

Natalia watched her mirror-self carefully as she applied first emerald and then turquoise eye-shadow. She reached down to the pile of eye-liners on the sink and picked out her favorite liquid black, pulling a long black line straight across one lowered eyelid and off with a small flourish, then repeated it for her other eye. After applying a pale foundation to her cheeks and a daub of rouge, she covered her lips with a pomegranate shaded lipstick, then after pursing and then dabbing off the excess, she traced the line of her lips to finish. Some people said she was far too young to wear so much makeup. But she felt you could never look beautiful enough, and, frankly, that she was too young to let herself go.

Her preparations complete, Natalia took a second to look, through the mirror, around the room. She checked off her favorite recent acquisitions. The mineral-green art deco soap dish, she believed it to be bakelite, the brand new Hello Kitty shower curtain, the plush lemon-yellow towels which were neither too yellow nor too plush – a combination that she had envisioned at once perfectly upon exiting the bath one day, but that had taken months to find. All and more she had gotten at a good price, carefully stalking eBay and Craigslist. In many ways the internet had made the resolution of her quests much easier to achieve, but simultaneously it had also schooled the holders of the odd rummage sale that many things they held worthless were in demand, somewhere. Sure, she thought, her grandparents had always said, “One man's trash, another's treasure.” But before this latest communication revolution, it was not so easy to put into practice.

“Natalia?” Pyotr called from the living room. He had his querying voice, which irritated her, since with him, questions were always rhetorical. “What are you doing, Natalia?”

She didn't respond, which was the proper if not polite way to handle him, but instead put her fingers on an enamel hairpin from the top of a heap of various hair accessories she kept in a dish. This one will go most with my eyeshadow. But which one will go least? She wondered if today felt like a Disney day, or if she would go with something vintage, flowers, or maybe a barrette with dun-colored owls with expressively painted faces.

“I am going to work, Petya.” He hated to be called by the diminutive.

“But it's Saturday,” he said. “Don't you know that workers suffered at the picket-line and even died so that you didn't have to work on weekends?”

“Of course,” she replied, “I realize that. But Matt called while you were still asleep. Sasha got sick or something and he has no one else to cover today's shift. Anyway, I have paperwork to finish, and I am practically his partner. If Sasha can't make the calls while the leads

are still fresh, I'll be losing out as much as Matt.”

Pyotr didn't say anything. In the past, he had railed against the evils of capitalism. Failing that, had warned her that her boss was no friend of her, whatever deal that she had made, and that he was taking advantage of her skill and her labor, pocketing an outsize portion of the profits for what, because he had the ready money required to pay for an office-lease, and a few Compaq computers, and to buy CD-ROMs full of leads. And what, asked Pyotr, does all this industry beget with your time? You interrupt people during their few moments with family, and push them to spend their limited resources on things they don't need. That relentless engine, spurring the proletariat to grind themselves into dirt while the Matts of the world with their polo shirts tucked into khakis lined their pockets, feet up on the desk.

She opened the bathroom door, to find Pyotr poking at the ceiling with a broom handle, standing on a chair.

“This is the second time there's been a leak, and they do nothing about these pipes!”

It was his way of apologizing for the lateness of his half of the rent: to rail on the management, and, this she found endearing, to march around the apartment taking special care of everything that the rentiers and their lackeys had no economic motivation to do. The broom handle tore the sagging ceiling, and a small bucketful of the pooled water fell to the floor.

“Will you be home late?” he asked.

“I think around nine.” The water became a steady drop. “Oh,” she said, “the floors!”

But he had already gotten a bucket and a towel.

As she stood, she could see both the mirror Pyotr reflected in the bathroom mirror and the real one on his knees sopping up the leaked water as the drips hit the plastic bucket with loud thumps. Even bent over like that, in a position of supplication, she could see something in him that would never bend. That deeper will that a few years ago, when he was on the university steps giving loud speeches in a leather bomber jacket had made him so appealing. And yet, she rather pitied him now. She meant to test his resolve.

She meant to bring up how she expected the Party would pay him back the money he had fronted for them to rent a van, that had been part of the rent.

“I forgot to tell you,” he said. “I saw something absolutely terrible yesterday, while I was waiting for the train. You know at Union Square, where they have these moving platforms – they look like torture devices, long rows of metal bars that shoot out to cover the gaps in the platform

when the train comes – this man must have been standing on one when it moved and slipped between the edges and the train. He was pinned at the stomach right in front of me. There was nothing I could do. He had this look of anguish on his face, and he was groaning and yelling. He kept raising and lowering his arms, as if it could help him. Someone stood six feet from him and took pictures with his phone– with the flash! Can you imagine?”

“Was there blood? Did he die? What did you do?”

“There was nothing to do. I waited a while, until I saw that the transit police were coming, and then I left.”

He put the towel into the bucket. The thump stopped.

Matt buzzed her in. The offices were in a condo apartment that had been converted with cubicles and fluorescents. Only the bathroom was still like an apartment, and the bedroom out of which Matt walked now. Behind him, Natalia saw the bed with its beige sheets was unmade. There was a hot-plate and a cooler in the kitchen. She tried never to notice that she was a head taller than him, even in her flats.

“I'm glad you could make it. We might have to find some replacements. Sasha doesn't seem to be very reliable.”

