won’t make me a better wife.”

Anya became so infuriated with me that I had to look away from her, which was fortunate because that is how I noticed Mother. We had reached the corner where I turn and where Anya continues to her home when I saw Mother pacing the street outside our wall. She had her back to us, so I was able to pull Anya aside in time and we just escaped her sight as she doubled back. I ordered Anya to hide until Mother and I went in, and I made my way up our street.

“You are late,” she told me. I explained that I was not, but she chastened me for arguing and pulled me into our courtyard. “Your father has a guest and you need to make a proper impression on him.” I did not understand, but Mother went to work on my hair again before I could ask her to explain, and then the condition of my dress took priority. We went into the house and I heard the men in our visiting room. Mother guided me to the guest bathroom, where she complained that I take such poor care of myself. Trying to draw color into my cheeks, she pinched them so hard that I thought she would come away with flesh.

“Mother!”

She covered my mouth with her hand and listened. After a moment, she squared my shoulders and looked me over, tapping her lips with her forefinger as she considered her work. “Come with me.”

“No.” I had never resisted Mother like this and I found it exhilarating. She raised her hand, but I knew she could not strike me now. “Tell me what is happening or I go nowhere.”

Mother, not yet forty but a grandmother three times, looked ten years older than her age. “Your father’s friend...” She made a sound, a moan, and hooked a drifting strand of hair over her ear. “Just do this right. Please.”

My body went numb but I made it across the foyer and to our visiting room. I now understood the talk with Mother last night and everything inside me demanded that I revolt. It is my great shame that I did not.

Father and the man were laughing at something one of them said before we stepped in. The stranger was more than twice my age and he had a barrel-shaped body. His face bore the ruddy look of a drinker and his suit was the picture of good intentions gone amiss. He stopped as he brought his cigarette to his lips and nodded to Father, whose back was to Mother and me, to indicate that the women had entered the room. I moved toward them and the fetid odor of lamb fat that he exuded pulled me into its clutches.

As Father turned from his guest, his smile faded to the gaze of reproach that I know well. It is a look that asks, *What have you done with my son?* I have seen it every day of my life and I have no response to it. As repulsive as this situation is, and as desperately as I want to leave and never return, I need this man’s approval. I am disgusted with myself for this, but I need him to desire me now, if never again, because I cannot survive his rejection or my parents’ dishonor if he turns me away.

I felt like some animal displayed at a bazaar. The men traded glances—the bargaining had begun—and Father sent me out of the room. In the entryway, my chest tightened and I could not release my breath. Mother pulled me to the kitchen, where she brought me a glass of water.

“I am sixteen years old,” I said, refusing to drink.

“Your sisters were seventeen when they married. Start young and enjoy your grandchildren. Tahmina from here in our neighborhood was fifteen when she married.”

“And she nearly died giving birth. Now she is nineteen and her husband has abandoned her. She cannot afford shoes for her two boys.”

“She was an unfit wife.”

“She was a child.”

“Besides,” Mother said, ignoring my words. “Her family made a bad choice of husband for her.”

I did not doubt the sincerity I saw in Mother’s eyes when she promised not to let that happen to me. “I won’t let it happen,” I said, tapping my chest. “I’m going to university.”

She laughed a cackle so cruel that I had to stare into my lap. Tears came slowly at first, then they rolled, and Mother approached but she was stiff and unyielding. “Our daughters do not attend university,” she said. I started to object and she quieted me. “It is what it is. If you don’t like it, that is your burden to bear. Now, go upstairs and wash your face. No man wants to look at a woman with swollen eyes.”

“I am not getting married,” I said. The words tumbled so clumsily that I failed to convince even myself. I went upstairs and when I opened the bathroom door, the draft through the window extinguished the flame in the inline water heater. Father took the appliance apart weeks ago to adjust something and he broke it. He refused to hire a technician, as that would require that he confess his ineptitude, and he dismissed my fear of gas filling the bathroom as female hysteria. Now when the flame goes out I relight it with a match from the box I keep on the shelf for that purpose.

I closed the valve in the gas line to allow the air to clear as I washed. The cool water was a relief when I pressed my fingers against my closed eyes and the towel, soft and fresh against my face, prevented me from seeing my image in the mirror. I stepped back to the tub and lowered myself to its edge. The sound of laughter from the men downstairs made it to me and the conspiracy in their tone declared that they had come to terms. How will I ever stop these tears?

