

## The Professor

Something about him is familiar. You see him as you wait for the train. This wait is a daily affair, so you know which chair to sit in, which size coffee to buy. Yet you're not calm, despite the easy routine. This ghost has come into view, for one, and you're also expecting a phone call, the most important one you'll ever get.

The adoption agency is supposed to tell you if the baby you met four months before in Russia will be yours. Dealing with Russians has been a learning experience. Communication is sporadic. Conduct is governed by a system of flattery and payments, not always of money. The counterpart of your adoption agency there suggested that a case of single malt scotch would help your petition. A Hermés scarf for the woman overseeing the infants was a nice touch. Formula for all of her little ones waiting for love, twenty-two boxes worth, let you learn that the parents are of "good stock." You're not interested in the parents or their lineage. You just want what they gave up, and your eagerness is clear by the way you hold little Katya (whom you'll rename Katie the moment she's on American soil). Usually, though, money is what moves the process forward. You've spent thousands of dollars already. And now spending this money all alone

because the man you were going to raise this child with bailed out. It's your fault, really. You have a bad habit of choosing partners who are all flash and no substance, slippery souls who hate being pinned down. You'll do better next time, you're sure. You stood at the window of your apartment and watched his back as he crossed the street with his bags. Well, only one bag. But it was heavy, and he leaned against it hard, sort of how he always leaned against the weight of your commitment to the future, and to him.

Is that what makes you watch this other man now? The way he walks? He, too, leans, but he's not carrying anything. He's a lot older, and his hair is bushy, wild even. All that, adjusted for what he would have looked like twenty-five years ago, makes you look harder. No one else could possibly have quite that combination of dash and decay.

It's Professor DeLille. No doubt about it.

When you were fourteen years old, you lived on a cul-de-sac in a quiet college town. The lawn was level in back, and sloping in front, where your mother doted on two huge peony bushes that gave gorgeous, fleshy pink flowers. From the curb to the house was a brick walk your father had laid the year you were born. Your initials were set in a thick wedge of mortar on the bottom of three short steps at the very end, where visitors parked their cars.

Your mother informed you to expect a house guest. You were put out. You were pretty much of an introvert, and didn't spend much time in anyone else's company. Sometimes this trait worried both of your parents, but you'd fallen off their radar recently, and the nagging about getting together with friends stopped.

The guest was Jean-Jacques DeLille. He was a visiting lecturer in French at the university where your father taught organic chemistry. Your house was large, with not one but two extra bedrooms for the children your parents hoped they'd have after you and couldn't.

Your parents offered their home to people like Professor DeLille, new in town, with no place of their own just yet. Such generosity made them look good, like team players. They'd felt like outsiders for a long time, your parents. You never understood why. They had friends. People came to dinner. They played golf with another couple whose son was your age. You'd been forced to spend time with him before, under the bored gaze of a baby-sitter who left you alone so she could talk to her boyfriend on the phone. The son smelled funny and picked his nose. How grateful you were that you didn't need babysitters anymore, that your time was your own.

Until then.

You had to prepare for this professor. The bed needed to be made, fresh towels put in the downstairs bathroom. Your mother consulted cook books to see what might be tempting and bring pleasure. Your father stayed out of the way. He wanted very little to do with the pProfessor.

Yet that first night, your father was charming. Professor DeLille complimented the martini your father mixed, then gratefully accepted your mother's offer of wine. She went to the liquor store and badgered the poor sales clerk into recommending a fine, but reasonably priced, Bordeaux. The professor was tall and broad, not your idea of a Frenchman. You assumed he'd be short and squat, and ridiculous, in the bargain. The professor wasn't ridiculous. He was commanding, easy to look at, even to listen to with his charmingly thick accent.