On her first day, she remembered, Matt had shown Natalia around the office. Shown her which of the four desks would be hers, and showed her how the computer turned on and the automatic dialer. He'd worked for years as a salesman at a car lot he told her, until one of his customers had cornered him. Wasn't he tired of working for someone else, making a bit of commission on selling a very expensive product? And this is how he got his first set of leads and the idea to set up an office space like this. He had told her this story with pride, and seemingly in complete ignorance of the irony of telling a new employee that you got into business so you didn't have to work to make money for someone else.

This lack of awareness put Natalia at ease. It became obvious quickly that, while Matt had the leads and his savings, he also lacked any sense about the business. Natalia quickly became office manager, and helped Matt to staff the desks, find leads, and even locate potential clients and bid out various marketing jobs through subcontractors. She helped him screen potential employees. Now she was filling in for Sasha, whom she thought had been a good fit.

He had a dark spot, a stain on his chest she couldn't stop staring down at. She turned to

her desk and sat. It was about 11:30, the computer clocks were always a little off. Matt wandered back to the bedroom where he had his office. A thought fluttered into her head, it was odd for a middle-aged man to be named Matt. Even stranger to think of him, ten years older yet, with wrinkles started and his hair gone to a few wisps.

It had been a few months since Natalia had had to do calls, though the rhythms of the one-sided conversations were the familiar background, one call ending abruptly behind her while to the left another one began again with renewed enthusiasm. She eyed the script pulled up on the computer. In a moment, the computer would pull a number from the list of leads, fill in a name of some head of household somewhere in the US at the appropriate places in the script. Matt, when Natalia wasn't paying attention bought inexpensive leads, because he had “confidence” in his salespeople. They were expensive even for their low price as they rarely translated to a sale, and hence a commission.

Matt hadn't always slept in the bedroom. Not too long ago he had had a house and a wife.

She turned toward the door, she could see the flicker of a television, cool light, the color of lightning, on the warm adobe of the wall.

She turned back to the script and read it to herself.

Hello [Mr. Jones], this is [Natalia] with Island Vacations Travel Club.

I am calling today with good news for you, because we have a free vacation for you and your family. That's right, a free vacation just for finding out more about our travel services. I am not calling to sell you anything today, just to get your confirmation that you'd like to spend 3 days and 2 nights in your choice of accommodations . . .

She closed her eyes and opened them again. There were no good scripts. Usually they just went with the canned scripts, rarely making changes. Natalia didn't have much of an accent anymore, except that she sounded a little exotic, which was an asset for this kind of thing. Matt always said, “we have a real leg up over people who use Indians, or you know people from the

Midwest.”

Natalia imagined Pyotr reading from the script.

She initiated the dialer. The phone rang in her headset a few times, then a man's voice:

Mr. Willis: Hello?

Natalia: Hello Mr. Willis, this is Natalia with-

Mr. Willis: Who?

Natalia: with Island Vacations Travel-

Mr. Willis: I don't know you.

Natalia: Travel Club. I'm calling-

Mr. Willis: [CLICK]

The main thing was to maintain an even keel. You will get dozens of quick rejections, even rude ones. Rejections weren't bad, especially if they happened quick. The worst was old people, alone, lonely, who just wanted to talk.

Natalia: Hello, Mr. Houston, this is-

Mrs. Houston: Ma'am, whoever you may be, my husband is dead.

. . .

Mr. Abrams: What do you mean a free vacation?

Natalia: We just want to give you a sample of what we can offer, that we're sure you'll enjoy. The positive word of mouth is worth more than all the expensive billboard, radio, or TV advertising we could buy.

. . .

Mr. Antori: I would love a sample of what you're offering, Natalia honey!

. . .

Mrs. Winston: What about the hotel?

Natalia: In Orlando you'll be staying in Lake Buena Vista, a few blocks away from the gates of Disneyland. 3 days and 2

nights of hotel accommodations and 2 round trip airline tickets, with no strings attached or salesman breathing down your neck. This is a real deal vacation.

. . .

Natalia: . . . good news a free vacation-

Mrs. Schwartz: Oh my god, oh my god. I've never won anything before. I can't believe it's really happening to us. Larry. Larry, get on the phone.

Natalia called leads until 4 PM. Matt brought her coffee in a pharmaceutical mug. Nexium. What was that for, she tried to remember. Heartburn? She gave him a quick tally. Two solid gets. She discussed the job posting she'd place on Craigslist, and then wrote up some invoices, put them into envelopes. At 5 she started to call again until 8 when she would pack up and leave. She looked down at her fingernails. They were short but manicured and sparkling green.

The voices were old, mainly old, some young children, the occasional teen. People were tired, playful, irritable, sexist, peasant, chatty, quiet, nice, and mean. Her tights, also green, were stitched with a raised repeating pattern of four-leaf clovers, which she felt under her palm like braille as she talked. She felt a tiny, quiet thrill whenever she got someone's address, phone number, and credit card. The third time someone shouted "fuck off" at her, she looked at the clock. Matt had closed the bedroom door. She wondered if he was watching porn.

At 8 she left without seeing Matt. She pinned her score-sheet and some notes to the cork board. On the platform of the subway, she stood pointedly back behind the yellow verge, and watched a rat pick at a wrapper by the track. It was sleek, and beautiful, and worked cautiously with its mouth and its hands.

She put her key in the door. There were lights at the table. Water glasses. Covered plates. It was dinner Pyotr had made. Her Pyotr had made. Pyotr.