

ESSENCE OF ELISABETH

Our hostess, Daria, has announced that after present-opening and cake eating everybody must tell a love story, something real from their lives.

If we were playing truth or dare, give me the dare. I'd run into a thirty-degree lake at midnight. I'd down a bowl of marshmallow fluff laced with vinegar. I'm out of place as it is in this Connecticut ranch at the wedding shower for Irina, my brother Rick's Romanian fiancée.

The sofa is fully occupied. I'm perched on a zebra pillow on the floor, legs arranged beside me like a damsel riding side saddle. My hip is cramping up. The coffee table is strewn with crumpled pink tissue, yanked ribbons, trays of Russian pastries. At some point I've switched to vodka and OJ from mimosas and bloody Marys. Why not? Rick's out getting smashed at a strip club with his pals. Us ladies--I barely have the names straight—must strip bare our souls in the name of entertainment.

“Everyone to tell little love story,” Daria says, again.

She's framed by the picture window. Flat afternoon daylight outlines her in a pale halo. It's late November but she's got her tree up--prim red bows, perfectly-spaced, dotted with little red lights. Pretty.

“Who first? Irina? Girl of honor? Come on!”

Daria's been here longest, lending an air of authority. The others--there are seven here, plus me--met this past year at a Russian Orthodox church in Bridgeport. Irina couldn't find one with her brand of Eastern Orthodox. It's the next best thing, though the Russian rituals are too stiff and strict, for starters.

Since she's come to live with Rick, his house is abuzz with a smorgasbord of transplants from the former Soviet bloc. They hang about the kitchen slicing up mounds of root vegetables, piles of beef and fish, never fewer than six pots rattling away on the stovetop, complex, pungent smells. I've tried joining in when visiting from the city but my peeling and knife skills aren't up to snuff. I drift out to the deck and get high with Rick or watch TV in the back room till dinner.

Irina replaces Daria before the window and launches into the story of meeting my brother on an international dating site. American males pay the subscription fee, ladies get in for free, like happy hour. Rick, Irina says, had the most beautiful quote entered into the optional free-text field beneath his profile picture. She closes her eyes and recites, as though reading from a monitor behind her lids.

Love, but don't make love bind: make love moving sea between beaches of your souls.

It's Kahlil Gibran, by way of a Romanian-English plug-in. Rick left the author out, eschewing even quotation marks. He gets prickly when I tease him. There was a character limit! Irina still believes the words are his.

"It touches me here." Irina pats her heart through her sequined sweater. "This is me, *my* thoughts, our minds across world crossing like fingers."

Poof. Soul mates. They exchange photos, embark upon an exchange that grows intimate, intense. Irina gives a throaty chuckle and discloses how late one night they did a slow Skype striptease for one another. She's swaying her hips, miming. The ladies squeal, delighted. I take a gigantic sip of vodka and concentrate on the lining of my mouth, which tingles pleasantly. I rack my brain for a story. I'm thirty-five and have never been in what most people call love. Closest thing is a decade-long obsession who never much liked me. Silent but emotionally-charged sex and unconditional adoration prolonged the slow-motion disaster. Not a love story for a wedding shower. Not passionate, heartwarming, charming--not a meaningful life lesson in sight. Not, actually, a story at all.

Irina is wrapping up. She eagerly awaits her first credit card and upcoming Vegas honeymoon! The rest is history, or it's about to be.

My turn. I've come up with a story that at least should amuse regarding my most recent rebound, Len. Coincidentally, Len is Russian, though unlike this crowd he escaped with his parents when he was thirteen. That's how he puts it. *Escaped*.

I stand before the gray window. The Christmas lights blink patterns on my face. I aim to keep it short.

"Once upon a time, my boyfriend Len scoured the kingdom for my essence--the 'essence of Elisabeth'--for my birthday."

Cooing sounds emit from the sofa.

"Proud of his find, Len insisted I open the gift in front of my friends. Turned out my essence was a globe of glass with a disk floating in a puddle of oil."

This is my big laugh line. *I* laugh. One of the ladies stands, tugs her low-cut red tunic over her leggings, and exits, presumably to pee. Maybe it's an ESL thing. I soldier on.

