

Sasha

Sasha was standing out front when I stepped into the snow. All the students in the courtyard had their heads tilted back, or ran in circles, running to see how far they could slide over the bricks. Everything in some way was connected to the falling snow. Sasha in her black coat stood straight, her feet together, huddled under her hood, looking right ahead at her black-clad colleagues, all of whom ignored her, all of whom were paired in twos and threes, or in the case of the solitary figures in the corner, postured in a way that showed they waited on the arrival of a friend. But Sasha stood straight up and alone without trying to be any other way.

She was proud of being of Russian heritage, which she showed by denouncing all things Russian to draw attention to her inside knowledge of the country and culture. She agonized over the Russian state during intimate conversations, her concerns about oppression a replacement for her personal problems, often done when she'd stopped trusting her interlocuter.

She was ice cold to people she met, in a way that was endearing; it was her thing, the way she expressed herself, and she did it fully, so completely committed to the role she took ownership of it, and ownership of any niche was endearing. Her route to human contact was through a dramatized mistrust.

She did not want the normal give and take that people used to get to know each other. She backed away from hugs, she looked forward to the extinction of the human race, she didn't want anyone visiting her in her room. *No, she said, really. Seriously. I mean it. If I need to see you I will come to your room.* Need, never want.

When word spread around the college that only her dad was Russian, and she was born in New York, she defensively said it was everyone else who called her Russian, she'd never made that claim. It scared her, in my observation, that she might lose her method of explaining herself — a girl lost in the world, a woman with an entire system pressing down on her — this feeling was usefully packaged into an opposition to the Kremlin, and without that story what did she have to explain her feelings? I really wanted to tell her I felt the same way, I wanted her to know she wasn't alone in providing loose truths for the sake of articulating real truth — as a new kid in middle school I told everyone I was Canadian. My Dad was born in Canada, and later when I got to wondering why I'd attached myself to being foreign it seemed too obvious to miss: I felt foreign, I was the new kid. And of course, as Sasha and myself both knew, the arrival in a new land was an opportunity to remake yourself for the better.

At first, her attitude of not needing the normal human approvals and ritualistic affirmations like hugs, drop by-visits, and even help carrying a heavy object (as Harari says what distinguishes humans as human is you will never see two chimpanzees carrying a log together), was charming. She turned out to mean it however, and that was frightening to me and the friends we had in common. She didn't want to be touched, she didn't want to be congratulated, she didn't like human achievements like the moon landing, she wanted the species to go extinct.

At the Smithsonian earlier in the month, Sasha and I had walked along the glass cages of bears, mammoths, dinosaurs, and she had been uninterested in anything we passed, but over-the-top interested in a 2,000-year-old crushed head. She had pulled my sleeve shoulder and stood me close to the glass to see it.

‘Look’, she had said. I nodded. She shook her head, pushed my head down until I was face to face with the artifact.

‘No, no, no. *Look.*’

A flat, brown patty encased in equally brown metal, the crushed helmet distinguished as such by the pattern of bumps and lattices around the edge. A placard reported that it was a crushed head from 2,000 years ago but there was nothing really to see.

A spear with a hip bone stuck on the end was also interesting to her. Apparently after abandoning dissidence she had adopted opposition to humanity in general. Anything that reminded her of what people could do to each other she wanted to stand very close to and read the full information, read all the dates out loud.

Walking along the sandy pathways of the mall towards the Washington monument with rows of trees on both sides, small and silvery and endlessly complex under the open sky, the limestone buildings visible through the screen of branches, cars zipping from trunk to trunk in a flickering, silent movie fashion, a phalanx of Chinese immigrants performing Falun Gong in a widely spaced formation by the statue garden, our feet making very stately sounds on the small stones of the wide pathways, she had said, ‘we’re friends right?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you don’t fuck your friends?’

‘That’s not necessarily true but we’re not like that, I know we’re not, it honestly never crossed my mind.’

‘I get nervous when guys start hanging out with me, it usually means they want to make something happen even if they say they don’t.’

‘I don’t want that, I don’t blame you for being suspicious but seriously I’m just glad you’re cool. I feel kinship you know.’

‘Sisterhood, brotherhood.’

‘Exactly.’

‘If you ever did ask me I would say no, so don’t ask me ok.’

‘I’m seriously not going to.’

‘I have to address it because I don’t have a lot of guy friends who haven’t ended up asking me out. And it ruins the relationship.’

‘I don’t take crushes on friend’s lightly anymore.’