You went through his things when he left for campus the next morning. There were letters you couldn't translate, a travel clock, an elaborate shaving kit, boxer shorts, two suits, several silk ties, a pair of polished wingtips, cologne that made your throat itch after you brought it to your nose, linen handkerchiefs, a light-weight blue bathrobe, a small photo album with pictures of a woman and a boy you assumed were the family he left behind, then wondered why

he hadn't brought them, given that his appointment was for a full year, and a fountain pen – blue lacquer with gold trim. You imagined him sitting in a café somewhere, writing words of love with that pen, pouring out his heart and soul to another woman, not the one in the picture, someone who's aloof and self-centered, with very short hair, a perfect frame for her hard yet flawless face.

Life took on a rhythm. Your father and Professor DeLille went to campus in the morning. Professor DeLille presumably looked for an apartment in the afternoons. You said "presumably" because he seemed very comfortable in your home, with your mother there to wait on him. You found the change in her marked. She was no longer cold and snappish, but warm and full of life. When the men returned, the evening began pleasantly and only improved as the hours passed.

Thinking of those days, as you watch the older, frailer Professor DeLille cross the tiled walkway of the train station, you become uneasy. You check your cell phone, and see that of course, there's no activity because you would have felt it buzzing. Maybe the deal fell through. Your money lost. Your man gone. You're alone, dejected, miserable.

Get a grip! Just bad memories taking hold. The old sense of abandonment.

Professor DeLille takes a seat and opens a newspaper. His slacks ride up to reveal hairy shins. His shoes are worn. Has he fallen on hard times? Or just become lazy about his appearance?

The time he spent getting ready in the morning, and then again before the cocktail hour! You weren't inconvenienced, because you used a different bathroom upstairs. His was downstairs. But you were always aware of the door closing, and the interval of time that passed before it opened again. Your mother always seemed to be listening, too. She had to time

breakfast and dinner around the sound of that door. She didn't time your meals to anything.

Rather, you met the schedule she set. Now she watched and waited for Professor DeLille. She never served breakfast in her bathrobe. At dinner she wore make-up.

One day, several weeks into his stay, he took an interest in you. Fixed you with a bright, curious eye across the table and asked what you wanted to do with your life.

Your mother watched you closely. She'd already told you not to sound like an idiot when an adult asked a question or made the foolish mistake of trying to engage you in conversation. They were only being polite, she assured you, so there no point in trying to sound clever.

"I wish to help the poor children of the world," you said. Your father closed his eyes for a moment. Your mother stopped chewing the veal she'd prepared with lemon and white wine. Professor DeLille continued to assess you.

"A most worthy goal," he said, then continued eating.

He didn't ask you anything else. You were sorry you broke whatever connection might have been possible. You thought after a bit that Professor DeLille might be an important person to have on your side, though you didn't know exactly what that meant.

It didn't matter, because your mother had claimed him. He understood how needy she was, and was good at pouring it on. He never failed to compliment the dinner, her dress, her hair, her choice of furniture, though in all honesty, the furniture was old and banged up. Some people, your father included, thought it bad taste to have things that were too nice. Their presence suggested that you weren't a serious person. Your father was very afraid of not being taken seriously, yet was highly respected. It was as though your father had found something he was very afraid of losing, though the means of that loss were unclear.

Then the event took place, the one you regretted for years. Professor DeLille had a bad day. You didn't know why. That information was never shared. He came home in a dark mood, spoke little, ate less. He drank a lot, though, more than was customary. Not one but two martinis before dinner. Not two but three glasses of wine with your mother's duck à l'orange. Then a nightcap of cognac, which he drank alone on the sun porch – your mother's fancy name for a screened-in outdoor space that the approaching winter must have made uncomfortable. You watched him there, by himself, slouched in a wicker chair. Your parents were in the kitchen, speculating. Maybe his appointment was cut short? Or there'd been bad news from home? Your mother aggressively scraped the plates into the trash – no one felt much like eating, except you, of course – and suggested that a woman was involved. Your father thought not. He'd have heard about a woman, if there were one. In that small little world of the university, such a thing couldn't be kept quiet for long.