“Len squeezes his fist into the globe to light the wick. The flame catches, jumps high, then fizzles. Ha!”

I don't mention how secretly I'd been thirsting to see the manifestation of my essence, no one, myself included, having ever given much thought to it before. There it was: Fat. Fragile. Overpriced, knowing Len. Useless.

“That's my story,” I sing, dropping back onto my pillow.

“Anyone needs topping up?”

Daria steps between us like a tsarina amongst her serfs, pouring pear vodka into upraised goblets.

“I also meet man on worldweb,” a voice murmurs, after a moment's contemplative drinking.

“Oh goodie!”

Daria claps her hands, relieved to be shifting to more fertile terrain.

It's Myrka, like Irina, though with a softness that Irina, all edges, lacks. Myrka, I notice now, is stunning. Thick waves of honey-blonde hair, gray-blue eyes, wide mouth, full lips. Her features coexist in communistic harmony, occupying acres of facial real estate. Skin pale, flawless.

“I come from Dalekushi, tiny village. By age twenty-three, never been nowhere. Noplace.”

Daria acts as translator, but keeps it first person, ventriloquizing.

Myrka was single, bashful, never had a boyfriend. Her married sister signed up with an international dating site, posing as Myrka. She posts Myrka's photo, starts trading emails with an American guy. Things heat up.

Daria throws me a look. *This* is what she had in mind!

“One day my sister confesses,” says Daria-slash-Myrka. “I scream, ‘get out my life!’ Sister say if I wants to throw man away, got to myself. So, okay. I e-mails man, explain what's happening, apologize my sister for trick.”

Myrka runs on, Darya trails.

“Guy, he say I charm him. So. E-mailing now. Soon he wants we meet. How? Impossible!”

He's a world away in a mystical land called Waterbury. Then, lo and behold, a ticket to Paris arrives on Myrka's doorstep. Daria looks at me, triumphant.

“First time I takes a taxi. First ever train, two hundred kilometers to airport. Only four hours, Paris, but crazy, like shooting over moon.”

Daria bows her head, attending Myrka carefully. Her smile fades. There's a clipped exchange. Daria sucks in a breath, as though debating whether to continue. Sacrificially, she relents. She's a mere vessel.

It's midnight. Myrka deplanes at Charles DeGaulle. The terminal is deserted. Myrka hasn't slept in twenty-four hours.

No guy.

What's she gonna do? She's displayed bravery, but courage drains away. She's lost, frightened, has no money, no emergency cell number, no phone. Utterly alone. She paces in a wide circle, trying to clear her head, mumbling, freaking out. Minutes tick by. Still no man. She's sweating, hyperventilating, tears flow. For *forty-five minutes*, this goes on.

Myrka, whose delivery remains a bright, babbling brook, lets out one brief, shrill laugh. Daria continues.

A sharp sound made Myrka look up. A man was sitting in the shadows of the gate opposite. *Watching her.*

Daria asks Myrka to clarify.

“He is thirty, maybe forty meters away.”

I tunnel back to third grade, Mrs. Arthur teaching the metric system. I make the conversion.

Myrka tumbles on. Daria's gone gray.

“He's been looking at Myrka's legs,” she whispers.

It's grown dark outside. The only light comes from the Christmas tree. I put things together: Myrka married that man. That man is Josh, Rick's best friend, Rick's *best man*. I've gotten high with him. Never even knew he was *married*. Myrka was just one of the Slavs in the kitchen.

Myrka left her family, left all she knew, moved from bohunk, Russia to bohunk, Connecticut. Later I'll find out that she wants to earn money of her own, clean houses, waitress. Josh won't let her. If he lets her out, her English will improve. She'll gain

confidence, eventually peg him as a sadistic, possessive asshole. She will leave him. He'd even resisted letting her come to the shower--who knew what dangers lurked--but Daria had campaigned hard. Even now he's parked in the driveway, waiting, not with Rick at the strip club.

“Look!” someone shouts.

We hustle to the door, a flurry of shoes and coats. We stand on Daria's lawn close together, shoulders touching. We tilt our faces to the sky, open-mouthed. Beyond the salmon streetlight, down through the electric blue, the first flakes of winter fall down upon us like a veil.

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