Her phone rang. She walked down the center of the mall, along the grass, talking. I gave her ten steps and walked myself behind her. We reached the pond and the footbridge before she hung up. She’d been having a chit chat, everything she said was colloquial, catching up on the past, and then before she hung up she made plans to meet her Dad, who she was talking to, at the airport.

‘You’re flying to New York,’ I had said.

‘It’s a four-hour drive.’

Probably at this point she had already decided not to come back.

She walked without speaking until we reached the crossing lights.

‘Do you know what,’ she had said, eyes on some invisible horizon, ‘I don’t think I’ll wait.’ She stepped into traffic, reaching the middle of the crosswalk before the first car had to react with sudden braking and a horn held down for centuries. She stared straight ahead and turned around when she reached the opposite curb. With the lights now changed and the terrified driver inching towards the back line of the almost stopped traffic, the other cars that had stopped for her at distance stuck too far out in the intersection and kept a worried eye on her from behind their windshields.

‘That was new,’ I had said.

We formed a duo in the snow with glittering eyelashes and red cheeks, warm breath. She wore black eye shadow that made her eyes stand out even more in the snow. Her straight black hair was swept underneath her hood to stay out of her face. Her neck had very exposed tendons, and a snowflake landed in the deep crevasses of these tendons and melted instantly.

Standing with her by the curb, her lonely gaze into the headlights of the oncoming cab caught me off guard with how her looks affected me, and I said I would come with her to NYC, like she had offered, the words just left my mouth unprepared. She opened her mouth to think about it, but the cab arrived before she responded. She got in and moved to the far side of the backseat while I stood holding the door.

‘What do you think,’ I said.

‘Come visit me in the summer.’

‘I’ll go to the airport with you.’

‘No no no no no. No. If I don’t see you again, good luck buddy, it’s been real.’

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Sasha was in the center of the sidewalk, obviously in front of the door of her father’s apartment, obvious because she wore sweatpants, a white t-shirt, messy hair, and was just waking up a few seconds ago, she said.

‘You took forever,’ she said, her eyes blinking fast.

‘You’re sleeping in these days,’ I said, ‘staying up late?’

‘It’s hard getting on a schedule without school. We’re on the fifth floor. He’s looking forward to meeting you.

‘I didn’t realize you were in the heart of Manhattan. Has he lived here forever?’

‘We’ve lived here forever, I grew up here.’

‘Why did I think the Bronx?’

‘My mom lives in the Bronx, I must have said I lived there, I meant visited though, I use to be there all the time. But no this is the place.’

Inside, blessedly cooler than the hot sidewalk, a marble stairwell went in corkscrews narrowly to the top.

‘Are you doing well, I haven’t heard anything,’ she said, ‘we were good together. I was missing you when I came home. Should’ve been a better friend. Appalled by how I acted, I let things get out of hand. It cast a spell over me being surrounded by kids my own age, I’d never had friends like that before I think I went nuts in four different directions. I’ve been happy here. We’re repainting the rooms. It’s like a museum with the coolest stuff. It’s good to be back. I was worried I’d feel stifled but I have a bunch of little things to keep me occupied.’

She was working, of all places, at the 9/11 Memorial as a docent, leading tours, since she’d walked home that day in fifth grade looking over her shoulder every few seconds, meeting her father outside on the very spot we’d just vacated, she was tasked with telling tourists the school kid’s experience; her own, and then the child’s perspective in general.

‘I’m good at it,’ she said, ‘and it helps me, its meaningful. People are interested in it and I can see it helps them too. I get emotional every day when people come down from Texas or Wisconsin just for the tour, their homage is a bit like a show of support as much as anything. I have a lunch break with this nice guy named John, we usually sit in Battery Park to be near the water. I’m happy.’

She opened the door and called into the apartment that we were here. Oriental rugs in the first room, a bookcase directly ahead. A large bay window was too bright to look through, the light landing on the tassels of the carpet, beyond where the wood floor and desk against the wall were in relative blackness. An open doorframe of the same rich mahogany as the bannisters showed the room beyond in darkness. We closed the door behind us and entered the hallway. At first it was too dark to see more then the shadowy outlines of furniture in the rooms on either side as we proceeded deeper into the building. I stopped at a darkened room with her lizards in a glass tank on a small schoolkids desk.

‘Why are all the blinds down,’ I said. She stepped over the clothes on her floor, strewn over the same circular blue carpet she’d brought with her to college, and zipped the blind up to reveal the neighboring building’s window and an old woman leaning over her sink with her face four inches from Sasha’s, who closed the blind as the woman looked up.