You went out to the porch to try your hand at levity, or conversation, at the very least. Maybe you could draw him out, get to the heart of the matter. You'd be a hero in your own house! Your sensitivity and compassion would be remarked on time and again. Yet when you stood there, next to his chair, awash in the alcoholic, sweaty smell of him, you couldn't speak. You wanted to withdraw at once, and found that you couldn't.

Neither of you spoke. He gazed at the twilight sky, a view that didn't inspire you much because of the neighbor's ramshackle house and the overgrown bushes around its front walkway. You realized that your eye was drawn to the world's mars, not its glory, so you began examining this trait, wondering how it has affected you and your chances for future happiness in life. Professor DeLille turned and looked up at you. His eyes were moist, red-rimmed, a sick man's eyes, you thought, someone broken apart from the inside out. He put his glass on the unpainted

wood floor and took your hand. The shock of it nearly took your breath away. His palm was callused and rough, damp with sweat. It was an ugly sensation, and the pit of your stomach lurched.

"Come to me," he said.

"What?"

"Tonight. When they're asleep."

He dropped your hand. You got out of there. You said nothing to your parents. The evening wound down. You stayed in your room, and even locked your door. You lay awake most of the night, listening. There was nothing, only the wind, the furnace running then shutting off, a metal trash can dropping to the ground, probably the work of a raccoon.

Professor DeLille was himself the next day. He looked at you from time to time with complete innocence. You were sure he'd forgotten the whole thing.

The fall progressed, and life took a sharp turn. When Professor DeLille finally moved out, into an apartment overlooking the lake, your mother went with him. She confessed to being in love. Your father sat for hours, silent and stunned. He was unapproachable. He was barely able to make his way to campus every day and teach. You told him he had to, that he must go on.

Your mother tried to explain, when you saw her. She asked you to join her on the long, low couch with its view of the water, cut then with whitecaps below scudding winter clouds. The fabric of couch was coarse, nubbly, something modern and in-vogue, yet hideous. Like your mother's love affair with the professor.

Your mother talked of unhappiness, years of dread and desolation. She was talking about her marriage. Your memories of her at home weren't consistent with this dramatic, bleak,

landscape she described. Either she was lying, or she'd put on a brilliant front all those years. You didn't know, and didn't care. All that mattered was that you were left in the wake.

Your father carried on as best he could, which wasn't very well. He was passed over for promotion, and took a job at a different college, not as good, out of state. By then you were of age and on your own. You've never been back to your home town since.

While your father slid down, Professor DeLille moved up. He took a position at Harvard. In the years that followed, you visited your mother and the professor only once at their home in Cambridge. Then Professor DeLille fell in love with someone else, and disentangled himself, which was easy, since he and your mother never married. In her letters to you she spoke of her bad judgment, her failure to recognize the "type" of man Professor DeLille really was. She also wrote about your father, and her grief over his unhappiness. She never blamed herself for it, though. She never went that far.

You check your cell phone once more just before it buzzes. The call is the one you've been waiting for. Katya is cleared to leave Russia, and will be in your arms the day after tomorrow. You make your heartfelt thanks, reconfirm the essential details, conclude the call, put the phone away, and stand. Your train is only a few minutes off, and you'll use that time to make yourself known to Professor DeLille. You approach with a steady, confident stride, then stop. It's the expression in his eye as he regards a young woman sitting across from him that brings you up short. You've seen it before. It's a hungry look, predatory, desperate, really.

*Come to me!*

And what if you had? Would he have been satisfied and not turned his sights on your mother? Or would he have had to conquer her, too, before getting his fill? You've pondered this question many times, and never found an answer. Now, with him only a few feet away, you're



certain you will. He'll give it you. You won't let him deny a thing. You won't let him slip the noose. In a few more seconds, his eyes will find yours, and he'll know he's caught.

Then you turn away before he sees you, because it doesn't matter. The past is over and done. It's the future you need to focus on now, and the kind of parent you'll be, the lessons you'll teach Katie about what to go after and what to avoid, with everything you've learned of life close at hand.