The next morning I marched to Anya's home. The access to her apartment was off the main street and I could only avoid the mud holes by hopping from one high spot to the next. From somewhere beyond the row of ramshackle tenements, the scramble of panicking chickens and the baying of a dog in pursuit broke the morning silence.

I knocked and Anya opened the door, wide-eyed. "You're early." Her smile faded once she had a look at me. "Come in. I'll make tea."

She pulled a pair of threadbare slippers from under a stool for my use and left to tend to the teapot while I removed my shoes. I could see each room in the home from where I sat. The living room, which doubled as Anya's bedroom, was at the far end. It opened into a narrow passage that led past the bathroom and to the kitchen, which connected to the entryway where I was sitting and a smaller room that I had once mistaken as a closet, but which is her parents' bedroom. Brick-colored linoleum covered the floor, but it had a worn spot that a rug struggled to capture.

In the kitchen, Anya set out our tea and the moment I wrapped my hands around the warm cup my resolve melted. "They are making me get married."

Anya took the news as if she were its subject. I told her that the wedding would be in two weeks and her face whitened, but angry red blotches fought their way to its surface. "I know your people do this," she told me, "but you will not. I will not let you."

We decided to skip school and once we had walked out of the neighborhood, Anya laid into me. "My parents will get you to my aunt in Moscow."

"I cannot get a passport without my father's consent."

Anya shook her head and I suspect she was thinking again that my father is an idiot. She asked, "What does this man do?"

"I don't know."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is his name?"

I had to look away.

I felt hatred boiling off Anya and I was sorry she had to put up with me. "In two weeks you're marrying a man whose name you don't—"

"I am not marrying him." I started walking again and Anya caught up and hugged me so tightly that the tears just came. I wondered if they would ever stop.

That afternoon I was careful to return home at my usual time and as Anya and I separated, she kissed my cheek and promised to get me through this. The neighborhood women were milling outside our place, talking to my mother, and they scattered like hens when they saw me.

Mother pulled me into our courtyard and a foreign sound drew my attention when she closed the door. I turned to see a new lock on the inside of that door, its shining combination wheels conspicuous. The unfamiliar noise was the bolt of that lock sliding home. Mother waited for me to figure

out what was happening and I guess the confusion on my face turned to panic when I finally understood because she said, “You will thank me one day when you are smarter.”

I pushed my way into the house and up the stairs to my room. I had prayed earlier that day that I would get past the tears, but I can say now that the place beyond tears is darker than my mind can endure.

Mother paraded in my sisters, whom I have come to loathe for their contrived cheer in their marriages. They brought in dresses for me to preview and I picked one only so they would take them away, but then they laid out shoes, gloves; it was endless. On the morning of the wedding, a woman came to give me a manicure and pedicure, and then another did my hair and makeup. I wanted to scratch their eyes out.

Mother ran everyone out of the room so she could spell out the details of the wedding night, which would take place in the home of the groom's mother, where I am to live. The specifics of how they would display the bloodied bedsheets over the apartment balcony in testimony of my lost virginity sickened me, and Mother noticed. She moved closer on the bed and I wanted both to pull her to my side and to shove her away.

“Your Russian friend has confused you with fairytales. The truth is that love grows slowly as you come to know your husband, like a kettle of cold water put to a low flame.”

“What of your love, Mother? What happened to your flame?” I could not help thinking of Father’s impotent advance on the water heater.

She pushed away and marched to the door. “Get dressed. The car will be here soon.”

She left me alone in the room with the gown. It is tragic that an article so exquisite could usher in such misery. I went into the bathroom to relieve myself and the draft rushed through and extinguished the flame again. As I reached for the matches, I caught my reflection in the mirror and did not recognize myself. I lingered, enchanted by the change I saw, and turned on the hot water in the sink to make the gas flow. Concern over my troubles dissipated as I closed the window and reached back to lock the door. I noticed the gap at the floor, but a bath towel tightly tucked into the open space solved that problem.

I undressed and then pulled my hair down and scrubbed away the makeup. The nail polish had to go, as well. I finally got into the bathtub, naked and lightheaded, and ran the water there. I reached for the hand mirror on the countertop and studied myself in it, allowing a smile. It had been so long since I last smiled that doing so now required effort.

The cold water made me shiver and it grew difficult to steady the mirror, yet I could not stop staring at myself. I was free of the burdens—not of my own, but of those that I carry for others. I laid my head back against the tile and tears, wonderful tears, warmed my cheeks once again.