Sasha stood amongst several pieces of artwork and furniture that required explanation, and found it was necessary, not that she wanted to, to give me a tour of her room. A gilded mirror beside the door, a beautiful armchair in the corner.

‘This is from middle school,’ she said of the posters above the bed, ‘these are all my clothes, this, turn around, this is my dartboard [the door was riddled], these are my lizards.’

She walked into the kitchen. ‘Hey Dad, this is Ben.’

The old man at the stove turned without letting go of the wooden spoon in the large pot. He took a few moments to warm up, but once his smile got steam behind it he transformed into some madman, beyond overjoyed at meeting one of Sasha’s friends, oh what an honor what an

honor what an honor, his laughter subsided and he went back to stirring his pasta with several recurrences of happy chuckling.

‘We’re eating soon if you two are joining me I’ll be happy and if you’re not I can save the rest of this for tomorrow but most of it will probably have to be thrown out if we don’t eat it all tonight but don’t let me pressure you only stay if you want to stay I won’t miss you I’m used to being on my own so if you do want to go out and do your own thing I will not mind old men are supposed to eat alone in front of the television.’

Words which he wished to come from his mouth followed words he wished wouldn’t, without knowing at the start whether the sentence came from the good wishes he had for Sasha or the bad actions he was haunted by since childhood. Sasha stood against the counter responding only to the positive, sidestepping the negative with a clear eye on the lineage that made the poor man say his passionate ‘don’t leave me’ that echoed through the centuries, repeated in every other word he spoke in his small kitchen. Shameful though it was for him to exhibit how powerless he was to not repeat the patterns of the past yet trying hard to change, it was brave of him to blend the positive affirmations of Sasha in with the abandonment complex, revealing through the contrast of his kind words how bound to its repetition he’d become, how determined he was to change. He garnered great respect from me, urged to tend my own wounded parts rather than ignore them.

Sasha at the counter seemed to say in her eye contact, ‘you get me now, you get me now?’

‘I get you now’ I said silently back through my own eye contact. Her defensive attitude was gone when she read in mine that I got her, and got him, wasn’t judging. She was glad to see my attitude was what it was, I was grateful to be born with the ability to stomach people’s afflictions, I’d be a good nurse, a good EMT, could stand their suffering with no problem, my highest quality no doubt. Proud of that ability in myself. Proud of Sasha standing by her father in his blindness, helping him carry the pot to the sink.

Cataracts, she said, standing at the bay windows while I put on my shoes. Her father, overcoming the living ghost within him, set us on a course to leave the house guiltfree, a victory for him I saw that took great effort, a battle won against the dark side of his heritage, a battle which made us want to stay but we had had to let him have his victory.

Goldenberries on the hill below their cottage; a mother and a father in the same kitchen; showers from the cloudy half of the summer sky; her favorite tree to climb with its low-to-the-ground branch perfect for sitting; her path down to the river; cauliflower in the strainer in the sink; a daisy in the narrow veil half-filled with water on the windowsill; lace curtains tied back with soft wooden window frames overlooking a magnolia tree in full bloom with woodpeckers hanging from the swinging bird feeder; her childhood stories coming out to me in long bursts which I had to keep interrupting to say ‘me too, I’ve done that too, same, same.’

‘Donchta want to see my city,’ she said as we walked in the direction of my hotel.

‘It’s strange being with you in another city.’

‘We’ll see each other when we’re older and let’s make a pact we’ll meet as real people, not kiddie friends from the past.’

‘Eh I’m not good at much besides nostalgia.’

‘Well then see ya around bucko,’ she said. We’d reached my hotel.

‘Nice ta know ya,’ she shouted from the end of the block and stepped into traffic which fortunately stopped. Jesus Christ protect her.

I went back to her door in the morning, arriving after walking the ten minutes from my hotel. She didn’t answer her phone, no one got the door. The museum was closed, she wasn’t at work. I waited until noon and took the subway to Penn Station, had to get my Amtrak but I’d see her again, some other time no doubt. Take good care buddy.

Bought a train muffin, one of the ones I was addicted to in childhood on our trips down to Stamford when I pretended they were Cauldron Cakes, bought one for old time’s sake and brought it back to my backwards facing window seat, but it turned to ash in my mouth like any recrudescence turns to ash, or any childhood regression turns to ash, or especially like a regressive childhood addiction’s recrudescence turn to ash, like when resurrecting anything meant to stay dead the ash filled my mouth and got stuck in my pores and in my hair, it floats above the streets for days, kicked up into a suncloud of dust every time someone’s feet pass through it.